

Introduction to Sled Dragging

Part I **By Todd Wilson**

If you watch television for more than 15 minutes, 3 things are certain, 1) you will see a Bow Flex commercial, 2) You will see a Fitness Made Simple commercial featuring "trainer" Jon Basedow, and 3) for every infomercial featuring a piece of exercise equipment, you will see at least 5 infomercials for some type of diet pill. Now, in all honesty, for someone who simply wants a way in which they can exercise at home and just "get in shape," the Bow Flex isn't terrible. You'll never become an Olympic Gold Medalist, World Champion Powerlifter, or the World's Strongest Man, but it can help in allowing you to play football with the kids, stay under 300 pounds, and look like you are somewhat active. As for Basedow, I cannot comment too much, as I have not seen his videos. However, I don't trust fitness advice from anyone who suffers from what is known as 'Angular Postural Disorder.' It is clear that Basedow is afflicted by this condition because he is always standing at an angle. As for the diet pills...what do you expect? Americans are the fattest people on earth, one of the primary reasons is that we are also quite lazy. As a culture we don't like to sweat, breathe hard, or have trouble walking as a result of fatigue.

Well, if you can find a way to remedy that last problem, let me know. We can invest together in a little business venture that could put Bow Flex and Fitness Made Simple out of business. How, you ask? Well, because if someone does not mind sweating, breathing hard, or having trouble walking because of fatigue, I have piece of exercise equipment we can market that gets better results in less time! This piece of equipment is called a Horizontal Mass Transporter. It's really just a sled, but who would buy that? We would need to jack the price way up too because you can get them for a \$100, give or take a little, in most cases. After all, who want's something cheap?

Forgive my bit of facetious rambling, but honestly, if one does not mind a little hard work, a sled, as simple as it is, is the best piece of fitness equipment one can invest in. No other implement can be used to work so many different muscle groups in so many ways. Name any exercise implement! I am sure they do a good job in certain situations, but I can list you limitations with any of them. Barbells, dumb bells, medicine balls, machines, bands, chains, swiss balls, club bells, Kettle bells, etc....while all useful at times, all have limitations. I have not found where the sled is limited yet. You can train any muscle group thouroughly with this piece of equipment!

On top of training any muscle group thoroughly, you can train it for any strength quality. Strength can be defined as the 'potency of a particular property' and quality can be defined as a 'distinguishing characteristic.' A strength quality is a type of strength and its unique abilities or contributions to the athletic process. There are many types of strength. An NFL lineman, Powerlifter, Olympic Weightlifter, Sprinter, High Jumper, Hammer Thrower, Wrestler, even a marathoner all display different types of strengths, and different types of strengths to varying degrees. A Powerlifter is interested in his Maximal strength development. A sprinter's goal is to continually get faster. Both depend on different strength qualities. A sprinter does not have to be able to squat 800 pounds to run fast, nor does a Powerlifter have to be able to run fast in order to squat 800 pounds. In this and the articles following this I am going to talk about how you can train for your sport, your goals, and the strength qualities that you need to develop by using the sled. Now, I've made some pretty big boast about it so far. While I have fell in love with using this piece of equipment, and I do think that it is the most versatile and useful piece of training equipment devised to date, it is not the Holy Grail of Training. It can help you achieve your goals, whatever they are, ASSUMING you will put in the work.

I was introduced to sled training about 8 years ago. I was a college basketball player, and one summer I visited a friend of mine who played at another university. I knew the strength coach here and he did not mind me getting in a workout while I was in town. While we were lifting, a group of football players (presumably wide receivers and defensive backs) were also being put through their afternoon training session on the field just adjacent to the weight room. Well, each player was hooked up to this sled and they performed all manners of running drills with them. High Knees, Butt Kicks, Cariocas, etc. they looked like idiots! Well, I immediately dismissed sled training as a waste of time. And frankly, to an extent I feel I was right and now even justified! A few years later however, I started hearing about a few coaches here and there that were using the sled more and more but they weren't running with it. I still dismissed it. A few years later I heard about some big ass powerlifters from Ohio dragging sleds around in order to get into shape to perform the amount of work it took squat small import cars. Well, my curiosity was peaked, but there wasn't a lot of information around about sled dragging. A year or two later I was at a Charles Poliquin seminar, while talking about improving speed and strength he said "The best investment you can make to improve your training is a sled." He went on to talk about it some, but I was sold. Westside was raving about them, now Coach Poliquin was exhorting how good they are, lightening didn't have to hit me three times. And I was already at two plus one narrow miss. I acquired one within a week or two and went to work figuring it out, so to speak. I was long done playing basketball by that time, but I wished I had had one since I was a kid when I first started all manners of physical training in order to improve my basketball performance. After all, what 10 year old doesn't want to dunk?

I immediately started applying some of the concepts both Poliquin and

Tate espoused for them as well as screwing around with it as well. What I quickly found was that the number of movements that can be performed with it are virtually limitless. When I told Smitty I would write this article, I was going to have a section going over the exercises performed with a sled. Well, I figure out a new one every couple of weeks. If you need explosiveness, there are exercises that fit the bill. If you need strength, there are exercises that fit the bill. If you need local muscular endurance, there are exercises that fit the bill. If you need to rehab an injury, there are exercises that fit the bill. If you want a workout that is so grueling and tough that it whips your butt into shape in record time, it fits the bill. I have not found an aspect of training or fitness that cannot be improved with a sled.

Dave Tate of the Westside Barbell Club, has written as extensively on the subject as anyone, and his articles are very good. He continually talks about the ability of the sled to improve general physical preparation. This is very important for athletes in general but especially powerlifters, as it serves as a form of active rest and/or extra workouts. This enables powerlifters to perform a higher amount of high quality work in order to increase their total. Tate gives the following reasons to incorporate sled dragging:

- "The sled is easy to use and doesn't require a special trip to the gym."
- "The sled is specific to the development of the special skills necessary for maximal strength. (And by the way, we never run with the sled.)" [Important point here that I will discuss later.]
- "Many movements can be trained with the sled,..... Virtually every muscle can be trained with a sled."
- "The sled is a great way to induce active restoration. In many of the upper body dragging movements, the eccentric is eliminated because of the nature of the sled. This in turn is great for recovery because the tearing down of the muscle is much less in concentric-only movements."

In addition, a sled can be used in the development of strength, maximal strength, strength endurance, speed strength, and speed. It can also be used for lactic acid training, energy system training, neural training, flexibility training, PNF training, dog training, bilateral training, unilateral training, concentric only training, eccentric training (yes I promise), isometric training, isoinertial training, and if one of your athletes pisses you off, you can use it for correctional behavior or puke training. Which ever comes first. On top of the many strength qualities and training methods that can be used, the sled allows for versatility in program design. For example, they are great as extra workouts or active rest, but they can be used far more specifically as well. If you are trying to bring up your posterior chain, and you go about this by performing workouts twice a day, the sled is an excellent second workout option. After a morning of deadlifts for example, an afternoon of pull throughs and forward drags will knock off every useful hamstring

muscle fiber that your nervous system knows how to activate. If your trying to add size, but need to drop some fat (who doesn't) an afternoon session can rev up your metabolism. If you can only get to the gym twice a week, for one day of legs and one day of upper body, you can add a third or fourth day of training anything you feel you missed from additional lower or upper body work, to direct arm work, ab work, etc. If you don't have access to a gym, you can train with a sled alone if you have to.

I have had three different sleds at this point, and seen, used, or been around quite a few more. The best available in my opinion are those offered by Total Performance Sports (<http://www.totalperformancesports.com>). The only problem I have with mine, is that I have an older model that does not have strap attachments on both sides as their current model does. It is my third because I literally broke two others. One was a manufacturer defect (poor spot weld job), the other....I may have been excessively rough, but thats up to interpretation of what rough is. TPS has a good product though! There are other manufacturers and distributors that may have solid products as well, but in my experience I don't think a better one can be made. One of the benefits of the TPS model over others I have seen is the taller loading pin (where you place the weights). One of the keys to getting the benefits of sled dragging is you have to use a lot of weight! It has to be heavy!

Now, what do you need? Just a sled? Of course not Crack Head Bob, your going to need some weights and something to pull the sled with. Virtually anything will work, to an extent. Chains can be a little rough on the hands, and fishing line can cut you, but hey, don't be a wimp! Seriously, pretty much anything in between will suffice. I prefer simply using straps for most of the exercises that I use and that I will show you. Harnesses typically come in two types, a belt harness and a shoulder harness. I dislike the belt harness as the pressure it creates around the abdomen in some drags ends up being the limiting factor. A shoulder harness such as the one sold by Ironmind (<http://www.ironmind.com>), is a great tool to have and if you are a Strong Man competitor it is recommended as it is specific to your sport. However, for most people, most purposes and most types of drags, straps suffice. They're more versatile, and that allows you to switch between different drags quickly. Also, with various types of harnesses, you have the potential, depending on how much volume you do of creating adhesions in the tissues around the shoulder. It may not cause a problem for ten years, but adhesion build up will eventually cause problems. Now, why not rope. If you can find a rope thick enough and strong enough go ahead. Some rope the size of the kind you had to climb in gym class would work great, hay string ain't gone work! Check with marine suppliers, as most hardware stores just don't have rope big enough. In addition being too small to hold in some instances, a lot of ropes will stretch. You won't even realize it until you start draggin the sled backwards and you've taken 5 steps before the sled starts to move.

The best thing to use I have found is cargo tie down straps with a

cam buckle. They can be found at Wal-Mart, Lowes, Home Depot, and most hardware shops. I use two of them 12 feet each with the end of each tied to a chain quick link or carabiner. This is superior to other straps that are one strap with two handles, as it allows for a greater variety of movements for the upper body, everything from variations of the press, to the fly, to straight arm rows. The cam buckle allows you to quickly adjust the handles. Another unique feature of the straps I use are the handles. Holding the straps is ok, but I have added a two inch handle made out of PVC pipe. You simply cut two sections of PVC pipe out and put them on the straps before securing them to the quick link or carabiner. You can still use the straps if you want. Also, the PVC pipe I used is 2 inches. It makes it a little difficult to hold on to. Surprisingly, I have not had a problem with hands slipping off the PVC even when sweating profusely. I had planned on adding athletic tape, but didn't need it especially considering it would be a breeding ground for bacteria (not good when many athlete are using the same handles). I have large hands, but even with some of the smaller/younger athletes I have trained with the 2 inch handles, slipping has not been a big problem. Using 1 and a half inch, or 1 inch PVC is an option, but there is a lot of benefit in holding onto a big handle. It improves grip and wrist strength in various drags and in drags involving the elbow flexors it increases brachialis and brachioradialis recruitment. Some of you reading this with more of an engineering mentality than I have that rig up something better, let me know. This system I use has worked great, but it takes a little work to rig it up. If you find something better let me know!

Shoes, women have a pair for every occasion! I have a clean pair and a dirty pair! The type of footwear used depends largely on the type of surface one is planning on dragging on. The sled can be dragged across virtually any surface. I don't like gravel because the shifting gravel makes it easier and therefore more weight is needed, but if it's the only surface available, then it's the only surface available. Concrete (steel scraping concrete is such a sweet sound), asphalt, artificial turf, carpet, grass, even your mother's 100 year old hard wood floors all make suitable surfaces to drag on. My favorite however is grass, it is the most consistent, and the taller it is the more resistance it provides! On surfaces such as grass, regular running shoes may not suffice. On grass cut similar to a golf course a running or cross training shoe will be adequate, but on a football field for example some shoes with a more aggressive tread will provide greater traction. You don't necessarily need cleats, but maybe a cross trainer with a turf tread for example, may be needed.

In this part I have probably raised more questions than anything. In parts II and III we will discuss some of the fundamentals of various sled movements, exercise selection, some program design considerations and options, look at some sample workouts, and basically load you with enough information to be able to incorporate a sled into your training arsenal regardless of your goals. Also, Smitty and I are in the process of creating a library of exercise pictures as well as detailed descriptions. It will not/cannot be exhaustive, but it will give you

enough exercises to use for most training situations and the understanding of how to develop one for your specific needs.

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