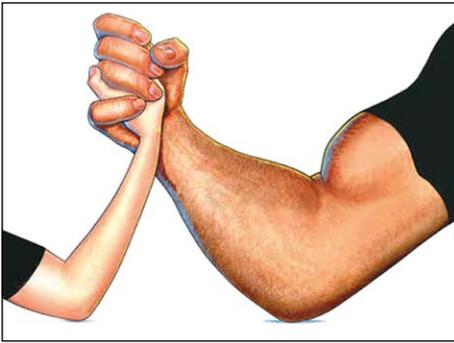


How to ring big bells

by Julia Cater



Being able to confidently ring every bell in your tower for Sunday service is a reasonable goal for any ringer. But how many of us, women especially, feel that we lack the confidence to ring bigger bells even when we are asked? But we don't gain confidence if we don't try. I want to share the techniques I use so that everyone has the skills and confidence to ring every bell they want.

I am not a particularly large or strong person but have been ringing bigger bells since I was a child. I have refined my technique so that it works on most bigger bells whether turning them in or ringing behind. If the technique works for me, it will work for you too.

Does strength matter?

Let's address this issue first. Men are typically stronger than women. We know that. A big bell can be rung through brute strength, and many are. But brute strength is not the only way. I am a firm believer that most people – men, women and children (assuming normal health and mobility) – should be able to ring every bell in their tower for Sunday service by building confidence and having the right technique.

The point where strength does become important in bellringing is in the extremes. Whilst I have rung York Minster tenor (59cwt) to a peal by ringing it behind (i.e. in 12th's place throughout), I could not turn it in for a peal – I am just not strong enough. Similarly, I am just not strong enough to ring Liverpool tenor (82cwt) to a peal even though I have rung it to touches. But these are extremes. Most towers in the villages and towns around the world do not have extremely heavy bells, so most people should be able to ring most bells.

Technique

Keep your core strong and straight, and sink your hips down

Our core (tummy and lower back) muscles are stronger than individual muscles in our arms. I ring heavier bells by using my core so that my arms operate more like levers to transfer the energy of my core to the rope. I do this by reaching up as high as I can (position 1 in the diagram), including going onto tiptoes if I feel I need, and then starting the pull (either stroke) by keeping my arms and back straight

and bending my knees. The key is that I sink my hips before bending my arms (position 2). When I have sunk as low as I feel I need to go, I start bringing my arms down elbows first (position 3). I continue with the follow-through of my arms (position 4) until my hands are pointing at the floor (position 5). On a "normal" bell (up to 40cwt maybe), my back does not bend. Sometimes, in extremes, I may pivot at my hips and lean forwards at position 5 because I need a more extreme follow-through to the absolute bottom of the pull. In these situations, my hands may even end up level with my shins.

The bit that people get wrong is missing out number 1 and 2 in the diagram. They start to immediately bend their arms (or maybe they don't even straighten them in the first place). That requires the power to come from the smaller muscles groups and it is less effective.

Use the top of the pull

I want you to think about how you might push someone on a swing. If we want to push them higher, we begin the push of the swing right at the point that the swing starts to come back down. We connect our hands with the swing and smoothly send it on its way as firmly as we judge we need. We might lean into the push and put in more follow-through if we feel we need to. We don't start the push halfway down or jerk at it erratically. The same applies to ringing a bell. We need to put in most of the effort at the very top of the pull (numbers 2 and 3 on the diagram) and sink our bodies to accelerate the rope as fast as we feel we need until our hands are at the bottom. People often think that you ring big bells by pulling long. You do, but the depth of the follow-through is secondary to the energy and momentum you put through the rope at the beginning of its rotation at the top of the pull.

Things that go wrong

Overpulling

When trying a heavy bell for the first time, most of us tend to overpull. The fear of not being able to manage means we put far too

much energy through the rope. You need to put in "just enough" energy to make it turn to exactly the point on its rotation that you want. It will almost certainly be less energy than you think. Having to stop the bell from going over (to balance or beyond) will require and consume unnecessary strength and muscle power. Of course, knowing how much is "just enough" takes practice and familiarity with a bell. But trust me, it will almost always be less force than you think.

Not reaching up high enough

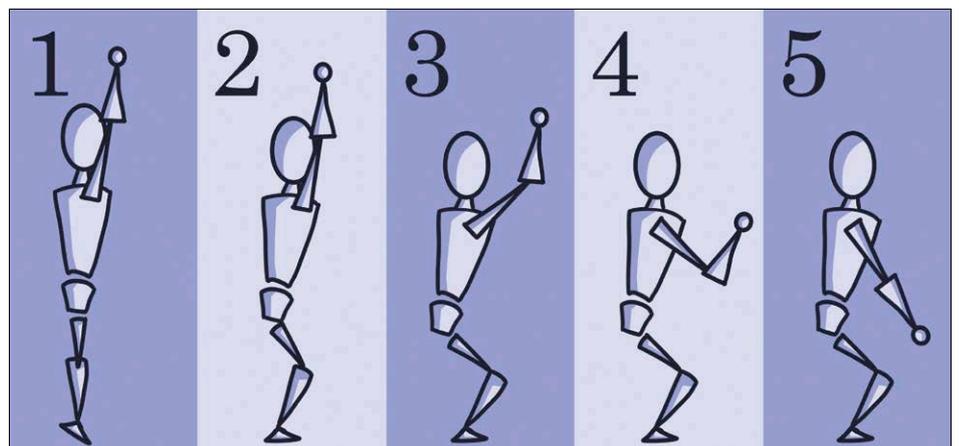
Most people if challenged will claim they ring with straight arms. But there is always the possibility of reaching up higher and being straighter. On a big tenor recently, my n-1 said to me, "Catch the sally higher". I thought that there was no way that was possible as I was catching it as high as I could, surely. However, I tried and caught it five to ten centimetres higher and then carried on with my handstroke pull. The next backstroke, the tenor went further up than I wanted because starting the pull five to ten centimetres higher up made a significant difference to the amount of momentum I was able to provide. Don't under-estimate the value of being at full reach in position 1.

Not being able to pull the bell off the stay

Every now and then, I struggle to get a bell off the stay. It's embarrassing. It's a lot easier if you can use brute strength, but if you can't, you need to "bounce it off". Briefly, this technique involves reaching as high up on the rope as you possibly can standing on tiptoes (position 1), and then dropping back onto flat feet and repeatedly sinking your core, lateral muscles and shoulders up and down until the bell starts rocking on the stay. Once the rocking has started, you can embrace the momentum and pull it to balance. Do not try to do this technique by bending your arms. You must keep them straight so that it is your core that is doing the work. Some people can be a bit sniffy about this technique thinking it will damage the stay. So long as the stay is sound, it won't.

Being late on the first handstroke

A bigger bell has a bigger wheel and is slower to turn. It means that you need to start



How to ring big bells: the ringing sequence (Arthur Hall)

the pull off (the first handstroke) earlier than you would a lighter bell, in order to be in the right place. As a rough indicator my advice is that on a medium weight eight (say 15–25cwt), I start my pull on the 8th when the 7th is just starting. On a heavier eight (30cwt+), I start when the 6th has started.

Not being slow enough with your handling

This catches many people out on their very first go on a heavier bell. They lift their hands way too early and try to catch the sally as it is still coming down. Just remember that heavier bells turn more slowly so you need to go more slowly with your handling. Don't be mechanical with your action. Instead, be highly tuned to what the rope is doing and follow its speed. You will adjust to the new pace within a whole pull or two.

Summary

If you have only rung in the front half of the circle, being able to ring every bell in your tower will bring a versatility to your ringing, will help you see methods from a different perspective as well as give you wider experiences for setting and influencing rhythm. There are also advantages for the whole band in being able to utilise ringers more fully. As long as you have a smooth and straight style and use the whole of your body, you will easily gain the technique for ringing big bells. To gain the confidence – well you just have to have a go – and tower captains need to encourage and support all band members to practise these skills.

Further information about this topic, including videos, can be viewed:

<https://www.stmartinsguild.org/teaching/training-and-resources/> (15 July).

With thanks to Arthur Hall for the ringing figures sequence.

Reproduced by
ANZAB with the
kind permission of
The Ringing World
and Julia Cater