

# THE ADONIS ATHLETICS DEADLIFT CHEAT SHEET



**ADONIS**  
ATHLETICS



WHERE THE STRONG BELONG

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## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



**T**his is a quick reference guide for lifters and coaches alike for those times when you need to troubleshoot your deadlift and find some quick answers to your deadlift weaknesses.

To get the most out of this guide let me explain the context and approach I use to address weaknesses in any lift in any strength sport – yes, this concept applies not just to addressing weaknesses in the deadlift but also the bench press and the squat and if you participate in other strength sports those respective lifts too.

Are you a strongman? You can use this same approach to target your weaknesses in the Atlas stones, overhead pressing, axle deadlifts and everything else in between. Weightlifter? Same concept applies and works.

The concept of weakness correction is as follows, when we perform an exercise we all have a weak point otherwise known as a sticking point. The reason why this happens is because somewhere just before this sticking point we leak power. We start to slow down in the speed of the lift for one reason or another. Typically it's due to either a lack of good technique or because we are at a mechanically disadvantageous position at that point and can't produce enough force to continue the bar speed and acceleration.

Either way the reason doesn't really matter what matters is that we have to fix it so that we can improve our lift. So how do we address weaknesses? Weaknesses are first addressed through movements that are as close to the actual movement as possible (in this case the competition deadlift) but just altered in 1-2 ways so that the actual weakness can really be targeted.

So why use movements that are very similar to the actual movement? Because of the principle of specificity which dictates that for there to be the best amount of transfer from a training stimulus to the required effect that stimulus must be as close to the actual thing we want to emulate as possible. Basically, the body will adapt to what you give it. If you want to get stronger at the deadlift you wouldn't run 10km 3 days a week – that is an extreme example of something that is super unspecific. But doing some deficit deadlifts could definitely help with improving weakness off the floor. Even though it's not the exact same as a deadlift it's close enough so there will be transfer.

When we keep the stimulus super similar to what the actual movement is going to be in as many of the demands as possible then the transferability of that practice to the intended movement is going to be higher. And because the body responds to what you give it we can exploit that, for example if we know we are weak at around the knee height in our deadlift because that's where we usually get stuck we can do regular deadlifts in our training but pause the bar for a couple of seconds right at that point where we know we begin to slow down and then continue with completing the rep. We call this the pause deadlift. It's not exactly the competition deadlift because of the paused nature BUT it's pretty damn close and at the same time it allows us to magnify where we are weak so that we can eradicate it.

The secondary way that we address weakness is through the employment of accessory work. By accessory work I'm referring to bodybuilding style, mostly isolation work. I'm talking higher reps and relatively higher total volume on those movements with the intention of making certain muscle groups that could be lagging bigger. Why? Because no matter how you want to approach it at the end of the day bigger muscles have the potential for more forceful contractions and if you want to get stronger sooner or later you must get bigger.

Period. Accessory work would be done by first finding out what muscles groups are likely lagging behind in the deadlift and may be under developed and then picking the right exercises to target and build them to get bigger.

You might be asking “Why bother with variation and accessory work if specificity is so important? Why not just keep doing heavy deadlifts since that’s what we want to get good at?” It’s a good question that comes from a fair logical place but there are actually a few good reasons. Here are just some of them:

## **STALENESS:**

Although the principle of specificity ranks extremely high on the totem pole of training principles there is also another training principle that is probably just right under it and that principle is Variation. In a nutshell the body becomes stale to a repeated stimulus and the more you give the body that same stimulus the less it responds to it. Sometimes to that point that after doing an insane amount of volume the body will respond and improve by a proportionately little amount. By varying the stimulus enough but not straying too far you keep the stimulus “fresh” for the body and you prevent plateaus.

## **OVERUSE:**

Doing the same movement in the same way with the same sort of intensities over and over can lead to overuse injuries. This is specially more true for more experienced lifters because typically lifters with more experience need to do more volume and if we were to stick to only the competition lift without introducing any variation or accessory work there could be too much load given to the tissues and the system as a whole too often. This could lead to different types of injuries.

## **STRESS MANAGEMENT:**

When I say ‘stress’ I don’t mean the day to day definition of stress. The word ‘stress’ when related to training refers to any type of stimulus that throws the body out of its normal rested state. A deadlifting session is stress for the body, but it’s good stress in terms of our goals because the recovery the body has to go through from this stress leads to an improved deadlift. This is called “functional stress”. There are other types of “junk” stress that also throw the body out of its normal rested state but its recovery doesn’t lead to any performance improvement.

Those are things like stress from work, stress from university exams and so on. This type of stress is called "non-functional stress" because their existence is not helpful to your progress – in fact it's detrimental. Now, heavy deadlifting ranks pretty high in terms of stress exposure for the body. We can't just keep doing heavy deadlifts 3 times a week, hell some people can't even do it twice a week. So what else can we do in the meanwhile to be able to still gain some ground and continue to improve? We can manage stress and prevent the body from overloading by introducing exercises that we know will help our deadlift from the diagnosis we make based on the cheat sheet below but won't blow our fuse. For example goodmornings are much less stressful for the body compared to deadlifts but they can be very helpful for developing the deadlift. So we can manage stress given to the body by getting stronger at goodmornings on some days instead of having to go hard at the deadlifts with high volume yet again.

## THE NEED FOR MORE VOLUME:

As mentioned before eventually you will have to face the fact that you need to build bigger muscles and bring up lagging muscle groups in order to improve your lifting. To do this you need adequate volume and this can sometimes mean a lot of volume. Say for example you need more direct glute work for your deadlift to improve. Sure, deadlifts do stimulate glute development but there are at least 2 problems with using only the traditional deadlift to get your glutes bigger and therefore stronger. 1) the amount of volume you'll have to do in the deadlift to target glute development will tax your lower back so much that it would feel jacked up and injured all the time, 2) the better range of motion you can get for glute development through other exercises such as the hip thrusts would make them an obviously better choice for targeted glute development.

There are other reasons why you would not and even cannot just simply use the intended lift solely as the way to improve that lift but these will do for now and for the purposes of this guide.

So, this guide will first state what a particular weakness will look like in a typical real life scenario then it will list some possible causes so that you can understand why we are using certain exercise variations and accessories when addressing the problem.

Then you will see a list of variation exercises that could be effective in addressing that weakness. The effectiveness of the variation exercises will vary on a case by case basis. It can be highly individualised and the coach will need to have a look at how the lifter is actually moving, what the technique is like, what the bar path looks like and some other things to then make a decision on what variation exercise/s will suit a lifter's problem.

For example a lifter may be weak off the floor because he is setting up with shins too vertical and needs to be cued to use the quads and initiate leg drive a little better off the floor. This lifter will need a different variation movement to another lifter who is also weak off the floor due to a lack of lat tightness and bracing causing her hips shoot up too fast. Both have a weakness off the floor but the variation exercises and even the accessory exercises each will have to do will differ.

But then again this is a cheat sheet not a practical workshop on the deadlift – stay tuned I will be releasing an online video of a deadlift seminar which will go through these things. If you want to stay in the know about that one subscribe [here](#). Or if you want to attend a live deadlift workshop you can put your name down [here](#).

Once you have identified the problem start by picking just one variation movement and 1-2 accessory exercises and use those to address the lifter's weakness in the deadlift.

After a while you can retest the progress and wash, rinse and repeat until you have a godly deadlift.

So, let's get right to it!

## WEAKNESS OFF THE FLOOR

### WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

The bar will raise a few centimetres off the floor and the lifter will either let go of the weight or the body cannot go any further and the lifter will just put the weight back down. If the lifter is successful in the lift what it will look like is a very slow and gradual lift-off from the ground and the lift gets progressively faster as the bar continues towards lockout.

### WHAT ARE POSSIBLE CAUSES:

- Lack of lat tightness
- Weak brace
- Lack of cueing and good technique execution
- Weak hips and to some degree weak quads (at least at that particular angle) specially for sumo deadlifts

### VARIATION EXERCISES TO TRY:

- Deficit deadlifts
- Partial rep deadlifts
- Getting stronger at squats in general
- Box squats using same deadlift stance width and height
- Pause deadlifts of varying lengths as soon as the bar leaves the ground
- Explosive/speed deadlifts to get lifter to think about accelerating as soon as possible

### MUSCLE GROUPS THAT COULD BENEFIT FROM ISOLATION WORK:

- Lats – bentover rows, Pendlay rows, seated cable rows, DB rows, chest supported rows, T-bar rows
- Quads – leg press, lunge variations, hack squats, belt squat
- Glutes – GHRs, hip thrusts, kickbacks
- Hamstrings – Hamstring curls, GHRs, RDLs, goodmornings
- Technique – pause or tempo deadlifts focusing on keeping lats tight, bracing well and keeping the bar close as you are lifting the bar off the floor



## MID-RANGE

### WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

The bar comes off the floor at a normal speed but begins to slow down as it approaches the knee, right on the knee cap or right above the knee cap. At this point the lifter will either maintain the same back position as he/she had during the lift-off while trying to complete the lift or may further round the back. Either of these cases can tell us what muscle group is likely weaker.

### WHAT ARE POSSIBLE CAUSES:

- Weak glutes – if lifter can maintain more or less the same back position through this point as he/she had at lift-off
- Weak hamstrings – if lifter can maintain more or less the same back position through this point as he/she had at lift-off
- Weak lower and mid back muscles – if the lifter's back rounds significantly more at this point compared to the lift-off
- Lat tightness – the bar drifts forward and away from the body too much

### VARIATION EXERCISES TO TRY:

- Block pulls
- Pause deadlifts at the point where the bar slows down
- Touch and go deadlifts
- Technique – pause or tempo deadlifts focusing on keeping lats tight and the bar close at the point where it normally tends to drift away

### MUSCLE GROUPS THAT COULD BENEFIT FROM ISOLATION WORK:

- Glutes – GHRs, hip thrusts, kickbacks, goodmornings, safety squat bar goodmornings
- Hamstrings – Hamstring curls, GHRs, RDLs, goodmornings, safety squat bar goodmornings
- Spine erectors – 45 degree back extensions, goodmornings, safety squat bar goodmornings
- Lats – bentover rows, Pendlay rows, seated cable rows, DB rows, chest supported rows, T-bar rows

# LOCKOUT

## WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

The bar comes off the floor at a normal speed, however as it passes the knee it begins to slow down and the lifter significantly slows down near lockout as the lift is grinded to completion or the lifter will miss the lift all together. At this position the knees are typically completely locked out. The hips are almost locked out and all that's left to do is to get the shoulders back on top of/behind the hips to complete the lockout.

## WHAT ARE POSSIBLE CAUSES:

- Weak lower and mid back muscles
- Weak upper back muscles
- Weak glutes would also be responsible to a degree in some cases

## VARIATION EXERCISES TO TRY:

- Higher block pulls
- Pause deadlifts at the point where the bar slows down
- Accommodating resistance work (bands, chains)

## MUSCLE GROUPS THAT COULD BENEFIT FROM ISOLATION WORK:

- Spine erectors – 45 degree back extensions, goodmornings, safety squat bar goodmornings, shrugs
- Glutes – GHRs, hip thrusts, kickbacks, goodmornings, safety squat bar goodmornings
- Lats – bentover rows, Pendlay rows, seated cable rows, DB rows, chest supported rows, T-bar rows

## NOTES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Bracing can always be a problem, if bracing is bad at any point there can be drastic leaks in strength transfer. Typically the first thing that happens with a bad brace is the back rounds at crucial points.

Sometimes the issue is technical not strength related, e.g. the lockout may suffer because the bar is not being kept close enough on the way up and the bar path gets drastically effected negatively at the most crucial point. For this reason there must be enough consideration given to optimising technique and making sure the correct muscular movement pattern is engrained.

With technical problems lots of pause deadlifts at one or multiple points through the movement and tempo deadlifts can go a long way to improve technical flaws.

Use this guide to help troubleshoot your deadlift weaknesses and bring your deadlift to new heights as you crush your plateaus. Remember it's all about first optimising technique and then finding out where you are leaking power during the lift and putting a magnifying glass on that position and working it until it goes away. How you do it in terms of programming and volume is a different story. If you would like some guidance whether face to face or through online coaching reach out to me directly [here](#) you can follow more training advice on Instagram [@the\\_sportperformancecoach](#)

Stay strong,

*Amir Fazeli*

Adonis Athletics