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Power Surge Strength for When the Wolves Come

Josh Bryant: Motivator, Educator and Winner

Part 3

by Sean Katterle

Last month top trainer and lifter Josh Bryant discussed muscle fibers, endurance and leverage. The interview concludes with more on proper training for the powerlifts.

SK: Some advanced-level deadlifters pull better with a rounded back. Bob Peoples is one famous lifter in history who comes to mind. What's the reason for their success with that unorthodox approach? Is it something in their skeletal and muscular makeup that allows for greater success pulling that way?

JB: I may get crucified for answering this truthfully, but here it goes. I am by no means saying that the technique is safer. It's not. It's more dangerous. The fact remains that many of the top pullers are using a semi-rounded-back technique. Martin Girvan wrote a great article on Elitefts.com entitled "The Biomechanical Analysis of the Deadlift," explaining that in great detail.

The semi-rounded style Girvan describes involves a higher-hip starting position. Great examples would be Orlando Green or the great Konstantin. The starting position would be

closer to a quarter squat than a half squat. That runs contrary to everything the Ivory Tower of Academia advocates.

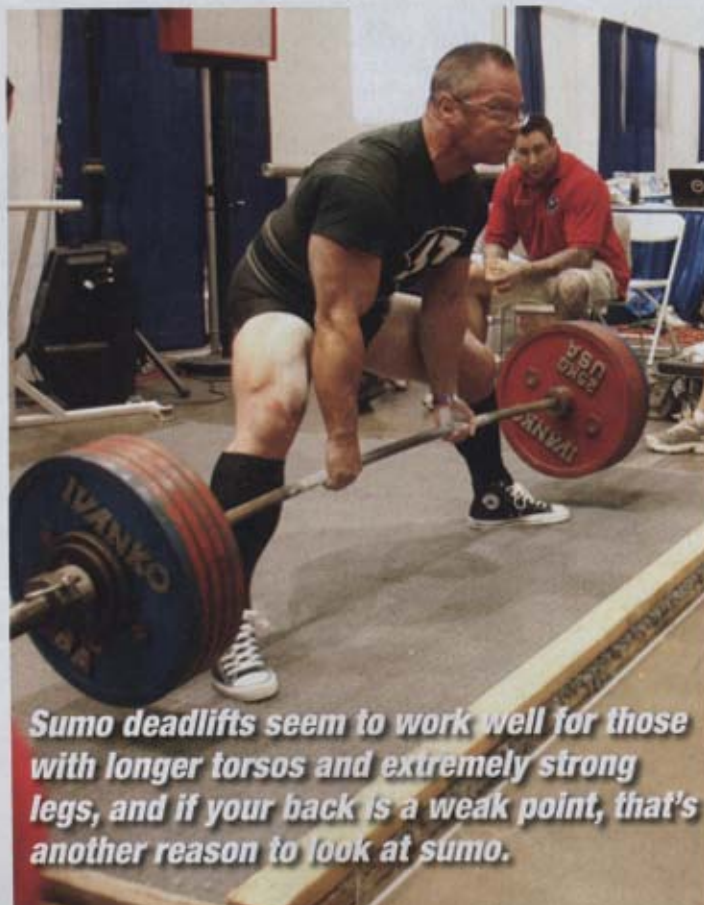
Remember, we are not talking about safety; we are talking about what some top guys are actually doing to lift world-record poundage. Studies do show that people can lift more isometrically as well as dynamically in a quarter-squat position compared to a half-squat. That's one reason some guys have used this technique effectively. The old adage says, The shortest distance to a point is a straight line. This technique more efficiently allows the bar to

travel in a straight line, which gives you a shorter range of motion as well as keeping the bar close to the midline of the body. The closer the bar to the midline, the more one can lift.

EMG studies have demonstrated that the erectors are twice as active during this technique than during a sumo deadlift. Much greater shear forces are placed on the lumbar spine with this technique than with a sumo deadlift or a regular conventional one. Higher poundage is possible with this technique, but greater chance of injury is also possible. One must analyze the risk-to-benefit ratio when choosing a technique.

The semi-rounded-back technique has been most successful for longer-limbed lifters with extremely strong lower and upper backs. There are exceptions, and lifters of varying body types have used it to hoist world-class poundages. Many records have been set using this technique. Look on YouTube at the top conventional pullers from all of the eras. I am not advocating this technique, just answering a question truthfully.

SK: The variations of setup for the deadlift include a narrow conventional stance (i.e., Vince Anello with his heels practically touching), a moderate-to-wide conventional stance (where the feet are apart but the hands are still outside the knees) a pseudo-



Sumo deadlifts seem to work well for those with longer torsos and extremely strong legs, and if your back is a weak point, that's another reason to look at sumo.

**Robert LaRon Toatley
deadlifts 800 pounds at
the Clash of the Titans IV.**



Joah Winzer / HardcorePowerlifting.com

sumo stance and a wide-stance sumo position. Most people waste months or even years of time experimenting with the various stances, working each one till they find out which works best for them. Is there a way to look at a person's structure and get an educated guess as to which stance(s) he or she should be focusing on? Is there a leg-to-torso-to-arm ratio that's best suited for each one? How do hip, back and hamstring flexibility and strength affect that decision?

JB: If you're pulling conventionally, there is a simple initial test to perform that will give you a baseline of where to set your stance. Perform a standstill vertical jump. The position of your feet at the start of your jump is a good initial stance to try for the deadlift.

Most people will do their best conventional pulling in the neighborhood of that stance. If that's not comfortable, some trial and error is needed. I do see more people pulling with too wide a stance than too narrow. Many times I will tell someone to move his feet in a few inches, and he immediately pulls a P.R.; however, the opposite doesn't happen nearly as frequently.

Sumo deadlifts seem to work well for those with longer torsos and extremely strong legs, and if your back

is a weak point, that is another reason to look at sumo. Look at leverage but also strengths and weaknesses. To get in a quarter-to-half-squat position doesn't require a great degree of flexibility. More often when a lifter cannot get low enough at the start, it's because of excessive girth. If you have a 60-inch waist, you will probably never pull any real significant poundage.

For sumo deadlifts try different stances. Look at Eddy Coan's 901. He is not a whole lot wider than some people's conventional deadlift. The greater the hip flexibility and the stronger the adductors, the wider the sumo stance you can try.

SK: One of the greatest squatters of all time is Steve Goggins. When I first saw Goggins squat, I thought he was going to break in half because his forward lean caused his torso to come within inches of his quads when he was in the hole! As he'd motor the ponderous weight back up to the standing position, his back would perform a motion similar to a good morning (but with 800-plus pounds!). Quite a few other top squatters also have that significant lean, which goes against the basic advice of keeping your back more erect for safety and leverage. What's causing this uncommon level of success with a "poor form" power squat?

JB: As a rule of thumb, the taller a lifter is and the longer his femur is, the more predisposed he will be to forward leaning as he goes down to break parallel. From a safety standpoint I would not look at just the angle of the torso, but is the back arched? The spine can more safely support a large poundage when arched, as well as lift more. Is the lower back arched? Are the shoulder blades squeezed together? This factor is important when you squat, and you must do it. Degrees of forward lean will vary based on an individual's anatomy as well as strength and weaknesses.

When you place the bar lower on your back, have a wider stance and sit back more with the weight, you have more of a forward lean. This is effectively referred to as a power squat. It puts more of the load on the posterior chain rather than the quads, and more stress is on the hip joint rather than the knee joint. More people have a weak posterior chain than have a weakness in the quads.

Most would consider Steve Goggins' lean excessive, but Eddy Coan has a fair amount of forward lean, as do most of the best squatters, just not to Goggins extent. An exception to this would be Doug Furnas. Who can argue with the results Goggins has gotten? He has tried to keep his torso erect, and it does not work well for him. Again, it comes down

Power Surge

to body type, strengths and weaknesses.

SK: It's my understanding that connective tissue—tendons and ligaments—are just as important for increasing a person's max powerlifts as is muscular strength. A common topic that comes up in powerlifting gyms is how much more developed a gorilla's connective tissue is than a human's and how gorillas' insertions are placed in a more advantageous position—which partially explains why their overall and pound-for-pound strengths are so much greater. Without the use of sports drugs, is it possible to thicken and strengthen a person's connective tissues beyond the benefits gained simply from training the regular gym lifts with intensity? Are specific exercises or set-and-rep schemes

more conducive to building ligament and tendon integrity and density? I've read a lot about static holds, isometric contractions and working with rubber bands, but what's the best route for strengthening these tie-ins without causing overtraining and chronic inflammation and injury?

JB: Tendons and ligaments are essential to optimal muscle contraction, so even if you could care less about prehab, remember that! A tendon connects a muscle to a bone. Ligaments connect bones to bones. Both stabilize your joints. If a tendon is developed correctly, it will be able to produce significant power and have great elasticity qualities. A tendon will strengthen generally on pace with muscle through weightlifting, but as you get stronger, you need to pay some special attention to developing tendons and ligaments.

Ted Arcidi advocated strengthening tendons and ligaments. He recommended doing partial movements with weights in excess of his one-rep max over the shortened range of motion. That strategy took the stress off of the muscle bellies and redirected it to the tendons and ligaments.

I am an advocate of using both isometrics and static holds to strengthen connective tissue. Tendons and ligaments are trainable and do increase in size. Overloads, isometrics and static holds are three strategies I have used successfully with my lifters.

SK: Some deadlifters have more success with the bar starting out one to four inches from their shins, and some do better when the bar's less than an inch from their legs—or even touching their legs. Some pullers don't let the bar come in contact with their legs till it passes their knees—pretty much everyone slides it up their quads. What factors determine if the bar should bloody the person's shins or not hit the legs till it clears the knees? I know the leverage is better the closer the bar is to the lifter, but some lifters really get off-balance if they start out with their legs against the barbell. What's the physiology behind that? Is it something that needs to be addressed in training?

JB: As you stated, the leverage is better the closer the bar is to your shins. When you pull the weight off the floor, the shoulder blades are over the bar. The bar should be about an inch from your shin when you set up and are standing over the bar. When you reach down to grab the bar and actually start the pull, the bar makes contact with your shins. When the pull starts, you want your shins to be touching the bar. The guys who are successful starting the bar way off the shins generally are built to pull. That's not a good barometer for the rest of us! They will enjoy at least moderate success with almost any technique. The closer the bar to the midline, the more efficient the leverage is. This needs to be practiced and addressed in training.

Editor's note: Josh Bryant's official Web site is www.JoshStrength.com. **IM**

Ted Arcidi advocated strengthening tendons and ligaments. He recommended doing partial movements with weights in excess of his one-rep max over this shortened range of motion.

