

The Science Behind the "Grip and Rip"

The deadlift has become very popular over the past few years and although it is a relatively easy exercise to understand, it is not so easy to understand what style works best for each individual for a max effort competition pull. No, I am not talking about sumo, semi-sumo, or conventional stances. That is certainly part of it. Instead, this article will focus on the advantages / disadvantages of leveraging yourself with the bar to lift the most weight for competition purposes. This includes issues such as: head up or head down? More straight legged or squat position? Round the upper back or don't round the upper back? Toes straight ahead or toes pointed out? Bar against the shins or slightly out in front? How do you get the most out of your belt and should you wear a belt? Many of these issues are style issues and need to be experienced based on the structure and build of your body. However, what I hear and see on a regular basis about what someone is supposedly doing "wrong" in a deadlift is simply not correct if that puller is a competitive PLer. This article focuses on what a lifter can safely get away with in the competition deadlift in order to lift a maximal weight.

First off, let me explain my background knowledge on this subject. I am by no means the best deadlifter you will come across. I have been competing raw for about 18 months and recently pulled 500 @ 181 and continue to improve every meet. My style is not text book by any means, but I have studied hard to learn how to maximize my style to get the most leverage on the bar. I have spent the past 18 months learning from guys like Pavel Tsatsouline (author of Power to the People), Jack Reape (soon to be Elite in the 242 weight class), e-mails with Ricky Dale Crain (www.CrainsMuscleWorld.com), different powerlifting forums, various articles and books as well as conversations with fellow competitors at various PL events. Having said that, here is what I have learned. Hopefully this information will help you maximize whatever your competition style is as well as give you some security in you lifts when the personal trainers in

your gym come over and tell you “you’re doing that wrong.” There is nothing worse than not being secure with your own style. Learn it – find the weak points and then maximize it by adjusting technique. Competitors should practice the way they pull in a meet!

Style Issue #1 – Squat behind the bar or more straight legged? Okay, here is the deal with this. If you squat behind the bar you can use your quads to help you break the bar off the floor. This is advantageous for most lifters. However, if you pull more straight legged (as I do) it is easier to break heavier weight off the floor and the weight tends to move faster; however, the lower back usually fatigues before everything else and you are left “hitchy” at the top. Therefore, you must have an iron stomach along with a rock solid lower back and glutes to pull this style. You must also wear a belt in this style any time you lift over 85%. The speed advantage is critical here because you are essentially trying to “out run” your lower back fatigue to lockout. Be aggressive and use this leverage to your advantage if you choose to use it at all. Just make sure that when the bar clears your knees you lean back hard with the shoulders and push your hips through!

Style Issue #2 – Round the upper back or don’t round the upper back? The lower back is what you need to be concerned with first and foremost. There must be an arch and you must know how to use your abs to brace your low back and maintain that arch. Understand that some people have more of an arch than others – that is not the point; the point is that the arch must be tight (for that person) and the abs must brace the lower back by pushing the diaphragm down. Rounding the upper back is an advantage for lifters that know how to use it because it shortens the stroke of the lift (those with a thoracic spine curve it almost feels natural for them). To maximize this technique just sink your ribs and round the shoulders forward when you grab the bar on the floor (being sure to keep a tight arch in the lower back). If you compete in PL and pull with an upper back curve and you feel comfortable with it – don’t change it. You tend to pull in a meet the way you practice. If you have ever seen pull Konstantin pull any of his 900+ pound deadlifts you will see how exaggerated an upper back curve can be. He is also a master of the rib sink / shoulder rolled forward technique I just described. Take a look!

http://www.gometal.com/videot/konstantin_deadlift_430.wmv

Style Issue #3 – Head up or head down? If you pull with a rounded upper back and sink your ribs low into your hips you may find it helpful to look down first and then gradually lift your

head as the bar comes off the floor. Otherwise, keep your head looking straight ahead or even up a little; especially as the bar gets to the top.

Style Issue #4 – Toes straight ahead or toes pointed out? Most conventional deadlifters pull with their toes straight ahead and that is how it should be done unless you have trouble locking out at the top. In this case you may want to try pointing your toes out slightly which allows you to push your glutes through more easily at the top; therefore assisting you with lockout.

Style Issue #5 – Bar against shins or bar slightly ahead of shins? I know you have heard it a thousand times – scrape the bar up your shins. However, if you pull more straight legged you will need the bar a couple inches in front of your shins when the bar is on the floor for leverage purposes. If you sit in a nice deep squat while the bar is on the ground go ahead and scrape it up your shins – it works for most people; however, I know of many top pullers that start with the bar a few inches from the shin while the bar is still on the ground despite being in a deep squat. Experiment and see what is right for you in terms of leverage.

Style Issue #6 – How do you get the most out of your belt? When you deadlift do not make the belt too tight. I like to go one notch looser than my squat. The reason is that when you go down to get the bar (if the belt is too tight) you will find it hard to pressurize your abs and you are also likely to feel very uncomfortable in that bottom position. Instead, go one notch looser, take a nice deep breath at the top while you are standing over the bar, then squat, pressurize the abs at the bottom, PULL!

Further valuable advice I have received from top PLer Jack Reape:

1. DL is a very psyche lift, so let it fly. But in order to pull big you need that relaxed upper body above the sternum. Getting too tight up top makes you bend your elbows which can lead to bicep tears, hitching, and a longer DL stroke. RDC even says to not squeeze the fingers hard, he squeezes the thumb hard but not the fingers. A bit of a mind blower.

2. Do every set the way you do your meet lift. If you are a dive bomber type, do your sets that way. If you are a slow set up guy, try to keep it under 15 seconds as the longer you are over the bar the more you might fail. Jack uses the slow setup then extends his legs and then drops his hips to the bar to get some stretch reflex.

3. Once the bar is on your legs and you are grinding it, **BE PATIENT**. Just keep pulling your sternum backwards and pushing your hips forward. Getting nervous or rushing it leads to hitches. Do not try to shrug the weight.

Some of these style issues are for competitive PLers only. The variations described are for more advanced pullers who are looking to maximize technique for the sake of pulling more weight. In many ways some of these techniques are more dangerous than the text book deadlift, but if applied properly according to your body type and where you gain the most leverage – it can help you win a meet. For any comments or questions please contact me; otherwise keep pullin!

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