

Lower Back Training

Louie Simmons

A weak man has a weak back and a strong man has a strong back. It's that simple. But how do you acquire a strong back without getting hurt? Let's start with large exercises like rack pulls.

Rack Pulls

Steve Goggins was famous for his back work. He was the first to squat 1100 with a body weight of 262. Chuck Vogelpohl has always done heavy rack work, and sometimes he worked up to 1100 or more on high pins. He holds the world record squat in the 275 bodyweight class at 1150 at an actual bodyweight of 264. I asked him why he did such heavy rack work. His answer was that it taught him how to strain. I thought if anyone knows how to strain, it's Chuck. But then I realized it. Rack work taught him not only to strain but to think his way throughout the lift correctly. Most of his rack work was just below his knees to just above the knees. Mostly singles but sometimes 3 reps were done for added muscle tension. This is common for Russian and Ukrainian training. Chuck was so strong off the floor that he had to slow the start to hold onto the bar. His best meet deadlift was 835, and 900 in the gym with straps. I recommend that those of you who are not very strong at the floor do some pulls with the plates 2-4 and 6 inches off the floor.

Good Mornings

A second bar exercise for enormous back strength is good mornings. At Westside, we do several types of good mornings. I feel the arched lower back, rounded mid to upper back style is the best for the conventional deadlift. Reps for all except concentric good

mornings should be 3-5 rep maxes. Good mornings can be done with straight legs, bent legs, rounded back, arched back, or any combination. Use a squat bar, Safety Squat bar, a 14-inch-cambered bar, or a Buffalo bar using a wide or close stance. At Westside, we do heavy good mornings lowering the plates into large foam blocks.

Zercher Squat

A third heavy bar exercise is the Zercher squat. Westside has developed a harness to do the lift with little stress on the arms. We do several versions of Zercher lifts off of the floor like Ed Zercher, the inventor, intended them to be done. Use whatever stance you like: wide, moderate, or close. Rack work is popular at Westside for the Zercher. Zercher squats off of a box can also be done. The reps will vary from 1 to 10. Walking with the Zercher harness loaded with up to 225 for a ¼ mile will blow up your lower back, hips, and hamstrings.

Low Box Squat

For lower back and hip strength the very low box squat is great. If you have never squatted on a 10-inch or lower box, you are in for a treat. There are two versions of this. The close stance version will work the quads and lower back. Westside uses the front squat, Safety Squat bar, Buffalo bar, Zercher squat, and Manta Ray but never a regular squat bar. A squat bar is too hard on the bicep tendons. Also try very wide stance, low box squats with any bar mentioned in this article. You want to work up to a 3-5-rep max, but establish a 1-rep max as well. For weight gain, 5 reps work best. If you have to keep your weight down, do singles.

Small Exercises for Lower Back

Pull-Throughs on a Cable Device

Face away from the low pulley, grip a rope or short handles, walk forward a step or two, and squat down, letting your hands go between and behind your body, then pull your arms forward while keeping your arms straight and stand up. High reps (10-20) are used. Bent legs work the hamstrings, glutes, and lower back. The straight leg version will isolate the lower back more effectively.

Dimel Deadlifts

Use a shoulder-width stance, hands outside the legs with your back arched. After picking up the first rep, drop the bar first to the knees and return to lock out. Use a fast up and down tempo for 2 sets of 20 reps. Use a grip with the palms facing toward the body or use straps. Matt Dimel used this exercise to push an 820 squat that was stalled for a year to the 1010 world record that stood for years. His common weights were 225 to 275 for 2 sets of 20 reps four times a week. You want to do this for 2 weeks, then switch to a different special exercise. This exercise pushed Steve Wilson's deadlift up from 815 to an official 865 at around 265 bodyweight.

Ukrainian Deadlifts

I was talking about training to my Ukrainian friends S. Naleykin and Konstantin Milyutin about special leg and lower back training. They said they do not do any special leg work, but they should. Konstantin told me while visiting Westside that they did 3 sets of 20 reps standing on two benches holding a 70 K, or 154 pound, kettlebell. After looking at the backs of their fellow lifters, I was intrigued. We started doing them and they blew us up. I tried sets of 20 reps in one workout with 53, 70, 88, 106, and 140 pounds and back to 70

pounds for a final set. This was too much volume, but I bought a 195-pound stone with a T-handle, and 3 sets of 20 reps worked very well. Stand on boxes or benches, round over, and perform the reps. The wider the feet, the more glute work; the closer the feet, the more lower back. Milyutin pulled 730 at 220, and Naleykin made 750 and almost 790 at 198. Remember, they use 154 pounds for the reps. We have several 800-pound deadlifters using 195 pounds.

Sled Work

Sled pulling will raise not only your GPP but also your squat and deadlift. For strength we pull 200 feet at a time. A strap is placed over your power belt, not on the shoulders. Do not do less than six trips with very heavy weights: three 45-pound plates to six 45-pound plates. As the weight is held to one or two 45-pound plates, the trips can go up to 20 at times. This will greatly raise GPP but will do little for absolute strength. There is little stress on the spine with sled pulling. It will build the hips, glutes, hamstrings, quads, calves, and even the lower back. By rotating the hips in a very natural way even when doing upper body work with a second strap, the lower body is getting a workout. Try sled work for a boost in your squat and deadlift.

Reverse Hypers

I came up with this exercise in early 1974 after breaking my fifth lumbar vertebra. Nothing that I had previously done had helped the pain or range of motion, but this worked. I received my first United States patent in the 1990s. Now I own three U.S. patents, and Reverse Hyper is U.S. trademarked. This exercise is a decompression tool. It builds strength to stabilize the core of the muscular skeletal system. This also helps with the flexibility to perform dynamic motions. To make it simple, it makes you strong while

rehabing the entire back, hamstrings, and glutes. Greg Panora pushed his squat from 920 to 1050 in 18 months. His deadlift has gone from 770 to 800. Luke Edward's deadlift was 740 before coming to Westside, and in 5 months it went to 810. Greg and Luke are both 242-pound lifters. The Reverse Hyper is done at least four times a week, twice very heavy on squat day. This machine not only builds your lower back and complete posterior chain but provides decompression of the spinal column and aids in range of motion. There should be one in every gym, because it will not only build the lower back to the extreme but is the best prehab and restoration tool available on the market today. To become extremely strong, one must be healthy and fit; the exercises large and small discussed here will prolong your lifter career. The great Jon Cole once said the most important test a lifter has to pass is the test of time. Amen.

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