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**CrossFit**  
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## The Suitcase Deadlift Dumbbell Style

Michael Rutherford



The health lift, known more commonly as the deadlift, is the most basic of essential movements. If an athlete were to do little more than deadlift they would most certainly stay very functional and possess good strength. I view the deadlift as a sign of vitality and independence. The simple task of squatting to the deck and picking up an implement represents baseline functionality. When someone can no longer squat and pick up their belongings, their independence is gone.

Deadlifting is traditionally executed straight on; facing the bar/dumbbell/dog food/landscape mulch, but deadlifting an object at the side is a different and equally useful skill. It can involve just about any object with a handle. Those living in rural areas or raised on a farm are accustomed to picking up their stuff and moving by foot to the destination.

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## The Suitcase Deadlift (continued...)

Suitcase deadlifting with two objects allows for greater overall load and trains the grip and shoulder girdle stabilizers simultaneously. However, suitcase deadlifting is actually easier to manage with two objects, assuming the loads are reasonable, than with one. The counterbalancing of the loads reduces the stabilization requirements. This is why my suitcase deadlift workouts generally involve one dumbbell.

There are plenty of occasions when you need to stand with an object held at your side, such as luggage, grocery bags, a bucket, a baby seat, an ammo can, or any number of objects. Then there is the situation when you sling a load to the shoulder. The weight is to the side and you need to dip (squat) to launch it. This uneven load increases the demand for lateral and rotational torso stabilization, requires minimal equipment—which makes it especially well-suited for groups—and has greater applicability to real-life situations.

The dumbbell suitcase deadlift is initiated by placing the dumbbell to the side. The feet are spaced evenly about shoulder width. The athlete squats to grasp the dumbbell and initiates extension by tightening the midsection and pressing through the heels while maintaining a firm and fixed flat back position. Spotters or trainers need to look for hips racing ahead and finishing their extension before the back rises. The posture and angle of the back should remain fixed from lift-off to full extension. Trainers should also insure that the hand with the load is straight and doing nothing more than holding onto the load, bit bending at the elbow or shrugging from the shoulder. The other arm is used as a balancing aid. Once the movement has been practiced successfully, then the opposite hand can be placed on the hip or the head.

Not all athletes have the mobility to squat this deep. Tall athletes already have challenges with squatting to an elevated barbell. If the athlete cannot assume a correct starting position, with eyes forward, chest up, and back flat, then the load should be elevated. Solid surfaces can be created at appropriate heights by stacking bumper plates or using supine benches or pulling blocks. Just make sure that your athlete is protected.

### Three suitcase deadlift ideas

I use a wide range of repetitions when prescribing this movement—typically anywhere from three to fifteen repetitions per side, depending on the weight of the dumbbells and the intended stimulus of the workout.



## The Suitcase Deadlift (continued...)

This allows for sound practice without compromising the objectives for the session.

Single-side suitcase deadlifting is easy to integrate into your workout repertoire.

### **Pull/push**

This involves two different-size dumbbells. The object is to deadlift and push press. Deadlift 20 reps per side, and then push press another, lighter, dumbbell for two reps. Return to the suitcase (dumbbell) and deadlift it 18 times. Return to the push press movement for two repetitions. Continue in this fashion until the deadlifting is reduced to two reps and the push presses have totaled 20 reps.

### **Suitcase relays**

My large groups love relay events. I attempt to balance out the strength and fitness of the groups. Sometimes it is males verses females. Then I shoot to the middle of the strength curve and pick a dumbbell for each group. Finally, I go to the track and pick a relay distance or time assignment for the workout. Each member of the group suitcase deadlifts five reps per side and then walks 50 paces with the dumbbell in the right hand and 50 paces with it in the left. The next athlete in line counts the paces. At the conclusion of their effort, each athlete takes off sprinting around the track and returns to the end of their team's line. The first group to finish ends up counting the loser's effort and looking forward to a burpee workout sometime in the future.

### **Bad baggage**

One of my clients' favorite workouts involves a combination of suitcase deadlifts and farmer's walks. It's similar to the relay but is done individually and goes for a specific number of rounds. I call it Bad Baggage. Start by walking an assigned distance (say, 50 meters) with the dumbbell in the right hand; then stop and execute five suitcase deadlifts. Switch the dumbbell to the left hand, walk back to the start, and execute five suitcase deadlifts in the left hand. We think of it as practice for the times you pick up the wrong luggage at the baggage claim.



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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. 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. You can learn more dumbbell exercises from his DVDs [Dumbbell Moves, Vol. I](#) and the new [Volume II](#).