Low-Back Bulletproofing: McGill Big 3

Background
Dr. Stuart McGill is one of the top subject matter experts in back health and rehab. His research has determined the most effective set of movements to increase core stability. They are known as the McGill Big 3.

Disclaimer
If you experience pain with any of the Big 3, stop performing the movement.

Programming
Dr. McGill recommends 3 sets of each movement in a reverse pyramid rep scheme. For example, a 3/2/1 rep scheme is a great way to implement these movements in your routine. This means performing 3 reps/side on Set 1, 2 reps/side on Set 2, and 1 rep/side on Set 3. Each rep is held for 10 seconds. Dr. McGill recommends performing these 3 times/week. We have found that these movements are effective as part of a warm-up, in between conditioning intervals, in between sets of a compound lift, or whenever you have time. The most important piece is long-term consistency.

Movement 1: The Curl-Up
1. Starting Position: Lie down on your back with one leg straight and the other bent so your foot is flat on the ground. Place your hands under your lower back to help support it and squeeze your glutes.
2. Holding Position: Brace for a punch to the gut by pulling your ribcage towards your hips. Your entire upper body should move as a single unit and only so much to raise your head a ½ inch off the ground. Avoid spinal flexion.
3. Return to the starting position in a controlled manner. Perform for 3 sets in the 3/2/1 reverse pyramid manner described above in the Programming section.

Start Position

Hold Position
Movement 2: Side Plank
1. Starting Position: Lay on your side with your bottom forearm and bottom knee or foot supporting your body weight.
2. Keeping your shoulders, hips, and feet stacked and inline, elevate your hips by bracing for a side gut punch and squeezing your glutes. Avoid axial rotation and lateral bend.
3. Return to starting position in a controlled manner. Perform for 3 sets in the 3/2/1 reverse manner described above in the Programming section.

Beginner Variation

Start Position

Hold Position

Intermediate Variation

Start Position

Hold Position

Advanced Variation

Start Position

Hold Position
Movement 3: Bird-Dog
1. Start Position: Get on all fours ensuring that your hands are right under your shoulders and your knees directly under your hips.
2. Brace for a punch to the gut and extend your opposite arm and opposite leg simultaneously while avoiding spinal flexion and extension.
   a. Arm Extension: Make a fist, squeeze it tight, and reach forward to engage upper body.
   b. Leg Extension: Kick your heel straight back and squeeze your glute tight.
3. Return to the starting position in a controlled manner. Perform for 3 sets in the 3/2/1 reverse pyramid manner described above in the Programming section.
Additional Resources

- Squat University Article on the McGill Big 3
  - https://squatuniversity.com/2018/06/21/the-mcgill-big-3-for-core-stability/
- Ultimate Back Fitness and Performance by Dr. Stuart McGill

Go forth and crush it!