

## **GRAB THE BAR, STAND UP HARD**

I have been avoiding writing about how to deadlift up until now for several reasons. One, I don't think that more of that information is really needed, there is a lot of material on that topic already. Two, I did not see how I could write it in a manner that would be applicable to all skill levels, and certainly not to all individuals. Three, I did not think text was the ideal medium for that kind of guide. But after thinking about it more I decided on an approach that I did feel would be more novel and that I felt would be helpful on a more general level. This writeup is not a comprehensive guide to deadlifting, it is not a tutorial for any skill level and it's not even a contiguous narrative. This write up is a series of smaller idea's pertaining to deadlift that probably would not stand up as their own full topics. They all derive from my years of experience excelling at the movement in all of its forms. I make no claims that what I suggest here is the best way to deadlift, or that it is applicable to everyone, but if you have ever wanted to grab something heavy and pick it up there is probably something in here that you'll find helpful. With that all out of the way, let's get started.

### **Setting Up For Success:**

I have written about this topic in general before, but I want to reiterate and hammer in the idea as it pertains to deadlift. More so than any other lift, the set up makes or breaks the deadlift. I will go so far as to say that your success or failure in a rep is nearly pre-determined the moment you fully initiate the pull. The deadlift is relatively unique among common compounds in that the 'hardest' portion of the lift is at the start of the movement, not in the middle. Even for people who fail higher up on the lift, such as around the knees or even at lockout, weakness at the bottom resulting in loss of proper positioning to break the bar from the floor is usually the root cause. This means you need to go from '0 to 60' faster than on any other lift, you do not have the benefit of a descent from a stronger position to prime and prepare yourself. Proper set up in deadlift is all about preparing your body as best you can for that moment when you initiate the pull in full and fight past that most difficult part. This requires that you build maximal tension and adopt your strongest position without the help of the weight already pressing down on you to help cue the needed changes. It also means holding that position throughout the movement and not losing it midway. Without going into too much detail, I think the best way to achieve this is to slow down your pull and ramp up tension as you 'pull the slack' from the bar and your body. You should be fully tensed and the bar completely flexed before putting in the last bit of force needed to break the floor and initiate the pull. In terms of positioning going into this step, I would direct everyone to Alan Thralls' 5-Step deadlift video.

### **Strong Back, Not Straight Back:**

This is another idea you may recognize from some of my other writeups, and it's more applicable in deadlifts than any other lift. 'Keep your back straight' is some of the most common advice parroted by beginners and long-term-novices when it comes to deadlifts, and it's complete nonsense. A perfectly straight back is not even in its natural, neutral position, let alone

its strongest position for a deadlift. There is no strict template for what a 'strong' back should look like, and that is probably why those without experience fear it. They can't get their 'answer' from a video, book, or paper, they need to actually go to the gym and try things. The position your back can and should adopt will depend on both your individual anatomy and what you are trying to lift. Back curvature will change for conventional deadlift versus a neutral grip elevated pull (such as high handle trap bar) versus an Atlas Stone pick and so on. Your technique needs to change to match your task and that is going to change your 'form'. Not being able to see all of you lifting to make personal suggestions and do some trial and error I will default to my 'Rule 0' of technique: Do what feels strong and as comfortable as lifting heavy things can. It's your body, listen to it and don't fixate on what it ends up looking like. Actively fighting against this back position can be detrimental to many pulls. If you start with a 'pretty' level of back curvature and are forced to shift to a stronger, more curved position mid-pull you not only are pulling less effectively but also opening yourself to injury. Remember, actively curving is a lot 'worse' than just being curved but at a constant level.

### **Lift More By Training Less:**

This one is the first that I need to preface by saying 'This is SUPER CIRCUMSTANTIAL'. I have whittled down the degree to which I train deadlift my entire training career. I am at a point where I barely, if ever train the movement. What you see posted in terms of PRs or odd pulls is the nearly the full extent of my deadlift work. I am not doing additional working sets or non-PR attempt work to support these lifts. I discovered pretty early on that, due to the relative simplicity of the movement pattern and natural proclivity, my technique remained pretty much fully honed even when not practiced. I cut down to one high intensity working set a week pretty early on, and ditched even that a few years ago now. I find that it's just much more effective to build the relevant muscles with other lifts and save the energy/fatigue for things I wanted to do for their own sake, like PR attempts or odd pulls. This also frees up a lot of fatigue for squatting when I push it, as that movement DOES benefit a lot from practice for me. Now do I recommend not training deadlift at all for everyone else? Absolutely not, I am a pretty unique case in this regard. But what I can suggest is to consider tapering down the volume in deadlifts if you find that the deadlift is a comfortable movement pattern for you and/or if you feel it's cost in fatigue is interfering with other work. You might find that it holds up fine despite reduced direct training, freeing up your programming for more work in other areas. Just make sure that you still get volume for your 'deadlift muscles' from some other movement(s) if you go this route.

### **Absolute Confidence, aka THE MINDSET:**

On a mental level, deadlift is one of the hardest lifts for reasons similar to those discussed when talking about set up. You need to be there 100% mentally to max your deadlift, as it's much easier to just quit when the bar is below you versus on top of you such as in a Squat or Bench Press. You need to be willing and able to give it your all on any pull, particularly a single rep max. This can be particularly difficult if you have lingering fear of injury due to previous injury or failure to completely reject the 'spines are fragile' narrative that is pressed so hard. How you counter this is training the mindset of "I will lift this" when approaching any pull. Not "I think I can

pull this”, certainly not “I hope I can pull this”, leave no room for failure in your mind. You can build this in a few ways. First off stop taking moon shots on your PR attempts, be more conservative, do not introduce failure so often that it becomes habitual. Second (and this is personal preference), take small jumps near the top of warm ups in your PR attempts. Don’t jump up a full plate going into your PR attempt, take 10-25lb jumps depending on your total weight. I have had multiple ‘cluster’ PRs where I get 2 or 3 PRs in a row because I go into each knowing that I just did 20lbs less (just a couple percent less in total weight), so this has to be easy. That confidence goes so far, as well as the physical priming. Third, spend some time on super heavy elevated pulls or pulls that are otherwise advantaged. I still think that I built a lot of mental power off the floor, forcing myself to go through an excruciating challenge where I completed all 11 weeks of ‘MagOrt’ in 32 hours with the high handle trap bar. Those last few sessions opened my eyes to the power of mind over matter.

### **Can’t Cheat If There Are No Rules:**

This is another general topic that I will focus on deadlift here. Do not be afraid to ‘cheat’ if you are not competing in a sport. Use wrist straps if grip is limiting your pulls. Go ahead and pull sumo. Use a noodle bar if you want, or a trap bar, or bands or chains or anything else your heart desires. If the intensity is there so is the benefit. As it pertains to conventional deadlift, absolutely learn to at least ramp, if not hitch, if you have no intention of competing in powerlifting. It’s not cheating, it’s good technique. I see a lot of people struggle at the top of a deadlift, usually because they get a bit out of position at the start or mid lift, that could potentially trivialize their struggles by learning to ramp and scoop their thighs under the bar a little. If your goal is just to deadlift as much as you can, take the time to learn the skills to do that, including ramping, and maybe hitching. I feel that I have a very effective and pretty ramp personally, and I really attribute that to pushing high rep AMRAPs for so long. When you are on rep 18/20 you are incredibly fatigued but the load is, in absolute terms, not that heavy. This gives you a good chance to try things that improve efficiency in a relatively low stakes situation. I discovered that in those high fatigue situations where I needed to move that bar as efficiently as possible because there wasn’t any gas left to just muscle it up I naturally developed the ramping motion. With some extra practice, I was able to take that and apply it to heavier lifts and situations without fatigue. Your body will figure things out if you give it the proper situation to do so, so try listening to it. And don’t be afraid if the solutions it offers break rules in sports you don’t even compete in.

### **Accessorizing:**

While I think that everyone is going to have their own personal ‘best’ accessories for any given lift, here are the movements that I think give the most bang for the buck for my deadlift. First off is back work in general. Strong bracing is very important in deadlift and bracing is a full torso experience, not just a core thing. You need a back that is big and powerful from upper to lower to maintain positioning when you start pulling heavy, regardless of what anyone telling you to ‘lift with your legs’ says. Second off is squatting, specifically low bar. I had to take a long break from deadlift years ago because I had lingering tendon issues (I think) in my forearm from some

tricep stuff. Because I had not yet discovered the wonder of straps I could not keep hold of the bar without pain. In that time I just focused on low bar back squat. When I came back about 5 months later I pulled 700, a 65lb PR, within 2 weeks. Even more specifically, I recently have found that high box squats are even better. It makes sense, seeing at the range of motion trained in the legs with a high box squat is a lot closer to the range you need out of a deadlift than a full squat to parallel. Third, alternative heavy pulls/deadlifts. If you primarily care about barbell deadlifts from the floor, consider spending some time with the high handle trap bar, or with elevated pulls, or some other bar or variation. I think time spent with the high handle trap bar did just as much to help with my positioning and power off the floor as the box squats did. What was my last major weakness has seemingly disappeared thanks to those two movements.

### **Deadlifting Everything:**

This last bit is just some general advice on moving out towards new deadlift movements and other weird floor pulls. I can't say for sure that I have the absolute widest range of deadlift skill and strength of anyone out there but I have to at least be up there. And I pull huge numbers in a really wide range of situations for a couple reasons. The first is I have a brutally powerful back and posterior chain. Absent any form of technique I can still muscle up a lot when I can use those muscles in the right movement patterns. If you want to start lifting heavy in a wide range of weird pulls I would make sure you have a comparable level of foundational strength in those areas. The second factor is that I have exposed myself to a wide variety of deadlift and deadliftesque movement patterns. While I have done specific training for very few of them, they all have some degree of overlap and my 'generic' heavy hip-hinge from the floor skill is very high. Being forced to figure out so many movements with minimal practice/trial and error has increased my general bodily awareness and makes tackling each new one that much easier. If you want to build up this kind of general skill and awareness start working in new pulls that are not as heavy or technically different from what you are already doing, and then build up both the weight and degree of weirdness as you become comfortable with what you are already doing. Try a Hack, or a Jefferson, or a rack pull before jumping into single arm Zercher lift from two atlas stones.

### **Closing Thoughts:**

These are just a handful of things that came to mind as I wrote this. I am sure there will be things I think of that I missed here that might fill a second one of these if this one is well received. I rarely go into any of these with much planning other than the topic and maybe 2-3 major ideas that I want to touch on so they are primarily stream of consciousness with some minor consideration. I really do think that most of deadlift can be reduced to "GRAB THE BAR, STAND UP HARD", with everything else being stuff that can be explained pretty quickly or stuff that you learn by doing. If anyone reading this is totally new to deadlifts I say just go for it, do not build them up as some complicated, or dangerous lift in your head. Despite popular opinion they are no different than any other free weight compound in risk, and are quite a bit simpler than most in my opinion. If you are a bit more experienced, I hope that some of the things I touched on here struck a chord and gave you ideas for things to explore or try. And if you are already a

deadlift master, maybe something you already knew became more clear after reading or you found a better way to explain or teach some ideas to someone newer and less experienced. If none of this had any value for you I apologize and hope you are in the minority.