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Dead On

Chris Mason offers a program designed for CrossFitters who want to improve their deadlifts without compromising overall fitness.

By Chris Mason

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Thus far, we have not seen too many competitive CrossFit athletes with a big pull. I firmly believe this relates to how CrossFitters normally attempt to integrate strength training with their CrossFit programming. The purpose of this article is to provide some new ideas to use in building your deadlift and improving your overall CrossFit performance.

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A.J. Roberts of Westside Barbell working on box squats with a safety squat bar.

I suppose one's interpretation of a "big pull" can vary quite significantly. I come from a powerlifting background, but I am not expecting CrossFitters to become the record-holding deadlifters in their respective weight classes. It's obviously not realistic to expect a good CrossFitter to pull 800-plus lb., but I do think it's realistic that we should see a lot more 550-plus-lb. pulls from the men and 350-plus-lb. pulls from the women.

Linear-Progression Folly

Linear progression and the idea of "just sticking with the basics" (with respect to strength training) have been more or less ingrained into the CrossFit culture up until very recently. With the addition of Louie Simmons of Westside Barbell to the seminar team, that has started to change. My goal is to further promote the change and provide a manner in which CrossFitters can take Louie's training methodologies and integrate them with their CrossFit WODs.

As stated above, until very recently many CrossFitters' strength training (not counting clean and snatch variations; they are a different form of strength training than what I am referring to here) consisted primarily of pressing, deadlifting and squatting following a linear-progression program.

CrossFit main-site programming, of course, does not follow that pattern, and athletes are not presented with a linear program where they try to increase the weight on the lifts each session. But when many CrossFitters start a supplementary or strength-bias program designed to increase their strength, they fall back on the old linear model. This is a recipe for mediocrity. Yes, you can progress in each exercise on a linear plan, but said progression will not take the trainee beyond intermediate strength levels (with a very, very few genetic-freak exceptions).



Sometimes correcting very specific weaknesses requires you to think outside the box.

Linear progression is limited in the results it can provide for two main reasons. The first is that most linear programs promote the use of the same exercises over and over. Training any compound movement at a high intensity in such a repetitive fashion leads to neural stagnation and possible regression. In other words, the nervous system gets overwhelmed and adaptation ceases, or the individual literally goes backwards in his training.

The second main reason classic linear progression fails is tied to the first. Repetition of the same exercises is again the culprit. In this case, repeating the same compound movements never addresses individual weaknesses. Everyone has a relative weakness on every compound movement. Repeatedly performing the same movement does nothing to address said relative weakness but only improves the weak part in proportion to the strong part. This ultimately—and usually in short order—limits absolute progress and might promote injury.

The Westside Solution

A huge component of the efficacy of Louie Simmons' Westside Barbell training methodology is its use of conjugate variety (CV). In the classic Westside template, CV is used primarily on maximum-effort (ME) training days and involves the rotation of compound exercises by body part weekly. The norm is four exercises (those the lifter finds are best for him or her) used for the rotation. Each four-week rotation thus becomes a mini-cycle, and at the completion of each mini-cycle, the process starts all over again the following week.

The weekly rotation of compound exercises helps prevent neural stagnation due to the unique effect each exercise has on the central nervous system.

CV addresses both of the major shortcomings of linear-progression systems noted above. The weekly rotation of compound exercises helps prevent neural stagnation due to the unique effect each exercise has on the central nervous system (CNS). Even small variances in movement are perceived very differently by the CNS, thus stressing it in a unique way. Additionally, each exercise places greater emphasis on different body parts, thus helping address individual weaknesses.

For example, if a trainee's weakness in the squat is the lower back, then the incorporation of both good mornings and deadlifts into the rotation addresses the problem by using exercises that more specifically target the weakness in the squat.

Westside also utilizes dynamic-effort (DE) or speed training. A separate day is allotted for this style of training. The purpose of DE is to help build explosive strength, to allow for higher volume, and to function as a form of active recovery (it is much less taxing on the CNS than ME work).

The Routine

With the above basic preamble done, it's time for the program. I have designed a 12-week template that incorporates ME, DE and CV with a focus on the deadlift. The program also provides for three days per week of conventional WODs, thus allowing the trainee to experience no detraining effect relative to CrossFit fitness.

Day 1 below will always be ME day.

Day 2 below will always be DE day. Days 1 and 2 should have at least 72 hours between them.

Sets and reps when applicable are listed in the following format: 2x15. This indicates 2 post-warm-up sets are to be done for 15 repetitions each. Other than speed work, all accessory sets listed in this format should be taken to the point where another rep cannot be completed without assistance.

Week 1

Day 1

ME exercise: box squat with bands ([video](#))

Accessory work:

Speed pull from the floor—15x1

Hamstring curl with dumbbell held between feet—2x15-20

Ab work—2x20

Day 2

DE exercise: box squat with bands ([video](#))

Accessory work:

Glute bridge—2x20 ([video](#))

Glute-ham raise—2xAMRAP ([video](#))

Ab work—2x20

Week 2

Day 1

ME exercise: rack pull with bands (from roughly 3 inches below the knees)

Accessory work:

Glute-ham raise—2xAMRAP

Heavy sled pull—6x20 yards (do not run with the sled)

Ab work—2x20

Day 2

DE exercise: box squats with bands

Accessory work:

Pull-through—2x20

Ab work—2x20

Week 3

Day 1

ME exercise: good morning

Accessory work:

Speed rack pull with bands—8x3 (from roughly 3 inches below the knees)

Hamstring curl with dumbbell held between feet—2x20

Ab work—2x20

Day 2

DE exercise: box squat with bands

Accessory work:

Glute bridge—2x15

Glute-ham raise—2xAMRAP

Ab work—2x20

Week 4

Day 1

ME exercise: deadlift from floor

Accessory work:

Glute-ham raise—2xAMRAP

Sumo-stance good morning with a Jump Stretch band—1x100

Ab work—2x20

Day 2

DE exercise: box squat with bands

Accessory work:

Glute bridge—2x15

Seated hamstring curl with Jump Stretch band—2xAMRAP

Ab work—2x20

The mini-cycle is now complete. Repeat for 2 more cycles.

Routine Tutorial

ME Work

ME training involves the lifter warming up to a one-repetition-maximum (1RM) attempt. This style of training is the most effective means of increasing absolute strength. To be clear, once the 1RM attempt is complete, the lifter is done with the movement for the day.

Example:

Deadlift from the floor

135x5

185x5

225x3

275x1

315x1

335x1RM attempt

Done!

DE Work

Two kinds of speed work are incorporated into this program. For the designated DE days, the speed work in this routine is performed with a box squat and Jump Stretch bands. In addition to the DE-day squats, speed pulls are used as an accessory movement on a couple of the ME days.

Prior to commencing the program, you will have to test your 1RM box squat because DE squat training is a percentage-based system. It consists of 3-week waves using 60, 65 and 70 percent of your 1RM bar weight plus the bands. For the purposes of this routine, “strong” bands should be used for all DE training (you can find them at [Westside Barbell](#)).

To illustrate a three-week wave, let’s assume you have a tested 1RM box squat of 300 lb. (no bands being used for the 1RM test). Your three-week wave will be as follows:

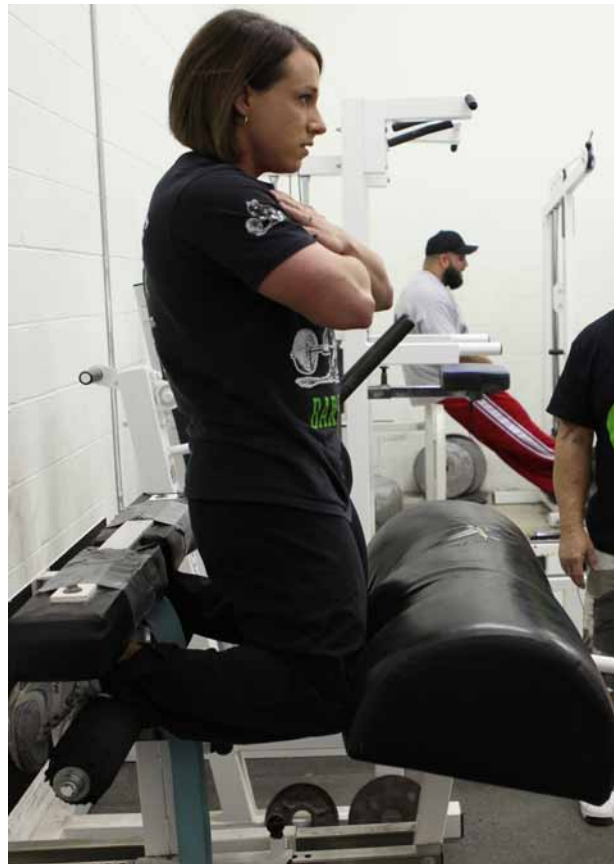
Week 1—180 lb. bar weight + strong bands

Week 2—195 lb. bar weight + strong bands

Week 3—210 lb. bar weight + strong bands

The first two weeks will consist of 12 sets of 2 reps (after warm-up) with the third week being 10 sets of 2 reps. A major goal of speed work is to improve one’s rate of force production. To that end, each rep must be *fast*. The negative or eccentric portion of the movement should be controlled (do not drop to the box) but fast, with the concentric portion being as fast and explosive as possible (again, always under control). Minimize rest between sets, but take enough that speed does not suffer. The last set should be as fast as the first.

Prior to commencing the second wave in Week 4, you should retest your 1RM box squat. That can be done prior to your ME deadlift for the day. If you have access to different bars (safety squat bar, cambered bar, etc.), use a different bar for each test and subsequent wave.



Accessory work is designed to address the specific weaknesses that are holding you back.

The Use of Bands

Jump Stretch bands, commonly known as just “bands,” are an integral component of this program. Bands take standard barbell training to the next level by simultaneously increasing intensity and efficiency.

If you are unfamiliar with bands, they are essentially giant versions of the common rubber band we are all familiar with. When they are secured on one end and attached to a barbell on the other, they change the resistance curve dramatically. This change forces the lifter to work harder throughout the range of motion (ROM) of the exercise. Think of the standard barbell squat. As you stand back up with the weight, the movement becomes progressively easier due to improved leverage as the involved joint angles change. This phenomenon of the physics of the

movement causes a significant portion of the ROM to be essentially an unloading phase. With the addition of bands, this inherent weakness is eliminated. As the movement would normally get easier, the bands are stretching and increasing the resistance, thus forcing the lifter to exert much greater effort throughout the ROM.

Bands can also serve to promote what Louie Simmons calls “overspeed eccentrics”—lowering the weight faster than might otherwise be possible. While not necessarily optimal for bodybuilding training, this style of training is quite beneficial for strength applications. The speed of descent very directly correlates with the speed of the concentric (or positive) portion of the ROM. In other words, the faster you lower the bar the faster you lift it.



Bands play a big role in Westside training and completely change the dynamics of a movement.

Sloppy form with big loads is a recipe for training disaster.

A point of caution: many less experienced lifters will try to employ this technique and end up hurting themselves. The caveat with overspeed eccentrics is that the lifter must always remain in control. Sloppy form with big loads is a recipe for training disaster. I always recommend a lifter learn how to perform a given exercise using slow and controlled form first. It is only after they have mastered the basic technique that I have them begin to explore

greater speed of movement. This leads to lifters who are able to maintain perfect form even at high speeds (I am not speaking of the Olympic lifts here—they are another story).

Bands can also provide another form of conjugate variety. You can do the exact same movement with varying band tension, resulting in exercise that is perceived by the nervous system quite differently.

Here is a video demonstrating how to set up bands for squatting: [video](#).

One note on band set-up: always be sure to use sufficient band tension at the bottom of the ROM such that the bands never totally unload and get slack.



Once your form is solid, work on moving the weight with explosive speed.

Exercises Used

This article contains video links to examples of some of the lesser-known exercises in the program. Proper performance of each exercise is of extreme importance. Improper technique can lead to both short- and long-term injury. Do not let your ego dictate your training. Do not sacrifice form for weight or speed.

If you have any questions about exercises that do not have video links, or even for those that do, please ask them in the *CrossFit Journal* comments section for this article or on the CrossFit Message Board. I will do my best to answer any and all questions.

WOD Incorporation and Training Timing

CrossFit WODs are not my area of expertise. I am familiar with them and certainly understand the physiological machinations of the exercise form, but I feel it best to leave the choice of WODs to you, the experts. My only caveat is that some consideration is given to avoiding truly strength-focused WODs like King Kong.

I do wish to address WOD timing relative to the ME and DE days. ME and DE training sessions should be 72 hours apart. The days of the week are not of particular importance, but if you have your ME day at 5 p.m. on Monday, your DE training should fall at 5 p.m. the following Thursday. Optimal WOD timing would see a WOD follow both the ME and DE days, with the third WOD falling on either Wednesday or Saturday following the Monday-Thursday/ME-DE training protocol used here.

Go Lift!

The stated goal of this program is to build your deadlift while simultaneously allowing you to improve your CrossFit WOD times. If followed as prescribed, it will do exactly that. As you build the absolute power of your posterior chain and continue to practice your CrossFit training, you will find there is a direct correlation between increased absolute strength and improved WOD performance.

Regardless of other factors, as absolute strength increases, all loads become "lighter" or, more accurately, become a lower percentage of your 1RM (lower intensity). The lower the intensity, the longer you can continuously perform a given exercise. And in a CrossFit workout, if the load feels light, you can ramp the intensity back up by cranking up the speed.

Give this program a try and let me see some more competitive CrossFitters with 600-lb.-plus deadlifts!



About the Author

*Chris Mason is the owner of [AtLarge Nutrition](#). Chris has been involved with bodybuilding and powerlifting for over two decades. He is an accomplished writer in the genre, having published articles in *Athlete*, *Planet Muscle*, *Ironman* and *Powerlifting USA* magazines, as well as online. You can view several of his articles on his website [WannaBeBig.com](#). Chris currently resides in Charlottesville, Va., and makes monthly treks to Ohio to train at [Westside Barbell](#) with Louie Simmons. He is also a member of Louie's team for CrossFit Powerlifting Seminars.*