

Teaching the Romanian Deadlift

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THE LIFTS TRADITIONALLY USED

for the sport of weightlifting (i.e., power cleans or snatches) are the lifts of choice for many strength and conditioning professionals around the world. Through these lifts, athletes can be trained to generate greater power output. This theoretically should transfer onto the playing field as improved performance. The Romanian deadlift (RDL) is considered a keystone in developing proficiency with the Olympic-style lifts (1). It is also considered a great lift for low-back and upper-hamstring development (2). A sports medicine clinic at which I was employed developed a strength and conditioning program that emphasized the Olympic-style lifts. Since that program's inception, we taught the RDL as a precursor to power cleans, and we also discovered that the RDL is perhaps the toughest lift for athletes to understand and do correctly. Through these trials of instruction, we developed a model for teaching young athletes how to properly perform the RDL.

■ Terminology

Prior to practicing the RDL, I have found it helpful to define a few important terms so that athletes will understand clearly how to do the exercise. This helps eliminate confusion about what we expect athletes to do as they are training, and it also serves to reduce the amount of time we spend explaining technical issues of the RDL. We try to keep these terms simple and concise so our athletes know exactly what we mean during instruction.

- *Proper foot width*—For the RDL, the feet should ideally be about hip width apart. This position is a little narrower than shoulder width apart. However, some athletes prefer doing RDLs with their feet farther apart. I try to emphasize the hip-width distance and make accommodations as needed.
- *Arched back*—This refers to the lordotic curve of the low back that should be used when performing any weightlifting movement (Figure 1).
- *Shoulders back/show off the*

chest—This refers to the shoulders being thrown back to help lock the low back in proper lifting position (Figure 1).

■ Methodology

Starting Position

The athlete starts in an upright position, comfortably hanging onto the bar at arm's length. Knees should be slightly flexed. Feet should be about hip-width apart and pointing straight ahead. The head and eyes should be facing straight ahead. The shoulders should be thrown back and the back arched in a lordotic curve. This posture is shown in Figure 1.

Bending Phase/Glutes to the Rear

After the athlete assumes the proper starting position, he or she must bend forward at the hips. This must be done while keeping the back arched in its lordotic curve. Otherwise, one puts the low back at risk for injury and negates all the benefits of the RDL. We tell athletes to push their glutes posteriorly, with minimal emphasis



Figure 1. Proper starting position for the RDL.



Figure 2. Proper descent during an RDL.



Figure 3. Return to starting position.

placed on bending at the hips. This emphasis usually results in technically correct RDLs. However, it should be noted that flexibility may limit how far an athlete is actually able to lower the bar, but as time passes, his or her flexibility will increase, allowing performance of this exercise in textbook fashion (Figure 2).

Return to the Starting Position

After the athlete bends as far forward as is personally possible, he or she returns to the starting position by contracting the glutes, hamstrings, and low-back musculature (Figure 3).

Progressing the Exercise

After the initial learning phase, we encourage the athlete to try to bend at the hips (go deeper) while maintaining the low-back lordosis (Figure 2). As stated before, this should come with a comprehensive flexibility-training program. As the athlete learns the mechan-

ics of the RDL, we also provide instruction about proper breathing technique (breathe in during the descent and out during the ascent). Watch for athletes who may be rounding the back (not maintaining the lordotic curve). We also progress all of our athletes from starting with an empty bar. As technique and coordination improve, we have them add weight onto the bar.

Common Problems

There are several common problems that may arise while training athletes in proper RDL technique. We have addressed some of them here.

- *Not maintaining the lordotic curve*—Remember to have the athlete direct the glutes posteriorly to produce downward movement of the bar.
- *Athlete cannot lower the bar very low*—This is probably because of a lack of flexibility in the athlete's hamstrings. With

time this will correct itself, as the athlete becomes more flexible. This is addressed through the warm-up.

- *Extending the knees during the lift*—Remind the athlete that knees must be bent to reduce back strain. Movement of the bar should be produced by the hips, not with the legs (as in the traditional deadlift).

Conclusion

With this method of instruction, we have trained over 130 athletes. We had only 2 or 3 athletes lose more than a week of training time because of back injury. Those who lost training time can be traced back to faulty technique or a pre-existing back injury. We can only credit our success to the athletes' proper lifting technique and proper training progression. We started our athletes with just a bar and progressively added weight as technique and strength improved. Using this method, I believe you

will find that your athletes learn how to do RDLs more quickly and safely. This, in turn, will only allow them to excel within their chosen athletic endeavors. ▲

■ References

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