

Overcoming Plateaus Part 3: The Deadlift

By: Louie Simmons

Squat and bench press records are continually being set in recent years. It's easy to see why. Most federations have a 24-hour weigh-in rule, which is a positive thing for the health of the lifter. It is easy to rehydrate in 24 hours, which results in fewer cramps and muscle pulls and tears. In the old days, it was common for lifters to pass out while squatting or to drop the squat bar because they were dizzy. And, of course, the more you weigh; the more you can squat or bench. In addition, the introduction of power suits, groove briefs, and bench shirts has enabled the lifter to make bigger and bigger lifts.

But, what about the deadlift? Does equipment help in this lift? Shawn Coleman said that using a larger deadlift suit helped him get into a better starting position to pull a PR 835 deadlift. So while supportive gear can help the squat and bench, and prolong one's lifting career, more times than not it can be a hindrance for deadlifting.

So, if equipment is of little benefit, what's the answer when it comes to the deadlift? Training.

Most lifters deadlift too often and too heavy. This has an ill effect on the central nervous system. A better method is to use a variety of exercises that mimic the deadlift or special exercises that develop the individual muscles that are used while deadlifting (the conjugate method). One must build the muscles that start and finish the lift. Also, there must be methods used to develop speed and acceleration; the quicker the bar is locked out, the less chance for the grip to give out.

Vince Anello, an 821 deadlifter at 198, once told me that anything he did would make his deadlift go up. Bill Starr said that if you want to deadlift more, don't deadlift. Bill was an excellent Olympic lifter who pulled a 666 national record in 1970, having concentrated on powerlifting for only a short time. Whether they knew it or not, both men were utilizing the conjugate method. This method was devised to develop the muscles and special strengths (starting, accelerating, absolute).

The good morning is a valuable exercise in the conjugate method. For deadlifting, the bent over version is the best. Bend at the upper back first and round over while lowering the bar. The legs can be slightly bent to prevent hyperextension of the knee. While doing good mornings, always think about duplicating the motion of a deadlift. Only you, the person doing the good morning, can gauge its effectiveness, (1) by the stress on the spinal erectors, hamstrings or glutes, and hips, and, of course, (2) if your deadlift goes up.

Shawn Coleman did 600 for 5 reps in the good morning prior to his 835 deadlift. If you are doing 600 for 5 reps and your deadlift is 700 pounds, you are just kidding yourself, and you must change your training.

Use a variety of bars in the good morning: straight, cambered, Safety Power Squat bar. Use a high bar placement and a low bar placement, close and a wide stance, and sometimes do them seated. Bands and chains as well as weight releasers can be used. One to six reps works best. Stockier men should do at least 3 reps to increase muscle tension. Because a max deadlift can take several seconds to complete, the duration of a set of reps in this lift must also be several seconds.

Various types of squatting should also be done to increase the deadlift. Michael Brugger of Germany related to me that the Olympic-style squat was his favorite exercise to increase his deadlift of 887. Eddie Coppin of Belgium made an 826 deadlift at a bodyweight of 186. The front squat was a major part of his training. In the early 1970s, George Clark pulled 700 at 181 and just missed 735, the world record held by Vince Anello. George's main exercise was the hack squat deadlift, with the bar held behind his back. These are three examples of great lifters using a form of the squat to raise their deadlift.

Squatting with a bar held in various ways will place the stress on the erectors, hips, and glutes; the primary muscles that deadlift. We advise using a group of specialty bars: Buffalo bar, Safety Power Squat bar, Manta Ray, etc. This will teach you to maintain a more upright position, which is conducive to a good deadlift.

If you do all deadlifting, it is a matter of time before your deadlift will stall, or even worse, injury will stop all progress. Why? No one's body will equally distribute the work evenly between the lower, mid, and upper back. If the lower back takes the major role in deadlifting, which is most often the case, eventually an injury will occur. But by doing a variety of special exercises for the upper back, the muscles of the entire back are more likely to receive equal work. These exercises include shrugs, lat work, spinal erector work, good mornings, back raises, reverse hyperextensions, glute/ham raises, sled work, and pull-throughs.

What about starting and accelerating strength? The best way to develop these strengths is by using Flex bands. By attaching the bands over the bar, the resistance is applied to the bar evenly. The higher the bar is raised, the more resistance applied to the bar. If you are weak at the top, with the bands you will learn to pull faster at the start, so momentum and then acceleration can help carry the bar to lock-out. If you are weak at the start, the bands will teach you to start off the floor faster, because without the fast start, you will not be able to lock out a heavy deadlift. For those who have said this will not build acceleration: one does not use maximum weight with the bands, but rather 60%. More resistance

is added to the bar by the bands as you lift the bar. This is called accommodating resistance.

Concerning contradictory information on this subject, research in the United States is invariably done in a college environment. It is conducted with students as subjects. These students many times are not avid weight lifters, nor are they of high standard, such as Elite lifters. Nevertheless, conclusions from these studies are put forth as a model for all training, including that used at football and weight lifting facilities.

The most usable results are obtained by testing high-skilled athletes. This is what is done at Westside, where only Elite lifters (43 to date) are tested. You must have a qualified trainer to ask the right questions and highly qualified lifters to test to help answer those questions.

Poor testing also occurs when two different training methods are tested together. This example also points out the misuse of plyometrics. A lifter had tried a program of plyometrics in between deadlift sets. Not only will the plyometrics dampen the central nervous system for the following sets of deadlifts but in fact the deadlifts would also negatively affect the plyometrics. He raised his pull 2.5-kg, an insignificant amount to register a valid training effect. You can't train plyometrics and the maximal effort method at the same time.

Plyometrics help the separation phase only, when the bar separates from the floor. But this particular lifter had difficulty above the knee level and locking out. He was also doing rack work above the knee at the same time and sled pulling. These two exercises build the top part of the deadlift, where he would fail. The plyometrics build the start, not where he needed help. In the United States, plyometrics are misused more times than not. They are so draining on the central nervous system that heavy pulls and squats must be decreased or done during the non competing months of the year. In summary, please be careful what you read. Not all conclusions are valid.

The abdominal muscles are extremely important in deadlifting. The abs must flex first, before the lower back starts to do its work. Lifters with weak abs and a strong back will invariably hurt their back. When the back flexes first without the abs working as stabilizers, the back is put under great stress. Therefore, you must learn to increase intraabdominal pressure while lifting. This will reduce the risk of a hernia and greatly reduce pressure on the disks.

The internal and external obliques play a great role in stabilizing the hips, and they initiate straightening the legs in the deadlift. Years ago, when powerlifters could deadlift more than they squatted, the obliques were often much more developed than they are today. Lifters use to do side presses and one-armed deadlifts to develop the obliques.

At Westside, we do most of our ab work standing up, with a lat machine. The abs must flex downward to be effective. Oblique work can also be done standing up. Face away from the lat machine with the strap held behind your neck. Put one foot in front of the other and bend forward, flexing the obliques. This will train the abs correctly.

You must do all types of ab work. In addition to standing ab work, leg raises and straight-leg sit-ups are beneficial. Don't be confused by the way bodybuilders look. Every time I watch one of those fitness shows, some big-time bodybuilder is telling everyone to keep his or her knees bent to take pressure off the low back. I guess sucking in those abs is a bunch of crap, huh. Because if their abs were half as strong as they look, they wouldn't be worrying about their lower back.

Although a smaller waist will make it easier to deadlift, it must be very strong. One could see John Kuc's abs, through his super suit from 100 feet away when he made 870 at 242. Bob Peoples taught the best method of using the abs in the deadlift to me. He said it was best to breathe into the stomach only, not the chest. This will stabilize and support the lower back, and it does not elongate the spine. The shorter the spine, the better the deadlifter. If you have long legs, a short torso, and long arms, you have the perfect build for deadlifting.

More important than the right build is attitude. The deadlift is a tough lift, especially at the conclusion of a long meet. No attitude is "working out" and a killer attitude is "training" — a big difference.