

List of Lower Body **Progressions**



By Bret Contreras

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Simple Progression Rules

It is of utmost importance that lifters, personal trainers, strength coaches and physical therapists know the optimum starting point and stairway to success in all the major lower body movement patterns. All lifters need to demonstrate proficiency at step one before moving onto step two. I can't tell you how often I see lifters and coaches performing variations that are too challenging for them at the moment. I see them shifting, squirming, and leaking energy because their bodies cannot provide the dynamic stability or they don't have the mobility necessary to allow for proper exercise performance. Rather than sticking with the challenging movement pattern and eventually "getting it," I believe it is more advantageous to regress to an easier variation and eventually work back up to the more difficult variation once the simpler pattern is mastered. There are several rules of thumb that you should know about exercise progressions. In no particular order of importance, they are:

1. Bilateral before Unilateral

Bilateral lower body exercises offer increased stability over their unilateral counterparts for two different reasons. First, they widen the base of support. And second, they don't require as much rotary stability at the hips. It should be noted that lunging, Bulgarian split squat, split stance deadlift and single leg abducted deadlift variations are still technically "bilateral" exercises as both feet remain in contact with stable surfaces. While I still consider these to be unilateral exercises and the goal should always be to try to maximize the loading on the intended leg, they're not as technically challenging as true "unilateral" exercises that are performed solely on one foot, including the single leg box squat, pistol, King deadlift, and single leg Romanian deadlift. Master the bilateral lifts before attempting the unilateral lifts.



2. Stable before Unstable

When I conducted my EMG research I found that often key muscles such as the glutes don't fire well under unstable environments. For example, a Swiss ball leg curl barely elicited any glute activation. It's important to first master stable exercises before attempting unstable exercises, but stability is relative and doesn't require an unstable surface. For example, a wide stance squat is more stable than a narrow stance squat. A low bar squat is more stable than a high bar squat, which is more stable than an overhead squat. A clean grip deadlift is more stable than a snatch grip deadlift. A static lunge is more stable than a pistol. Stability comes before instability. There are even ways to make



List of Lower Body Progressions

stable lifts slightly more “stable.” For example, a counterbalance squat, which simply involves flexing the shoulders (raising the arms) as one squats down, shifts the center of mass forward which decreases the moment arm at the knee joint and increases the moment arm at the hip joint. In other words, a counterbalance squat puts more emphasis on the hips and less on the knees, thereby making the squat pattern easier for most folks to learn.

3. Partial ROM before Full ROM

Many newbies have decent movement patterns during shallow movements, but they fall apart when going deep. For this reason lifters can typically employ partial range movements with great success while slowly progressing toward full range of motion movements. I’ve had beginner clients who had to start with ultra-high box squats, ultra-low step ups, rack pulls above the knee caps, and even partial range glute bridges as they weren’t yet strong enough to lock out the movement. But the upside is that every individual I’ve ever trained could squat, step up, deadlift, and hip thrust. It’s just that many of them have to start out with the bare bones. Gradually I was able to lower the box height during box squats, increase the platform height during step ups, lower the rack height during rack pulls, and increase the range of motion and elevation during bridging, but partial ranges of motion must be executed properly prior to performing full ranges of motion.



4. Bodyweight before Loading

The most common mistake of personal trainers all over the world is immediately putting a bar on every client’s back and expecting them to squat correctly. While I just informed you that partial ROM comes before full ROM, you should work on increasing ROM with bodyweight before using extra loading. Typically beginners will put a bar on their back when squatting and initiate the lift by bending the knees and shifting the weight forward rather than sitting back. This practice fails to engrain proper movement patterns and simply makes the individual better at sucking. Gray Cook would call this, “Putting fitness on top of dysfunction.” Prior to loading up an individual with external weights, make sure they’ve mastered form with their own bodyweight with a full range of motion. Individuals need to squat, hip hinge, and bridge properly before holding onto a dumbbell, kettlebell or barbell.



List of Lower Body Progressions

5. Slow before Fast

High velocity movements are fun and exciting, but if you can't perform a movement pattern well during slow speeds you're probably not going to perform the movement well during higher velocities. For this reason, squats come before jump squats, Romanian deadlifts and clean pulls come before power cleans, and hip thrusts and cable pull throughs come before kettlebell swings. When you've mastered the squat, then jumping and landing with weight will feel natural. When you've mastered the RDL, the power clean will feel like a powerful continuation of the RDL. When you've mastered the hip thrust, the kettlebell swing will simply feel like an explosive standing hip thrust.



6. Simple before Complex

It's enticing to want to perform movements like Turkish get ups, overhead squats, and barbell single leg RDL's right from the get-go. The full Olympic lifts are without a doubt the most impressive lifts in existence. Who doesn't want to use bands and chains from time to time? There's just something empowering about them. But beginners aren't ready for these movements as they require too much whole body coordination and it's more fruitful to master the different "chunks" of a lift and build up a base of strength and stability before integrating everything together. Keep it simple in the beginning, and over time add more complexity. Learn the primary movement patterns and feel free to throw in some farmer's walks and sled pushes, but save the Oly lifts, accommodating resistance, and TGU's for down the road.



List of Lower Body Progressions

The Big Three: The Box Squat, Hip Hinge, and Glute Bridge

The box squat, hip hinge and glute bridge are the three primary movement patterns that need to be mastered prior to performing other movements. Remember that these are bodyweight movements; load can be used when pattern proficiency is demonstrated. Given proper instruction, many newbies can perform these movements correctly right off the bat, assuming that possess sufficient mobility in ankle dorsiflexion, hip flexion, thoracic extension, as well as sufficient lumbopelvic stability and glute activation. That said, these patterns need to be reinforced over and over until automaticity is reached. If a lifter struggles with any of these patterns, then their homework is to perform the movements twice each day; attempting three sets of five to ten repetitions in both sessions. These patterns are about quality, not quantity. It's far better to perform three good repetitions than a hundred poor ones. These movements teach proper lumbopelvic hip mechanics. While keeping a neutral spine and pelvis is always a good idea, it is my belief that lifters should learn to keep a strong low back arch (slight lumbar hyperextension) and anterior pelvic tilt while under load in a hips-flexed position, as well as a strong glute squeeze (slight posterior pelvic tilt accompanied by very slight lumbar flexion) while under load in a hips-extended position. Notice I said "slight." There's a fine line between slight arching and pelvic tilting and overdoing it. I believe that this practice reinforces ideal load-distribution mechanics and will prevent deleterious tissue stresses incurred from losing good spinal position (ie: rounding at the bottom of a deadlift or hyperextending at the top of a deadlift).

The Box Squat

The box squat is the key type of squat for laying the foundation for the squatting pyramid. When you know how to box squat, you know how to use your hips. When Olympic weightlifters and powerlifters are asked to perform deep squats, the weightlifters naturally use more quadriceps and less hip musculature, whereas the powerlifters naturally use more hip musculature and less quadriceps. Though strong quads are essential for proper squatting, most individuals are "quad-dominant" or perhaps more accurate, they are "hip-deficient." When you teach the box squat, you'll quickly realize that most lifters absolutely suck at sitting back in the squat.

The box squat is characterized by the following:

1. Ideally you have a box squat box that you can situate with the corner facing forward, which allows you to make contact with the calves and the box from a standing position for some proprioceptive feedback so you know you're in the right place. If you don't have a box squat box, then you can use a bench or some aerobic steps stacked to proper height. Most newbies can begin with a box height that has their thighs parallel to the ground when seated.
2. The lifter lines up with a fairly wide stance, usually with the feet flared.
3. The lift is initiated by imagining that an individual is behind the lifter with a rope around their waist pulling their hips rearward. The hip break comes first and the torso leans while the knees bend.
4. The knees do not migrate forward; the tibias stay vertical and perpendicular to the ground.



List of Lower Body Progressions

5. The knees are forced outward to prevent knee valgus and they track over the middle of the feet during the movement.
6. The chest is kept up to prevent spinal rounding.
7. The weight is kept on the heels.
8. The lifter has three options; he or she can simply tap the box and rise, or the lifter can sit for a second before initiating the rising motion, or the lifter can rock backward and then forward prior to performing the concentric portion of the movement.
9. The lifter does not plop down on the box; the eccentric motion is controlled all the way down for a soft landing.
10. The lifter never loses the spinal arch when seated. NEVER!
11. Squeeze the glutes to lockout.

The Hip Hinge

The hip hinge is an essential component to long-term lifting success. If you can't hip hinge, then you won't be able to squat, deadlift, good morning, bent over row, kettlebell swing, or bent over rear delt raise properly. The hip hinge requires adequate spinal and pelvic stability and hip flexion mobility/hamstring flexibility. Grooving proper bending patterns takes some time, but perfect practice makes perfect. There are two good methods for teaching the hip hinge. The first is the wall Romanian deadlift (RDL), and the second is the dowel hip hinge.

Wall RDL

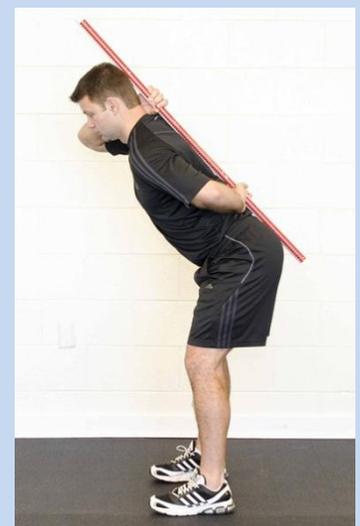
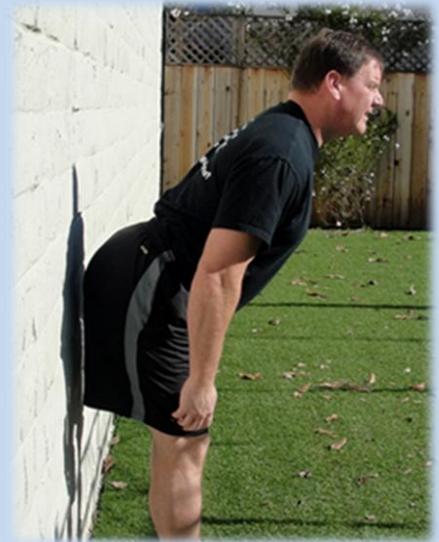
The wall RDL is performed by doing the following:

1. The lifter positions himself or herself approximately 6 -12 inches in front of a wall with a shoulder width stance and feet straight forward.
2. The head and neck stay in line with the body which requires the gaze of the lifter to look down as the movement descends.
3. The lifter sits back and envisions having glue on the buttocks while trying to capture hundred dollar bills that are stuck to the wall.
4. The knees bend but the hamstrings are stretched as the movement descends due to lengthening at the hip and a good low back arch and anterior pelvic tilt.
5. The weight is kept on the heels.
6. The chest stays up to prevent spinal rounding.

Dowel RDL

The dowel RDL is performed by doing the following:

1. A dowel, broomstick, or pvc pipe is held behind the back while the lifter stands upright with a shoulder width stance and feet straight forward.



List of Lower Body Progressions

2. One arm is placed behind the low back and grasps a hold of the dowel, while the other arm is placed behind the neck and grasps a hold of the dowel. The curves in the lumbar and cervical spines create perfect grooves to allow the hands to sink into.
3. The dowel has three points of contact; the head, the thoracic spine, and the sacrum.
4. The lifter bends forward while sitting back and keeping the chest up. The dowel maintains the three points of contact throughout the duration of the movement.
5. All good with two legs? Now try the same form with one leg while keeping the non-grounded leg straight and in line with the torso. You'll have to remind yourself to "sit back" while on one leg.

The Glute Bridge

It's mind-boggling how every once in a while I'll train a 300 lb. squatter or 400 lb deadlifters who is unable to perform a proper glute bridge. These types do not possess what Nick Tumminello would call "full spectrum glute strength." They have sound initial range hip extension strength (their hip extensors work well in a hips-flexed position), but they have lousy terminal range hip extension strength (their hip extensors are dysfunctional in a hips-extended position). It is essential that all lifters learn to use their glutes in neutral and slightly hips-hyperextended ranges of motion as the glutes are the strongest hip extensors at end-range hip extension. The glute bridge is ideal for learning proper glute mechanics, as by bending the knees, the hamstrings are placed on slack and can't function optimally, causing the glutes to do more of the work during the bridging motion. Furthermore, the posterior pelvic tilt can be learned quite easily from this position.



Here is how to perform a proper glute bridge:

1. The lifter lies supine with the hips flexed at approximately 135° and knees at 90°, with a shoulder width stance and feet straight ahead.
2. The weight is kept on the heels and the hips are thrust upward.
3. The lumbar spine stays in neutral while the motion occurs about the hips.
4. At lockout, the hips slightly hyperextend while the glutes are squeezed, causing a slight posterior pelvic tilt.

List of Lower Body Progressions

Lower Body Progressions: Squat, Deadlift, Lunge, and Bridges

Squats

1. Bodyweight high box squat
2. Bodyweight mid box squat
3. Bodyweight low box squat
4. Bodyweight counterbalance parallel squat
5. Bodyweight counterbalance full squat
6. Kettlebell or goblet low box squat
7. Kettlebell or dumbbell goblet full squat
8. Dumbbell between bench squat
9. Barbell box squat
10. Barbell front squat
11. Barbell back squat
12. Zercher squat
13. Barbell plus band/chain squat



Deadlifts

1. Bodyweight hip hinge
2. Band good morning
3. Kettlebell or dumbbell sumo deadlift
4. Dumbbell Romanian deadlift
5. Barbell high rack pull
6. Barbell medium rack pull
7. Barbell low rack pull
8. Barbell Romanian deadlift
9. Hex bar deadlift high handles
10. Hex bar deadlift low handles
11. Barbell conventional deadlift
12. Barbell sumo deadlift
13. Barbell good morning (Russian deadlift)
14. Barbell snatch grip deadlift
15. Barbell deficit deadlift
16. Barbell plus band/chain deadlift



List of Lower Body Progressions

Lunges

1. Bodyweight static lunge
2. Bodyweight forward lunge
3. Bodyweight walking lunge
4. Bodyweight reverse lunge
5. Bodyweight slideboard or Valslide reverse lunge
6. Bodyweight deficit reverse lunge
7. Weighted vest walking lunge
8. Dumbbell walking lunge
9. Barbell walking lunge
10. Barbell front walking lunge
11. Barbell Zercher walking lunge
12. Dumbbell contralateral load deficit reverse lunge
13. Barbell deficit reverse lunge



Glute Bridges

1. Bodyweight double leg bridge
2. Bodyweight double leg feet elevated bridge
3. Bodyweight double leg shoulder elevated bridge
4. Bodyweight double leg shoulder and feet elevated bridge
5. Barbell double leg bridge
6. Barbell double leg shoulders elevated bridge
7. Bodyweight single leg bridge
8. Bodyweight single leg feet elevated bridge
9. Bodyweight single leg shoulder elevated bridge
10. Bodyweight single leg shoulder and feet elevated bridge
11. Barbell plus band/chain shoulder elevated bridge
12. Band single leg shoulder and foot elevated bridge
13. Barbell single leg shoulder elevated bridge

