The Difference Between Ignorant and Stupid

by

Mark Rippetoe

It is not always apparent, and is often poorly understood. Stated succinctly, stupid is not your fault – you were born that way. You’re just dumb. You can’t learn. Ignorance means you just don’t know. Ignorance probably is your fault, because you have failed to inform yourself. This is especially true since the advent of the World Wide Web; the internet has enabled the most universal and thorough dissemination of information in the history of human communication. The obvious problem is that 95% of that information is wrong – which follows my popular maxim: 95% of everything that occurs everywhere is completely fucked up. The internet is no different.

But you can, with a little diligence, tease out the facts if you want to badly enough. If you’re interested in a subject, it eventually falls upon you to distill the truth from the bullshit. This you will do gladly, if you’re actually interested enough to devote significant amounts of time and effort to it, because an intelligent person realizes that bullshit is a waste of time. A stupid person might not appreciate this, and therefore continue to be ignorant of the truth of a matter.

Take the deadlift, for example. It’s the most basic, obvious movement in barbell training, the one with the most carryover to everyday tasks and the easiest to learn of all the basic exercises. You just step up to the bar with a vertical-jump stance width, with toes out and your shins about an inch from the bar, grab it just outside your stance with your knees still straight, then bend your knees forward and out a little bit until your shins touch the bar, squeeze your chest up until your back is flat, take a big breath, and drag the bar up your legs until you’re standing up straight. See there? One sentence describes the whole thing.

But just because a task can be described simply does not mean that there are no important details, or that these can be ignored. Fortunately, they can be built into the instructions if the instructor is clever. Our one-sentence deadlift instruction carries lots of important information, and if it is followed correctly and intelligently it will result in a perfect deadlift every time. Let’s take it a step at a time and see what we can learn from this simple approach to an uncomplicated movement, that we might become better informed.

The stance width of a vertical jump is narrower than most novices deadlift. A push into the floor should have the mid-foot directly in line with the hip joint, and this is the stance width that allows you to push the floor without losing force to any shear that will develop along a laterally-angled
leg (sumo intentionally widens the stance to artificially shorten the legs, and trades the benefit of a more vertical back and a shorter ROM for the mechanical inefficiency of the leverage on the angled legs – but we're not sumo-ing right now). The toes-out stance is very helpful for the deadlift; it gets the thighs out of the way of the belly so you can set your back flat better, and it involves the groin muscles and the external rotators in the pull. Konstantinovs demonstrates this when he pulls, as have many great deadlifters through the history of powerlifting.

Placing the bar about an inch from your shins puts the bar directly over your mid-foot, precisely where the bar wants to be anyway, because that is the point over which the load balances. When you stand up straight with your feet even, where are you in balance? On your toes? On your heels? In either of those positions, you have to exert more effort to stand than when balanced in the middle. The mid-foot is the place that is farthest away from both of those positions of imbalance, and is therefore the place of greatest stability. It is also the place where the force of the load is distributed the most evenly over the largest surface area – where the ball or the heel is not a “heavy spot” under your foot. An intelligent person will verify this by watching youtube videos of heavy deadlifts, and will see that every heavy deadlift travels up in a vertical path directly over the middle of the foot, sliding up the shins at a fairly vertical shin angle. Even if the lifter starts with the bar forward of this position, the bar will roll back to the mid-foot before it leaves the ground. The heavier the weight, the more closely the pull conforms to this rule.

Don’t believe me – look it up for yourself. Find a video on youtube, copy the URL of the video, go to www.keepvid.com, paste it into the box on the website, download it, then save it to your hard drive as an .mp4 file. Open it in Quick Time and frame through the video to see what actually happens in a heavy deadlift. And then you won’t be ignorant of this important fact about deadlifting.

Likewise, this same intelligent person will notice that the bar locks out at the top directly over this point. Why would you intentionally pull the bar from a position that is horizontally different than the one you’re pulling it to? Well, you wouldn’t if you’re not stupid, so that’s where the bar starts.

Your grip should be designed to make the bar travel the shortest possible distance to lockout, and this means that the arms will hang parallel to each other when you grip the bar. This is accomplished by taking the narrowest grip you can without your hands rubbing your legs on the way up. So your grip will be where your hands line up with the outside of the widest point of your stance. Most novices take too wide a stance, and therefore too wide a grip. Most elite lifters take a close grip. Verify this for yourself. If your stance is correct, your arms will hang straight down when seen from the front and you’ll have pulled the bar the shortest distance it can travel to lockout. During the process of taking the grip you do not move the bar, because you just intentionally put it exactly where it needs to be, over the mid-foot.

Now, drop your knees forward until your shins touch the bar, having not bent them before just now. This motion places the shins at a slight angle forward that leaves the bar over the mid-foot while in contact with the shins. If you drop your hips, your knees will travel forward and shove the bar forward of the mid-foot. Remember: don’t move the bar. That would be stupid.

Just after you touch the bar with your shins, push your knees out very slightly. This keeps your thighs lined up with your slightly-pointed-out toes and allows your groin muscles and lateral hip muscles to engage during the pull. By now you’ve watched Konstantinovs deadlift like this, and perhaps several other people as well, so you’re informed about the fact that it’s done by some very strong lifters, and you’ve given yourself permission to try it and see for yourself that it helps. If you’re a bigger guy, you’ll immediately notice that it’s easier to get in position over the bar if your thighs are
more out of the way of your gut, as mentioned earlier. The knees-out motion takes full advantage of
the toes-out stance, the smartest thing to do as you prepare to pull.

Now comes the most important part of the procedure. Squeeze your chest up to set your back.
Don’t drop your hips, like everybody else does and like you’ve been doing too. Just leave your ass where
it is after your shins touch the bar and set the back from the top down, by squeezing your chest up into
thoracic extension and letting that wave of extension carry itself down to your low back. Watch Brad
Gillingham do his 881 deadlift, and you’ll see that it can be done quite effectively without a drop of the
hips. It’s hard, because your back is fighting with your hamstrings for control of your pelvis, and
your back has to win. It may feel odd the first couple of reps; as you warm up it will get easier, but the
chest-up motion will always be the hardest part of the set-up. In fact, if it’s easy, you did it wrong.

You must understand this: you are not trying to squat the weight off the floor with the bar in
your hands. This doesn’t work, as you may have noticed if you’ve watched enough deadlifting to be
informed about what actually occurs when heavy weights are pulled off the floor. When the weight gets
heavy, you can drop your hips as low as you want to and push the bar as far forward as it takes to make
you happy, but what actually happens before the bar leaves the floor is always the same: the bar comes
back toward the mid-foot, the hips come up until the shoulders settle into position just in front of the
bar, and the bar comes up in a straight (if you haven’t fucked up the pull too badly) line.

The shoulders-just-in-front-of-the-bar position is a feature of all pulls that are heavy enough,
whether deadlift, clean, or snatch, and I take a shot at explaining why in the new 3rd edition of Starting
Strength: Basic Barbell Training (hint: it has to do with the lats). By now you’ve looked again at all the
deadlift videos and seen this position establish itself every time, either by the efficient, informed lifter
on purpose, or accidentally, as the hips rise and the back angle changes until the shoulder is just in
front of the bar. You can identify this position because the arms do not hang straight down plumb, but
rather hang at a slight angle when seen from the side. While you were looking at them again, you also
noticed the tendency toward the vertical bar path. In fact, if you fuck the pull up too badly, i.e. let it
get forward of the mid-foot anywhere in the pull so that the bar path is not vertical, it will not go up
unless it’s a sub-maximal attempt.

So squeezing the chest up as the best way to set your back merely incorporates the facts that
you have gathered by watching the videos and informing yourself. If you set your back in the position
it likes to pull from anyway, you minimize wasted motion before the pull, and you create a simple
procedure for doing it the same way every time.

All that remains is dragging the bar up your legs to lockout. “Dragging” implies contact, and
contact all the way up ensures the vertical bar path; if you let it go forward as it passes your knees on the
way up, you will have let it drift forward of the mid-foot, and thus get out of balance. If you have set
your back correctly and started the pull with the bar over mid-foot, it will come up your shins and your
thighs in a straight vertical line, which I’m sure you’ll agree is a mechanically pleasing configuration.

Of course, you have to keep your back flat, and that takes strength in the lumbar erectors
than can only be built with heavy deadlifts done correctly. It has become fashionable in random
exercise/“functional movement” gyms to permit the use of bumper plates and a bounce off the floor for
all the reps of a set of deadlifts after the first one. This is not “functional” – you do not pick up a heavy
object by first bouncing it off the floor, because that might break something. An informed person by
now knows that if you do not use a muscle, you will not train that muscle. Common sense dictates this
fact, and no particular intelligence is required to arrive at this conclusion. Simple observation tells us
that people who bounce their deadlifts are not very strong off the floor. Experience informs me that if
a 185-pound man with 3 years of barbell “training” comes to my seminar lacking the ability to deadlift
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300 pounds with a flat back, he has probably been bouncing his deadlifts. The lumbar erectors are the muscles that hold the lumbar spine in extension. If you do not use them for that purpose during a deadlift, they will not adapt to this isometric task, and you will have turned the most basic back exercise in the gym into a ridiculous circus trick.

Let's be honest: you bounce your deadlifts because it's easier to do more reps that way. You know this already, because you were never *that* ignorant. Reset all your reps and make your low back get strong enough to hold itself flat during a maximum deadlift attempt. Even if more reps are the goal, a stronger back is the only way to achieve it.

There may be a slight tendency for the bar to drift forward as it comes off the floor. When this happens, it is usually because you have rocked forward during the set-up so that your weight is forward of the mid-foot. Shoes with heels can do this, as can a misperception of your start position. If this happens, you are probably too far forward, with your shoulders too far in front of the bar and your back too horizontal. To correct this, rock back off of your toes, reset your chest up, and think about actually *pushing* your mid-foot into the floor, instead of *pulling* on the bar.

Deadlifts are one of the easiest lifts to learn and do correctly. It usually takes me about 5 minutes to fix an incorrect deadlift, and everyone I fix tells me that the movement feels “shorter.” We know that the trip from floor to lockout is pretty much the same distance, wrong or right, unless your grip is very wide, so what is responsible for this change in perception? There are two components of the system – the lifter and the barbell. If the bar travels the same distance from floor to lockout, it cannot be the source of the difference in perception. It's the lifter, whose ass is no longer waving around in the air before the lift starts. This decrease in body movement and increase in efficiency results in the perception of a shorter pull, even though the bar travels the same distance.

So, now that you're not ignorant, stop acting like you are. Do your deadlifts correctly, efficiently, and with impressive weights. Almost always, the simplest method is the smartest method to use. And you can do this now that you know how, unless you're really just stupid, in which case you came by it honestly.