

# Back to Basics

## Back Training Considerations

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Barbell Row

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cwq4\\_Q1Yig](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cwq4_Q1Yig)

As performed by Todd Bumgardner, MS, PES, of [beyondstrengthperformance.com](http://beyondstrengthperformance.com)

A popular, yet controversial exercise for strength athletes is the barbell row. Which, according to Todd Bumgardner, MS, PES, of [beyondstrengthperformance.com](http://beyondstrengthperformance.com), has a great carryover to the deadlift.

“I think the carry over is pretty big when you consider that it’s strengthening your lats and upper back, which will help the pull from the knee up.”

Bumgardner, also a powerlifter who competes in the 198 lb. and 220 lb. classes added, “it also strengthens the entire posterior chain due to the exercise being performed in the bent position.”

Undoubtedly, it can pack on slabs of muscle mass and get you a pissload stronger due to the high number of motor units that are recruited, however, the exercise is often performed incorrectly - thus inviting injury, or improperly prescribed - especially to beginners who often lack adequate core strength and hamstring flexibility. These shortcomings are often compensated by excessive lumbar flexion which can lead to injury, especially when compressive and shearing forces are acting upon the spine while a heavy load is being lifted. If you’re new or just getting back in the game, go light, until you get the movement down pat, or preferably use chest supported rows or bench supported dumbbell rows. If you’re an experienced lifter or a strength athlete, barbell rowing can go a long way in getting you stronger, just be sure to keep a neutral spine. Often times, I’ll have my clients lighten the load and pull them off the floor, similar to the Pendlay Row (1), keeping the hips flexed and the back and head perpendicular with the wall, pulling the bar to the midsection and returning the bar to the floor following each rep. I find this really hammers the lats, erector spinae, lower traps, and rhomboids far better than performing them with less hip flexion. The more you open up your hip flexion angle, the more you will be hitting your upper traps and back.

Some takeaways from the Barbell Row

The more your hips are flexed, the more your back is being worked. This prolonged prone position can limit the duration of the set, making it challenging to keep good form.

You’ll have to lighten the load if your torso is closer to the ground.

The barbell row not only places more compressive forces on the spine in comparison to the inverted row and one armed cable row, but it also caused the most spine stiffness (2).

The greater the load that is used will cause the lifter to stand more upright and use more momentum, sometimes making the exercise look like the first pull of the power clean. Sure you’ll hit your traps at the expense of good form, but the barbell row is intended to target the lats, rhomboids, and to a degree, the rear delts.

Flip your grip. By supinating your hands, you'll be able to drive your elbows and shoulders further back, thus really hitting your lats and causing the scapulae to protract less during the eccentric movement. Remember, pronation creates more scapular protraction.

Barbell rows should not be dismissed as an effective exercise; it's a contraindicated exercise that if properly programmed can elicit considerable strength gains within a resistance training program (3,4).

### Cable Rows

Witnessing someone performing these correctly is rarer than finding a hotel fitness center with dumbbells heavier than 50 lbs. Usually, the person doing cable rows resembles former San Francisco 49ers safety Merton Hanks, doing his "funky chicken" dance following an interception. Cable rows are a great test of scapular stability, scapular retraction, and to a degree, thoracic mobility. A lack of scapular stability may glare mightily during the concentric portion of this exercise via extension of the torso. Additionally, this exercise, much like prone planks and bird dogs, can reveal SI joint instability. If a person exhibits any of these during the execution of the exercise, I'll have them perform chest supported rows, progressing from machine rows to dumbbell and then eventually barbell rows on an incline bench. I'll also toss in some corrective exercises that will help restore proper SI joint functioning, such as the supine leg alternating push / pull and supine leg wipers with a flexed knee.

### Some takeaways from the Cable Row

Sit erect on the bench, while keeping a neutral spine. Initiate the movement at the shoulder, by retracting the scapulae, drawing the elbow toward the body with the back. If I'm working with beginners or someone who has a history of back and elbow injuries, I'll have them wrap the handle to help them familiarize themselves with the proper movement – which is using the back, not the arms!

If you want to engage the core a bit more, drop your feet off the platform and onto the floor. This will really fire the RA, TA, and the obliques, by forcing you to keep a neutral spine. From here I may progress the client to rowing from a standing, kneeling, and eventually an iso squatting position.

### Behind the Neck Pulldowns

One of the most widely debated and subsequently covered exercises is the Behind the Neck Pulldowns. Behind the neck pulldowns require a high degree of shoulder external rotation, and when loaded, can place more stress on the anterior glenohumeral joint. Literature suggests that pull downs be performed to the front, which would minimize the unfavorable end-range position (5), thus allowing for the safer handling of greater loads. Behind the neck pull downs and their equally problematic sibling – behind the neck pull ups, often referred to as "Prison Pull Ups", require cervical protraction and/or flexion as the bar clears the back of the head, thus possibly promoting the forward head posture, which as we know, is pretty prevalent among office workers.

### Some takeaways about the Behind the Neck Pulldown

If you want to befriend your local Chiropractor or Physical Therapist, or want to unnecessarily suffer from neck pain and cervical headaches, then this is the exercise for you!

More advanced athletes may use the following exercises to prevent injury and increase performance.

## Face Pulls

<http://www.youtube.com/user/ExplosiveFootball#p/u/14/6C14EPfYV34>

Demonstrated by Steve Morris, of [explosivefootballtraining.com](http://explosivefootballtraining.com), face pulls help activate the mid and lower traps and external rotators of the shoulder.

To Steve, face pulls are must have in any strength program.

“You’re not only going to need them for a bigger bench, but for shoulder health - as we all know, most guys press about five times more than they pull! They’re also good for building up the yoke, which is important for any contact sport, including football and wrestling.

### A takeaway from the Face Pull

As Steve mentioned, many trainees, including strength athletes’ push to pull ratios are flawed. Use these as part of your program to safeguard your shoulders.

## Rack Pulls

Yet another controversial exercise is the rack pull. Trainees have had a hard time figuring out where it fits in one’s program. It is postulated by many lifters that heavy rack pulls will help improve dead lift performance.

Josh Bryant, MS, MFS, CSCS, PES, of [joshstrength.com](http://joshstrength.com), and the owner of an 810 pound raw deadlift, disagrees.

“Rack pulls are generally better for hypertrophy and overall limit strength, but rarely get the desired transference to the deadlift. They allow you to pull a short range of motion with optimal leverage. Most of the time when you miss a deadlift, your position sucks.”

In addition to thickening the upper back and traps, rack pulls can be a great tool to overload the grip. If grip strength is your weakest link, you may want to consider adding rack pulls to your program, but as Josh mentioned, it may not directly help your deadlift performance.

### A takeaway from the Rack Pull

From a hypertrophy perspective, rack pulls will deliver a thicker upper back and traps, similar to heavy barbell shrugs. They will also overload one’s grip. So there you have it, just a few pointers on some exercises that are widely discussed and debated. Feel free to add your two cents.

Stay strong.

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3. Robbins DW, Young WB, Behm DG. The effect of an upper-body agonist-antagonist resistance training protocol on volume load and efficiency. *J Strength Cond Res.* 2010;24(10):2632-2640.
4. Miranda H, Fleck SJ, Simao R. Effect of two different rest period lengths on the number of repetitions performed during resistance training. *J Strength Cond Res.* 2007;21:1032-1036.
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### **About the author:**

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