

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Three Levels of Dumbbell Squat

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For those of you who I have not had the privilege of meeting or speaking with in the past, I'm known around the CrossFit community as the dumbbell coach. My friend Greg Glassman has referred to me as the King of the Dumbbells, a title I carry with pride. I am excited to bring you additional insight to dumbbell training here and in future issues of the CrossFit Journal.

I find the dumbbell a most important tool in my own practice and I believe that you too can learn to use the dumbbell as an athlete and a coach, even more—and in more ways—than you probably do already. This unique tool has limitless application.

Advantages of dumbbells

Let's review some of the practical advantages of dumbbells as training tools.

- Coach friendly - You can work small to large groups of individuals with dumbbells. My record is 60 participants for a workout. I'm simply more relaxed when my athletes are working with dumbbells.
- Athlete/client friendly - Working with dumbbells is far less intimidating than wielding a barbell.
- Cost effective - No need to purchase weight trees, bar clamps, bars, or platforms—or mortgage the house to purchase the popular yet overrated kettlebell.
- Universal application - I can train the entire range of clients with a set of varied-weight dumbbells. I can challenge the Olympian, college grappler, and the soccer mom all at once. Also, because dumbbells are found in almost any gym and are friendly

homeworkout tools (low-cost, varied weight, require little space, affordable, and portable), clients can apply what they learn with me in other environments.

- Sport transfer - Case after case has demonstrated that athletes are performing better on the field, court, or combat situation after using my dumbbell moves, complexes, and workouts.

Scaling the dumbbell squat

Let's take a deeper look at how we can use dumbbells to scale a fundamental movement, the squat, to the abilities of a varied population. If you are not squatting, you must be very new to CrossFit. This ground-based movement is essential to developing the power zone (i.e., posterior chain and "core").

Using dumbbells for loading, we can increase the intensity of the squat for beginner to advanced athletes by simply shifting the center of gravity (COG) by changing how the dumbbells are carried. As we move the dumbbell load higher on the athlete the COG moves higher, increasing the demand. (Please do not ask me to perform Twardokens calculus to give exactness. You just have to trust me. The COG, and therefore the difficulty, moves up with the combined load of the athlete and the dumbbell load)

The entry-level position (Level I) is the low carry position. After establishing perfect squatting form without loading, you can place one or two dumbbells in the hands held beside the hips, with arms hanging straight from the shoulders. Now squat. While it may appear very elementary to some of you, this is also

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Dumbbell Squats (continued...)

useful as a rehabilitation movement for athletes with injuries limiting shoulder-girdle ROM.



Level 2 is accomplished by racking the dumbbells on the shoulders. This requires additional stabilization and therefore increases the demand on the athlete. This is the most common and widely applied version of the dumbbell squat.



Level 3—the most demanding—is the dumbbell overhead squat. The overhead squat places a premium on shoulder girdle strength and mobility and demands hardcore midline stabilization. I have found that only the most established athletes can overhead squat more than a single dumbbell at a time. On a couple of occasions, I've encountered strong guys who tell me, before trying it, that it's easier to overhead squat dumbbells than it is a loaded barbell. They generally turn tail after failing with a pair of forty-fives, a mere 90 pounds.



For loading purposes, I've observed that beginners generally squat with dumbbells totaling somewhere in the range of 10 percent of body weight, and more advanced athletes may use 50 percent or more. In programming for my athletes, I often drop in numbers of 25-45 percent of body weight, depending on the training objective for that day.

No matter what the application, I believe you will find these three versions of the dumbbell squat useful in your development or practice. Scaled for individual abilities, they can be both challenging, functional components of an elite athlete's program and also an excellent entry point into resistance movements, as they are a foundation for other movements that I will explore in future articles.



Michael Rutherford (a.k.a. Coach Rut) is the owner of [CrossFit Kansas City/Boot Camp Fitness](#). He has over a quarter century of fitness coaching experience with athletes of all ages. He has also worked in hospital wellness environments and rehabilitation clinics. Coach Rut holds academic degrees in biology, physical education, and exercise physiology and sports biomechanics. He is a USAW-certified Club Coach and is a CrossFit level 3 trainer. He is also the current national Masters Champion in weightlifting at 94 kg.