

Exploring the Deadlift

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SUMMARY

THE DEAD LIFT (DL) AND ITS VARIATIONS ARE WIDELY ACCEPTED BY STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING COACHES AS ONE OF THE “BIG 3” EXERCISES PRESCRIBED TO DEVELOP “TOTAL BODY STRENGTH,” SPECIFICALLY THE HIP AND KNEE EXTENSORS, SPINAL ERECTORS, QUADRATUS LUMBORUM, CORE ABDOMINAL MUSCULATURE, AND BACK AND FOREARM MUSCLES. THEREFORE, THE PURPOSE OF THIS COLUMN IS TO INTRODUCE STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING COACHES TO THE MANY SPORT-SPECIFIC APPLICATIONS FOR COMMON DL VARIATIONS USED IN STRENGTH TRAINING PROGRAM DESIGN, WITH SPECIFIC EMPHASIS ON THE ROMANIAN DL, FOR ITS POTENTIAL USE IN THE TEACHING PROGRESSION OF THE POWER CLEAN.

DEAD LIFT TERMINOLOGY

Although there are several reports addressing correct teaching technique of the dead lift (DL), (7–9,11,12) only a few provide clarification surrounding specific terminology and explanation of the different DL styles used by coaches (10,17). Typically, the term DL is associated with both conventional and nonconventional styles (i.e., sumo), commonly used by athletes, with these 2 styles being the basis of all other DL variants. A comprehensive review by Piper and Waller (17) presents 11 variations of the DL (Table 1), highlighting the adaptability and versatility

of this fundamental exercise. This is an important consideration because it is important for strength and conditioning coaches to be aware of the correct terminology for the many DL variations. The authors have found that explanation of DL variations is often more problematic than is necessary because of unnecessary confusion with surrounding DL terminology.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

It is interesting to note that despite the extensive use of the DL by athletes, relatively little research has been conducted exploring its application; to the authors' knowledge, only 5 articles (1,4–6,16) and 2 abstracts (14,18) have been published. According to research examining electromyography, a measure of muscle activation, the conventional DL results in twice as much activation of the erector spinae muscles compared with the sumo DL (14), whereas the Romanian DL (RDL) is reported to have greater activation of the biceps femoris, as opposed to leg curls (18).

A comprehensive biomechanical analysis of the conventional and sumo DL by McGuigan and Wilson (16) revealed that the sumo DL offers several mechanical advantages, the most significant being a more upright (i.e., extended) trunk posture at liftoff. The authors report that the decrease in L4/L5 torque during the sumo DL represents a significant safety advantage for athletes involved in strength training. Suggested mechanisms include reduced spinal flexion and increased muscular activation (6). According to previous research, a 3-dimensional analysis of the sumo and conventional

DL by Escamilla et al. (4) found that vertical bar distance, mechanical work, and predicted energy expenditure were approximately 25–40% greater in the conventional DL. However, further research is warranted with regards to understanding the different DL variants, specifically in determining which DL style an athlete should use. For example, determinant criteria for prescribing DL variants should be related to the athlete's specific sport, current training status, and mesocycle goals.

ROMANIAN DEAD LIFT

The RDL is suggested to be essential in developing movement proficiency in weightlifting (3,8) because the RDL establishes the correct body positioning (stance and posture) through initiation of the posterior chain segment of the hips, buttocks, and hamstrings (i.e., low back-hip hinge) (3), which is required to allow lifters to maintain optimal alignment (2). Although there are different teaching progressions for the hang power clean (13,15), we have extensively used the 6-step progression model presented by Duba et al. (2). The authors suggest that because of the importance of correct body positioning, teaching the RDL should be considered the first step in the progression, along with the front squat because both movements develop the posterior chain segment (Figure 1). Once the athletes have mastered the RDL, and developed solid lifting competence in both the RDL and front

KEY WORDS:

dead lift; strength training; technique

Table 1 Overview of dead lift variations and sport-specific applications			
Dead lift variation	Primary muscles used	Comments	Sport-specific applications
Conventional DL	Gluteus, quadriceps, hip adductors, spinal erectors	Total body exercise	Football, volleyball, sailing
Sumo DL	Gluteus, quadriceps, hip adductors	Decreased lumbar stress, total body exercise	Wrestling, rugby league, rugby union, AFL
Stiff-legged DL	Gluteus, quadriceps, hip adductors, spinal erectors	Common technical errors, low back rehabilitation contraindicated	Diving, gymnastics, sailing
Romanian DL	Hamstrings, spinal erectors	Essential learning movement for Olympic lifts (power clean) and variants	Weightlifting, field events (throws), hockey
Power Rack DL	Spinal erectors	Heavy loads used for increased strength	Powerlifting, rugby league, rugby union, AFL
Machine DL	Varies with exercise movement	Controlled movement pattern	Powerlifting, rugby league, rugby union, AFL
Snatch DL	Upper back, spinal erectors	Increased scapular stabilization	Weightlifting, gymnastics, ski jumper
Dumbbell DL	Varies with exercise movement pattern	Varies with exercise movement	Sailing, windsurfing, baseball, equestrian
One-arm DL	Abdominals, spinal erectors	Increased trunk stabilization	Field events (throws), rugby, squash, tennis, equestrian, archery, sailing
Strongman DL	Gluteus, quadriceps, hip adductors	Heavy loads using various objects; total body exercise	Wrestling, rugby league, rugby union, AFL
Finger-grip DL	Forearm muscles, varies with exercise movement	Increased grip strength	Rock climbing, archery, basketball, gymnastics

AFL = Australian rules football; DL = dead lift.
Adapted from Piper and Waller (17).

squat, they are ready to move onto the next progression in the model, which being the power shrug. Although there is significant emphasis on teaching the RDL, for reasons previously mentioned, it has also been suggested (8) that the RDL may be the most challenging lift for athletes to perform correctly, especially in athletes who present with posterior chain segment dysfunction. This is a source of common error because the athlete tries to pull with the lower back, thereby initiating the movement without the hips, buttocks, and hamstrings (3). As such, the use of specific

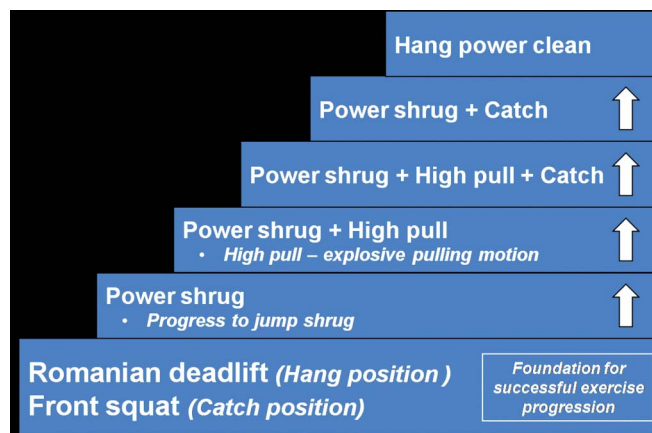


Figure 1. Six-step teaching progression for the hang power clean. The Romanian dead lift provides the foundation for successful exercise progression. Adapted from Duba et al. (2).

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Figure 2. Set position for the Romanian dead lift.

teaching cues is recommended to assure competent performance of the RDL (2).

TEACHING COMPONENTS

The following brief overview provides explanation for the teaching components of the RDL:

1. *Setup.* The stance is similar to that of a conventional DL with a double overhand grip. The scapula should be retracted with the spine maintaining its natural s-shaped curvature (i.e., natural lordosis of the cervical and lumbar spine) both at the beginning and throughout the entire lift (Figure 2).
2. *Execution.* The RDL is similar to the stiff-legged dead lift, with the exception of approximately 15 degrees of knee flexion that is used. Movement is achieved via hip flexion during the eccentric phase

while maintaining extension in the cervical and lumbar spines, concurrent with holding the knees at approximately 15 degrees of flexion. The bar descends slowly and closely to the thighs instead of being directly underneath the shoulders (Figure 3). This reduces the torque on the lumbar spine (L4/L5) by placing the load closer to axis of rotation and over the base of support. The bar descends until it is inferior to the knee joint or to the point where the lifter feels the need to flex the back, the urge to further flex the knees, or they have reached their maximal range of motion

without compromising lifting posture (Figure 4). The key is to focus on initiating the movement at the hips, buttocks, and hamstrings while maintaining knee flexion of approximately 15 degrees. When ascending, hip and knee extension should occur simultaneously while maintaining some shoulder retraction and the spine's natural curvature.

3. *Common mistakes.* As previously mentioned, mistakes during the RDL are related to posterior chain segment dysfunction and often result in faulty movement patterns. Typical lifting errors include a round flexed lower back, excessive

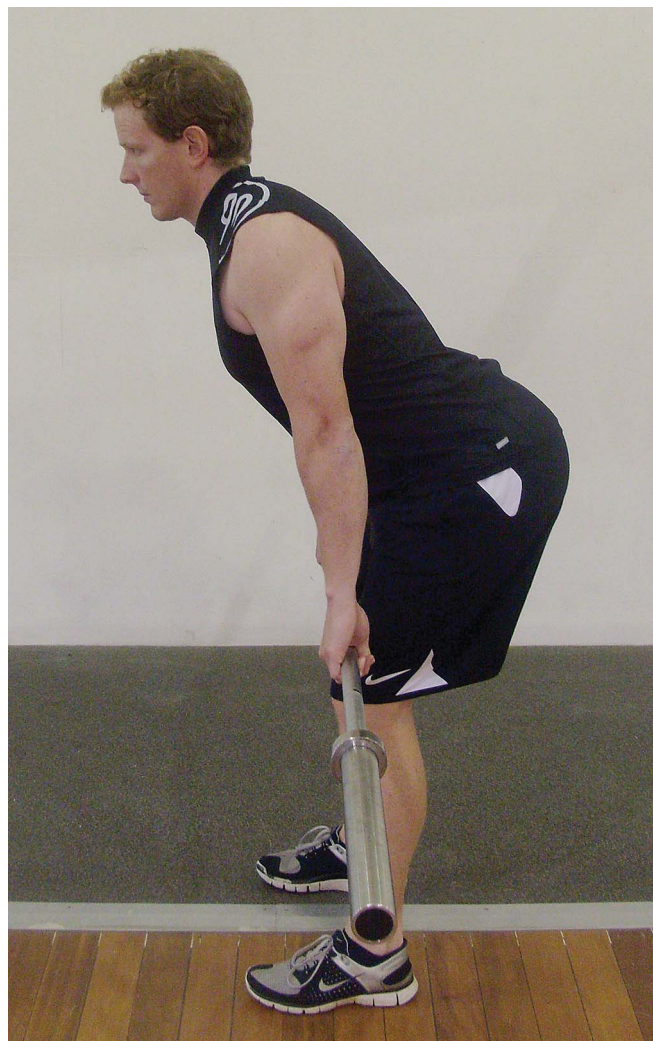


Figure 3. Mid position for the Romanian dead lift. The bar remains close to the thighs.

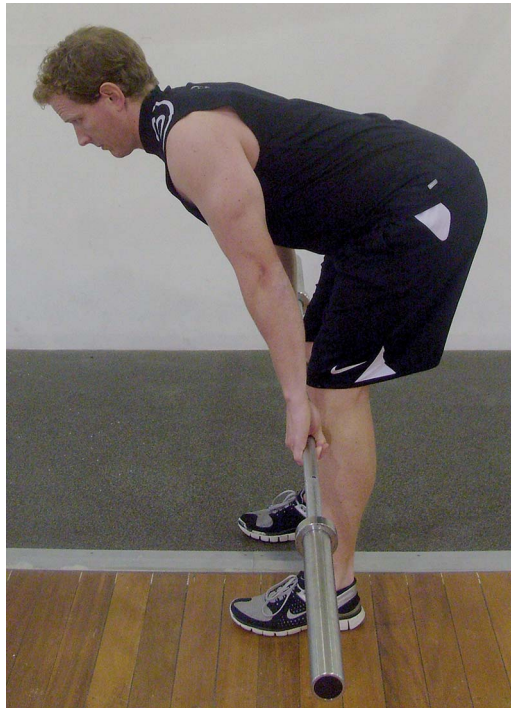


Figure 4. End position for the Romanian dead lift. The bar finishes below the knees.



Figure 5. Avoid the rounded back (excessive kyphosis).

kyphosis of the thoracic spine (Figure 5), pulling the bar against the thighs, and excessive extension of the lumbar spine at the end of the lift (Figure 6) (8). Common mistakes include not maintaining the recommended amount of knee flexion throughout the lift (i.e., approximately 15 degrees) and a lack of movement synchronization (i.e., extending the knees before hip extension during the ascent). Piper and Waller (17) highlight that more stress is placed higher in the hamstrings if the knees are maintained at approximately 15-degree flexion, whereas more stress may be felt at the insertion if the knees are straightened during the lift.

VARIATIONS

As with all exercises, there are several variations that can be applied to the RDL. Some examples include

1. *Grip—using a snatch grip.* The grip setup described in this column is for developing the fundamental movement progression for the hang power clean. However, if the athlete performs the RDL with a snatch grip (i.e., wider than shoulder width), then this is a preparatory movement for performing the power snatch.
2. *Equipment—the use of dumbbells.* The use of dumbbell variations is of extreme importance in addressing athletes who present with bilateral comparison strength deficits. The functionality of dumbbells allows for both bilateral and unilateral exercise prescription.
3. *Stance—performing RDL on one leg.* This is an advanced, functional application, exercise variation that targets and engages the posterior chain segment of the hips, buttocks, and hamstrings. Athletes require a strong core and a well-developed RDL technique as well as unilateral balance.

CONCLUSION

The DL is a fundamental exercise for the development of total body strength, and manipulation of the

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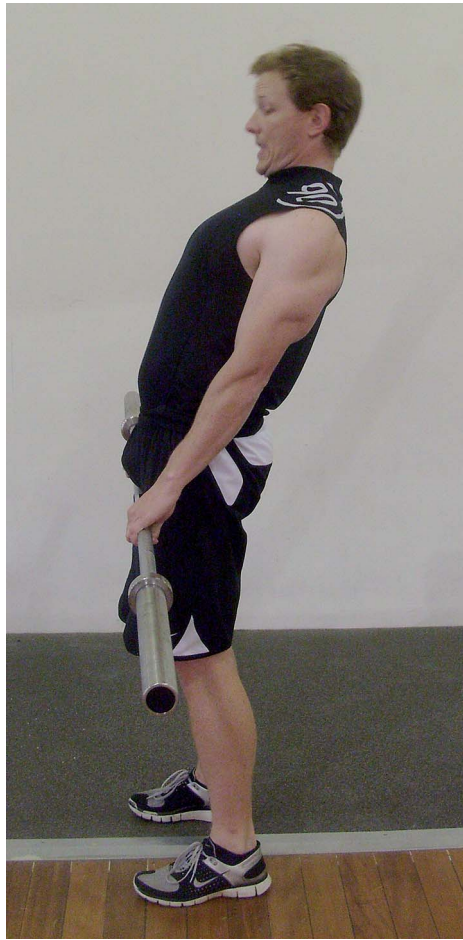


Figure 6. Excessive extension at the end of the lift should be avoided.

many DL variations provides a means for sport-specific application. However, the use of the DL should be based on the goals, needs, and abilities of the athlete (17). Specifically, the application of the RDL allows athletes to establish and develop the correct body positioning that is essential in the progression for teaching weightlifting, which can be accomplished through the use of the 6-step teaching progression (2). However, when programming the use of the DL (or DL variants), the strength and conditioning coach must devote time and expertise to develop the technical competence of the athlete in this progression.

Once technical competence has been achieved, this exercise progression is

considered extremely beneficial in optimizing the transfer-of-training effect and overall development of the athlete.



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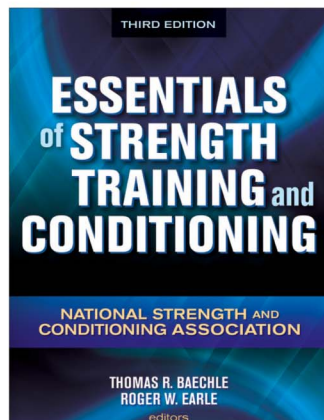
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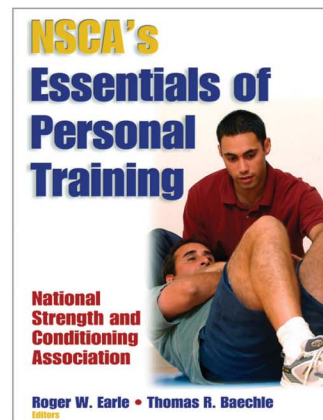
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