

# Starting Strength

## Deadlifts Aren't Just For Powerlifters

by

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Way back, prior to the avalanche of specialized machines and weight rooms loaded with bars, weights, and dumbbells, anyone who was interested in improving his strength, and this included aspiring bodybuilders, did deadlifts. They could be done with just a bar, which was often a standard one rather than the Olympic model, in a limited amount of space and there was no need of any spotters. Most did them without wearing a belt, stating that it got in the way, and few bothered with straps. They just used the over-and-under grip or the hook grip. It was a basic strength movement just like the back squat.

But when the sport of powerlifting emerged on the scene and grew in popularity in the late sixties and early seventies, the deadlift shifted to the sole possession of those strength athletes. The belief was, if you're not going to be entering a powerlifting meet there's no reason to bother with deadlifts. In fact, many Olympic lifters shunned them completely, believing that the slow pulling movement would have a detrimental effect on the quick lifts.

Since bodybuilding had been taken over from the A.A.U. by Joe Weider, the athletic points had been dropped from national competition so physique contestants no longer did any heavy lifting. And the first lift they dropped from their programs was the deadlift. From the time I came across my first barbell, which was a standard variety, I included deadlifts in my routine. Once I started trying to learn how to snatch and clean from photos and articles in *Strength & Health* magazines in the fifties, I did them much less frequently. And when I lifted under the coaching of Sid Henry at the Dallas Y, they were completely eliminated from my program because Sid believed more explosive exercises were more valuable for Olympic lifting.

After I left Dallas and was once more in charge of arranging my own routine, I inserted deadlifts back in it, but only did them occasionally. In Indiana, I entered quite a few power meets. It was a good way to get in a heavy workout and at these, of course, I deadlifted. I think the fact that I didn't do them regularly helped me and I was doing heavy cleans, snatches, and high pulls. In fact, the deadlift was one lift that came easy for me. As a 181er, I deadlifted 575 at the Indiana State Meet in East Chicago in December of 1965.

When I moved to York the following year, I found that none of the lifters there did deadlifts. They said they wanted to spend their time doing exercises that were more dynamic so the strength could be carried over to the snatch and clean. So I stopped deadlifting, except when I'd go to a power meet in the summer. Ernie Pickett also liked going to power meets and we went to a number of them, mostly to be able to hang out on the Jersey Shore on York Barbell's nickel. After I retired from Olympic lifting, deadlifts became an integral part of my workouts and as I grew older and had to change my way of training, the deadlift became even more valuable to me.

## *Deadlifts Aren't Just for Powerlifters*

I happen to believe that the deadlift is a most beneficial exercise for men and women and athletes of both sexes of all ages. Even youngsters? Yes, just as long as they're supervised. It's always been one of my staunch rules – never allow a young boy or girl to do deadlifts without a coach being present. The reason is simple: left alone and being highly competitive, he or she will attempt to deadlift a weight they may not be ready for. And I never let youngsters go for a limit single either. There's no reason. There will be plenty of time for that further down the road.

The deadlift is not only a useful exercise to help build greater hip, leg, and back strength, it's a movement everyone needs to know how to do properly because it will be done in some form or fashion countless times in a lifetime. This is why I teach every beginner the correct technique on this lift. Even before I teach him or her how to power clean. If the person is older, knowing how to lift a heavy object off the floor correctly is even more important. An injury to an older back takes a great deal longer to heal than one to a younger back. It seems that I find a reason to deadlift something nearly every day – a case of books, a heavy bag of groceries, moving a heavy TV from the floor to the top of a table.

Also, it doesn't matter whether you're using a high-rep formula or doing singles, doubles, or triples for the deadlift, you still have to utilize perfect technique. This is because you will be handling more weight in this exercise than any other in your program, and if an injury does occur it will most likely be more severe than a ding sustained while doing some other exercise.

Whenever someone thinks of the deadlift, he generally only imagines doing the movement in one way – what I refer to as the conventional deadlift. Feet set close together, arms outside the legs, with the bar pulled upward close to the body. Yet there are several other variations that can be most useful in helping you strengthen a weak area.

But before I get into those, I want to go over more form points for the conventional style of deadlifting since everyone needs to learn that first. I suggest using straps for deadlifts, unless you are doing high reps such as twenties or more. The straps will allow the athlete to focus all of his attention on the necessary technique without having to be bothered with gripping the bar. There are, naturally, commercial straps, but in my mind, nothing can beat seat belts. Cut them out of the back seat of some junker. I don't know of anyone who buckles up when he's riding in the back seat of a car anyway. Cut them to a length of about 22". Better too long than too short. You can always trim them if they're too long. Now throw them in the washer for five or six cycles to soften them. They will last you for a very long time while the commercial ones tend to rip with heavy usage.

My seat belt straps were used by everyone in the Hopkins weight room for ten years and are still in good shape. This meant they were put to work by as many as twenty or thirty athletes at a single session. That's what I call "durable," and best of all they're free. Even if you feel that you don't need them while learning how to do the exercise, use them anyway. It takes a bit of practice to figure out how to wrap them so that they're snug, but not too tight.

Your grip should be the same as you use for cleaning, clean high pulling, and shrugs. Unless you have extra wide shoulders, this manner of finding the best place to grip the bar works well. Extend your thumbs on the Olympic bar until they barely touch the smooth center. Now strap on. Foot placement is shoulder width or a bit closer than that. The very best way to find your strongest foot placement is to shut your eyes and pretend you're going to do a standing broad jump. Pull the bar in tight against your shins. This is most important. If it starts away from your legs, even so much as an inch, or moves away during the execution of the lift, you're giving away leverage and it will make the lift a lot more difficult. While this isn't a big deal with the lighter warm-up weights, it is critical when you start handling some demanding poundages. And in order for deadlifts to have a positive influence on your overall strength, they have to eventually be demanding.

## *Deadlifts Aren't Just for Powerlifters*

Set your eyes straight ahead, lower your hips until you're in a strong starting position with your back very flat, then make certain that your frontal deltoids are slightly out in front of the bar. This is a key form point. Should your deltoids be behind the bar, you will not have as much thrust at the start and almost always, they will continue to move backward during the execution of the movement. Once the frontal deltoids move back behind the bar, you lose pulling power.

Those athletes with a great deal of experience can benefit by setting their hips fairly high, even as high as parallel to the floor, but this isn't a good idea for those just learning the lift because they usually do not have the necessary back strength to hold that position at the start. The basic rule to remember on any pulling movement is that your hips and the bar must move upward at the exact same rate. While the higher starting position is an advantage, lever-wise, if you're unable to hold it, you're better off setting your hips lower.

Keeping your back extremely flat and tight is critical for success with heavy weights and also for those final reps on high-rep sets. You can achieve this by pulling your shoulder blades together and keeping them locked in that position throughout the exercise. And this also includes lowering the bar back to the floor. While learning to do deadlifts, you should never allow your back to round at all. Later on, after a solid foundation has been established, you can get away with rounding your back, but not in the beginning. Flat going up and flat going down.

Once everything is as it should be, take a deep breath and make sure every muscle in your body is tight, then do this: instead of pulling the bar off the floor, think about pushing your feet right down through it. This positive action will let you bring the bar off the floor smoothly and in the perfect line. Then, still keeping it tight to your shins and thighs, guide it all the way to the finish. When done correctly, the bar will just float upward. The bar should climb upward as if it were in a Smith Machine.

The middle range is usually the most troublesome for both beginners and those more advanced. Many try to rush the bar through this range by jerking the bar off the floor, in hopes of using momentum to overcome the sticking point. This doesn't work. All this does is to cause your arms to bend and your back to round. Your arms are no more than connecting links. Think of them as powerful chains. If they bend, you lose upward thrust, so they must stay straight from start to finish. And if you jerk the bar off the floor, your back will invariably round and the bar will be carried out of the proper line.

Experienced lifters can explode the bar upward at the start and still maintain perfect technique through the middle and finish. Beginners cannot, so learn to break the bar off the floor in a smooth, controlled manner.

The finish also gives some beginners trouble, mostly because they wait until the very last moment to bring their traps into the mix. A move that I learned to do enabled me to finish strongly was to involve my traps much earlier than my competitors. There's no reason to wait to contract the traps, so when the bar reached mid-thigh, I contracted them. This elevated the bar several crucial inches and then all I had to do was drive my hips forward to complete the lift.

Whenever an athlete waits until the bar is almost at the top before shrugging it upward he will almost always end up jerking the bar around. Which is not a legal lift. The move is much easier to do with the over-hand grip. Since I didn't mind using the hook grip, it didn't bother me at all. And of course, when you use straps, that's not a problem. It can be accomplished with an over and under grip as well, but it's a bit more difficult.

Once you're fully erect with the bar firmly under control, take a breath or two and lower the bar deliberately back to the floor while maintaining a very flat back, and keeping it once again close to your body. Always keep in mind that you can injure yourself using sloppy form while lowering a bar

## *Deadlifts Aren't Just for Powerlifters*

just as you can while lifting it. Don't get in the habit of letting the bar crash back to the floor. This is troublesome on two counts. One, it can aggravate your shoulders and elbows, and two, it will throw you out of the correct position for the next rep. Even if it's the final rep, lower it with care.

Lowering the bar also helps you gain more strength since it serves as a negative. Those who use bumper plates quite often get in the habit of rebounding the bumps off the floor to get a jump-start on the next rep. This action will throw the bar out of the proper line and usually cause your arms to bend and your back to round. Most importantly, this form of cheating bypasses the groups which are responsible for breaking the bar off the floor. Which has a very direct negative effect when you attempt a max double or single. Just don't do it. Reset every single rep from the very beginning and you'll be way ahead when you start trying to improve your personal record on the lift.

Now for some variations. My favorite is the Sumo version of the deadlift. What I like about the Sumo style is that it hits the adductors much more so than the conventional style and those groups are difficult to strengthen unless you have access to an adductor machine. Most don't. I would guess that about 33% of all the athletes I dealt with at Hopkins came in with relatively weak adductors. This is because the quads, abductors, and even the hamstrings get a lot more work during the participating of any sport, so they lag behind until the athletes starting going low in the back squat and bring their adductors up to par. But even then, squatting and deadlifting with a wide stance hits them in a slightly different manner, so I build both into all of my strength programs.

Most find that Sumo deadlifts are easier to do than conventional ones. It's basically a short stroke and is less stressful to the lower back. Take a wide stance. How wide? That, in large part, depends on your height, but as a rule of thumb, about 3 feet apart. You will grip the bar between your legs, so if you do not feel comfortable with that wide of a stance, make sure it's wide enough for your arms to be inside your legs. Your grip will be more narrow than with the conventional deads, but not too close or you will not be able to control the bar as well. A bit of trial and error for the grip and foot positioning will allow you to find what fits for you.

Your feet should be placed straight ahead. No turning in at all. This is because in the Sumo style you will be putting pressure on the outsides of your feet throughout the lift. In the conventional style, the pressure shifts from the front of your foot to the back as the bar travels upward. But in the Sumo, the pressure starts on the outside of your feet and stays there.

Some of the rules are the same for both styles. Such as starting the bar in against your shins with your frontal deltoids out front just a tad. And your hips and bar will once against move upward at the same rate of speed. Likewise, the bar must stay close to your body on its way up. What I tell my athletes to do is: grip the bar firmly, eyes straight ahead, back rigidly tight, hips in a strong position, with every muscle locked and ready. Now, think about pushing down with your feet and leaning back. The bar climbs right up to lockout like magic. Again, remember to activate the traps prior to the finish.

Many powerlifters who tried this style found to their surprise and pleasure that they could handle more weight almost right away than they could with the conventional style. Since it's a legal lift, that's what they began using in competition. Quite a few of my strength athletes discovered the same thing and decided to do Sumos in their programs almost exclusively. I believe it is better to mix them up. Since they work the various pulling groups a bit differently, a more complete development can be achieved by including both in a strength routine.

One thing that needs to be understood about the sumo style is that it doesn't involve the lumbar nearly as much as the conventional style. This means that if you decide to do them exclusively, you need to have at least one specific exercise for your lower back in your program. And, coincidentally, one of the best is another variation of the deadlift, the almost straight-legged deadlift. It's often referred

## *Deadlifts Aren't Just for Powerlifters*

to as the stiff-legged deadlift, but the knees should never be locked when working the lower back. This holds true for good mornings, back hyperextensions, and reverse back hypers. When the knees are locked, it puts a huge amount of stress on the hamstrings. Bending them slightly relieves that stress and reduces the risk of injury. And the exercise is just as effective.

Many people who do almost straight-legged deads like to stand on a bench or box when they do them. That's not a good idea. I've seen more than one lifter lose his balance while standing on a bench and have to drop the bar. If you're using your own equipment, that's fine. However, if the bar belongs to someone else, it's not fine. And not necessary. Just use 25 lb. plates. That will allow you to go as low as you need to on the exercise without putting the bar in jeopardy.

The two main points on this exercise are: keep your knees bent and keep the bar extremely tight to your legs while moving the bar up and down. I also believe in higher reps, eights or tens, for any lumbar movement. I also like to start at the top rather than off the floor for these. It allows the lifter to guide the bar downward in the ideal line much easier. And just because you're using the small plates doesn't mean you can't go heavy. Even if you start with just two 25 pounders, 95 lbs, with the bar, in four jumps of adding two more 25s, you'll quickly be at 295. Doing this amount of weight for eight or ten smooth reps isn't a walk in the park.

Once you bend your knees, hold that position throughout the exercise. When the weights get demanding, there is a tendency to lower your hips more and more, but this defeats the purpose of doing the exercise. However, doing deadlifts with the hips very low and using 25 lb. plates is yet another variation that I used regularly for any athlete who is having trouble holding his starting position for heavy cleans, high pulls, or conventional deadlifts. When done correctly, they improve the weakness immediately.

Be forewarned, they're tough. Use the conventional style and strap onto the bar. Lower your hips just as low as you can, get everything set and tight and squeeze the bar off the floor without allowing your hips to climb upward any faster than the bar is moving. You really have to focus on keeping your back flat because it will try and round to help set the bar in motion. This exercise forces you to use your power pack – hips, legs, glutes – and after a session where you did five sets of eight, working up to 295 for a clean final set, you'll find out how effective they are. Every lifter that did these told me that the next time he deadlifted, using the higher 45-pounders, he was able to hold his starting position without any trouble and his deadlifts were overall much stronger. I've had athletes put twenty pounds on their deads in a matter of a month with these.

Another way I strengthen the start of any pulling exercise is to have the athlete do halting deadlifts. They're done exactly like a regular deadlift except the bar stops at mid-thigh. After a short, two-second pause, the bar is slowly lowered back to the floor. It works because there's no real rest period like there is when the body comes fully erect. Straps are needed for these and once again, full concentration on the movement of the bar. Every rep needs to be executed perfectly for these to bear fruit. Higher reps once again just as long as you maintain good technique. When your back begins to round, stop and start over.

I also use the wider, snatch grip, for the low deadlifts with 25 lb. plates and the halting deadlifts. I realize that few Olympic lifters or coaches of Olympic lifters include any form of deadlifts in their routines, but I think they have value. Why not? They build strength in some of the most important muscles utilized in both the snatch and clean. Make the groups that propel the bar off the floor and through the middle stronger and you will snatch and clean more weight. Just because they're not dynamic movements doesn't mean they don't have value. I know they do. Not from any study but from experience, the same way I learned just about everything I know about strength training.

## *Deadlifts Aren't Just for Powerlifters*

When I moved to Chicago from Dallas in 1965, I lifted in every meet available and there were lots of them. One every Sunday during the winter season. After each of these contests, there was always some sort of odd-lift event. I entered these as well since at that stage of my lifting career, nothing was more important than another trophy or medal. After one meet, there was a deadlifting contest. I hadn't done a deadlift in over three years, but I felt my pull was strong since I had snatched and cleaned well that day. I had no idea what attempt to take and ended up doing 525. As soon as I finished, I knew I had a lot more in me, not that it mattered all that much. I still got a medal. Ernie Franz stepped in right behind me and did what he needed for the gold. I didn't mind getting beat by a lifter of his caliber. Well, some, but not a lot.

For the next three days, my back was so sore I could barely get through a training session and I questioned my sanity for entering the deadlifting contest. I had another Olympic meet the following Saturday in Moline, Illinois. Bob Gajda, Rick and Tom Holbrook and I traveled together and I had no idea what to expect. To my utter surprise and delight, I broke both my snatch and clean and jerk record and posted my very first 800 lb. total, which was sort of a benchmark for the 181 lb. class at that time.

The only difference in my training leading up to that meet was those deadlifts. It didn't take a Rhodes Scholar to figure out that those heavy pulls overloaded my hips, back, and legs and made me stronger. So after moving to Indiana, I took advantage of as many power meets as I could get to in order to hit some deadlifts again. And every single time I did that, my pulls got stronger.

Deadlifts, in one form or another, belong in every strength athlete's repertoire. To shun them is a mistake. They also belong in older athletes programs as well. They're the best exercise to keep the back strong, and since more weight can be handled in the deadlift than any other full-range pulling exercise, they're perfect for overloading. Which is, of course, a relative term. I do them twice a week, combining both conventional and Sumo, for fairly high reps and I also make sure I give equal attention to the lower and upper back for good measure.

Two or three sets of twenty plus, using enough weight so the final five reps make your eyes cross will help you avoid many of the nagging back problems that the majority of the over-forty population lives with. So do yourself a favor, learn now to deadlift correctly and make them a regular part of your fitness program.

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