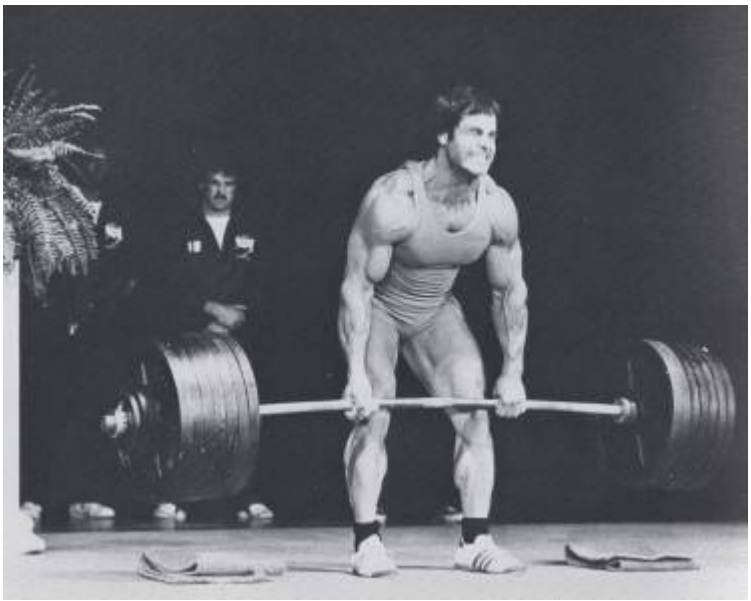
# Deadlift 101

*"What do you mean your back hurts?!?"*

The deadlift is as much an art form as it is a lift. It is a combining of muscles, tendons, and ligaments, working as one unit to move a massive weight from a dead stop to lockout. It requires tremendous total body strength, from the traps to the calves. You have to have a back of steel, hands like talons, and a mind of solid granite. It isn't a lift for everyone. Throw open the doors on any commercial gym and take a look around. See anyone deadlifting? But, one must face the very simple facts about the taboo exercise known as the deadlift: **Nothing is better at adding muscle and strength to the entire body!**

Take a look at a good deadlifter. They will be as thick as an old oak. They will have huge traps, big lats, and a massive set of spinal erectors. Their hips will be wide and boxy, and they will have legs the size of tree trunks. They didn't get this way doing pull-downs and leg presses. They got this way slinging around heavy iron!

**Gene Bell: 766 @ 198**



**Franco Columbo: Bodybuilder & Deadlift Master**

Take a look at those physiques, and the massive amount of weight they are capable of deadlifting. Next time you think to yourself, "The deadlift can't be that hard!" Better think again.

Keep in mind; you won't develop those kinds of physiques slinging around 200 pounds! You have to pull until your eyes bleed. You have to make a conscious effort to add weight to the bar each and every time you deadlift. Yes, there will be times you will want to vomit. If you tell yourself that right now, and accept it, it will be much easier when you are banging out sets of 10 with 500 pounds and your Fruity Pebbles© spew out onto your t-shirt.

**A look inside the deadlift**

Though the deadlift appears to be an easy lift to execute, nothing could be further from the truth. When watching people deadlift, the same mistakes always stand out. Not using the legs enough, bowing the back, bending the arms, etc. All of these mistakes are easy to correct. Nine times out of ten, you have to swallow your pride, take a couple plates off the bar, and start at the beginning.

Start the lift by setting up in front of the loaded bar. It is my belief that in order to maximize pulling, you should **not** have the shins tight against the bar from the start, but rather line up the first knuckles of the toes with the bar. When you squat down to grasp the bar, you will now have contact with the bar and be in the right position.

The width of your set-up is dependent on a lot of scientific jargon: length of the torso versus the length of the legs, length of the arms in comparison to the body, bla, bla, bla. I say experiment, and see what works the best for you. You will either be one of three types of deadlifters: **conventional, semi-sumo, or sumo**. See which one maximizes your strengths and body type, and go with it! More on this later.

Once in front of the bar, suck in a deep breath of air, squat down, keeping the hips and butt low, and grasp the bar.

Conventional style starting position. Note the low hips and tight back.

Semi-Sumo style starting position. Flat back, low hips.

Sumo starting position. Again, note the flat back and low hips.

You should feel compressed like a giant spring waiting to pop. Get the hips as low as humanly possible for your build and flexibility. You should still be holding that breath in order to maintain tightness. At this point, I like to keep my head up to help keep my back straight and tight. Looking forward, or down, tends to make me hunch forward at the start of the pull.

Now that you are in the start position, it is time to initiate the lift. Most people think you pull on the bar to start the lift. **WRONG ANSWER!** Pulling up tends to make you lose your tightness and hunch you over. Instead, concentrate hard on driving your feet into the platform and squatting the weight up. This will bring the hips, glutes, and legs into the movement. As you do this, the arms stay straight. They are merely hooks and play no part in lifting the weight. Bending them is not only a good way to miss the lift, but a great way to tear a bicep!

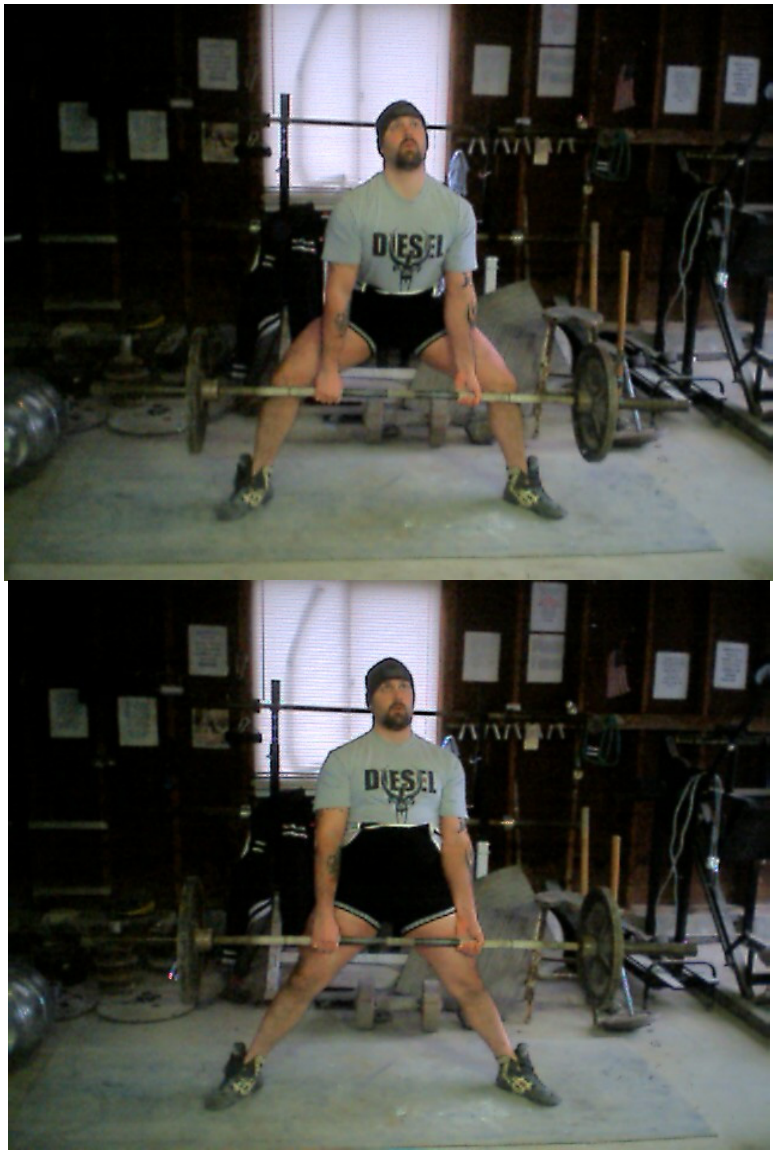
Driving the feet into the platform on the semi-sumo style. Back stays tight!

Lift Off!  Driving the feet with the sumo style.  Head up, back tight, arms straight.

As the bar leaves the platform, it should be on the shins.  Continue to drive the platform as you glide the bar up over the shins and knees and onto the thighs.  At this point, you will drive the hips forward into the movement to put the bar into the locked out position.

Conventional style at lockout.  Tight!

Semi-Sumo. Throwing the hips into lockout. No arm bend!



Sumo. Throw those hips forward and minimize distance traveled.

That's it! Now that you know HOW to do it right, lets look at a couple of common mistakes that lifters make when deadlifting. The biggest problem I encounter with beginning and seasoned lifters alike is the hips shooting up without the weight. Instead of driving into the floor with the feet, the lifter will initiate the lift by pulling. More often then not, this will make the hips pop up first, taking the hips, glutes, and legs almost entirely out of the movement. This will also bow the back and increase the chances of a back injury from deadlifting! When someone tells me they hurt their back deadlifting, all I have to do is watch their form. Do their hips shoot up first?

NO! Conventional style. Hips are up first, back is bowing. Best to abandon this lift right away!

NO! Semi-Sumo style. Hips are up, legs are almost straight, and the back is bowed. Notice the bar has only moved about 6 inches. Bad news.

Zatsiorsky tells us in *Science and Practice of Strength Training* that the loads on the lumbar intervertebral disks from a mere 50kg load will amount to a whopping 630kg with a bowed back! When the back is held in the arched, tight position, the same 50kg exerts a load of 380kg, respectively. Is there any wonder people injure their backs?

A second common mistake is the arm bend. I guess from all the years and years of curling and rowing, people automatically think the arms should be bent on the deadlift. To stop this, think of the arms as hooks only, and concentrate on relaxing them through out the lift. Squeeze the bar tight, but relax the arms.

**Training**

So how does one build a strong deadlift? What training techniques work? What doesn't work? Most importantly, how often does one deadlift?

Although I am fairly young in years, I am still "old school" when it comes to training the deadlift. I am a firm believer that you need to pull at least once a week if you are going to consistently add weight to the deadlift. However, I also believe in using many variations of the deadlift, as well as many assistance exercises, in order to make the deadlift skyrocket!

Let's start with some basic assistance exercises. The first I want to mention is the **barbell good morning**. In my opinion, nothing is better for strengthening the structures of the lower back for big pulls. This exercise can also be extremely risky if you are not careful. Beginners should start out light, with an empty bar, and strive to add only 5-pounds a week. It is a risky exercise, and you do it at your own risk. To me, the benefits I see in my deadlift, and squat, far outweigh the risks.

Start with the bar on your back like you would if you were performing the barbell back squat. Use the same stance width you use when squatting or deadlifting. Keep the back tight and push the butt back as you lower the weight. Take the weight down to about waist height, keeping the back tight the entire time. No rounding! Your weight should be on your heals and your butt should be back. The stress should be felt on the low back as well as the hamstrings. No flex the back and hamstrings to return the weight to the standing position. **Throw your ego out the door! Go light, strengthen the back, and reap the benefits of this great exercise!**

Lower slow and under control. Keep the head forward and use a controlled movement.

The next assistance exercises are for the hips. I am a firm believer of strengthening the hips as much as possible. As the hips get stronger, your sumo *and* conventional pull will increase. As a matter of fact, I believe in this theory so much that I train all my pulls sumo style until I am two to three weeks out of a contest. Only then do I switch to conventional. With that, one of the best ways to strengthen the hips is to pull sumo! Concentrate hard on pushing the feet into the platform and spreading the floor.

A second way that is tremendous in strengthening the hips is the barbell box squat. Use a wide stance and squat onto a box that is a little below parallel. **Lower slow to the box, do not bounce or slam onto it!** Once on the box, relax the hip flexors then flex them hard to pop off the box and lockout the weight. Drive out on legs the entire time, lowering and lifting. Spread the floor with the feet hard!

On the box with weight and bands. Wide stance, good form.

To learn how to box squat properly, visit www.elitefts.com and read the articles on box squatting. Reps, sets, weight, etc. are all explained in great detail.

A third exercise I like to use on my hips is **the bottom-up chain suspended squat**. This movement requires a cage and some heavy-duty chains. I set the cage pins up so when the chains are attached, the bar is below parallel.

Bar suspended by the chains.

I then wiggle under the bar, get set-up as straight as possible, then concentrate on driving my feet into the ground and lifting the weight with my hips only.

Standing on the 45's allows me to get a little deeper, thus using more hips.

Locked out off the chains.

Keep your back straight the whole time and use the hips. Drive out hard with those feet. A quick word on why I use the chains instead of the cage pins: the chains allow me to use my proper form as opposed to being locked onto the pins. Also, with the chains, I can really wiggle under the bar, as it is free to move with me.

Along with these assistance exercises, I also pull at least once a week. This is a constantly changing process; sometimes I may do regular pulls from the ground, sometimes I will do a rack pull, sometimes I will go off a box, and sometimes I will do a specialty lift such as adding bands or chains.

One movement I really like to do is the rack pull. Put the bar in the cage at your sticking point. For me, this is about 14" off the ground. I tend to slow down at this point and it

causes my deadlift to grind to a halt. Experiment to find your sticking point, but you can do these from as low as 1" from the ground and as high as above the knees. Everything about your form stays identical as it would to pulling off the ground. I do singles and triples with these, and I always use a semi-sumo style.

Semi-sumo rack pull from 14".

Another great movement in building deadlift speed is the band deadlift. Loop a couple of Jumpstretch© bands over the bar like so:

Bands are draped over the bar, and then stood on.

Now pull like you normally would. Use perfect form and make sure to pull with speed. If you don't-you won't make it to lockout! Use 60-80% of your max, and then add bands of your choice. Do triples, as many as ten sets.

Bands locked out, conventional style.

If you have access to chains, you can use them as well. Just drape them over the bar, then go to it. More chains = more weight at lockout!

Some 5/8s chain being used with the sumo style.

Another great way to overload the top for a strong lockout is to use dumbbells. Beware, dumbbells are much more intense then chains or bands because the weight gain is not gradual, but rather instant. Chain some dumbbells to each side of the bar like so:

An 85-pound dumbbell chained to the barbell.

Make sure to measure the chain and have the dumbbells kicking in right at your sticking point. This works okay off the ground, but even better in the cage, as you wont have to worry about hitting the dumbbells on the way down. Use this for singles work.

Weight at lockout. Dumbbells off the ground-an instant 170-pounds at the sticking point. WHEW!

If you have access to the Jumpstretch© bands, you can also do the reverse-band deadlift. I love this lift as it really strengthens the lockout portion of the deadlift. Simply attach the bands of your choice to the cage pins at a desired height, or the top of the cage. The higher the bands are attached, the more they will help off the ground. Then attach the bands to the bar. You will notice, depending on what bands you use, you will need a certain weight just to keep the bar on the ground. This weight can be used as the amount the bands are actually de-loading from the bottom.

Light bands de-loading from the cage pins.

At lockout, the weight is almost entirely supported by you as the bands are relaxed. Adjust the band height higher or lower for more or less help.

With all this talk about lockout strength, how does one strengthen the bottom of the lift? Nothing is better then the deadlift off a box. Stand on a box that allows the bar to almost touch the tops of the feet. Keep your form the same as you would if pulling a regular deadlift, only now you must get the hips much deeper to initiate the pull. Everything stays the same! You will find you will have to use much less weight to perform this lift.

575 conventional off a 4" block.

Training this way will make your starting strength soar through the roof! However, don't neglect the lockout.

**Onward and Upward**

How you use each of these exercises is entirely up to you. I do the box squats once a week and wave my weights up and down from 47% to 53% over a three-week period. I also vary the band tension. I pull once a week, using a four-week cycle. Week one I may do regular semi-sumo pull from the ground for ten singles, or five sets of triples. Week two, I may do a lockout from my sticking point for singles or triples. Week three may see a deadlift off a box. Week four I may use the dumbbells. When week five rolls around, I am back to semi-sumos off the floor. **The goal is to see a strength increase during the four week cycle on the pulls off the floor.** This may or may not work for you. Experiment and see!

Hip work is done twice a week, incorporating the bottom-up squats, or a sumo belt squat. Glute-hams are also done twice a week with one day being ten to twelve rep range and the other being six to eight, or heavy. Low back work in the from of a weighted back extension, or good morning is also done twice a week for four sets of eight reps.

The biggest thing with the deadlift is to train it intelligently, and diligently. You need to listen to your body, experiment with form, and train your weaknesses. Who knows, you might be the next big thing when it comes to deadlifting!

I leave you with the following picture, for motivation and for your next pulling session:

This is Andy Bolton deadlifting 900+ pounds!

Good luck, good lifting, and as always, TRAIN HARD!

Rick Walker, CSCS