

Sumo Deadlift Tips

By Gina Hensley

Over recent decades, the sumo deadlift has become more popular in the powerlifting world. It has become the competition lift of choice for many reasons. Compared to a conventional deadlift technique, the range of motion is much shorter. It allows for more activation of the quadriceps muscles because of knees being pushed outward, rather than forward and coming into contact with the barbell. The sumo deadlift is also friendlier to the large population of powerlifters with great proportions for the squat and bench press—a long torso, short arms, and short femurs—and less optimal proportions for the conventional deadlift. Although sumo deadlifts are appealing to many, they can be very difficult to master because of the greater need for sound technique to achieve success. Whether you are considering switching to sumo from a conventional style deadlift, would like to incorporate sumo into your program as an assistance exercise, or simply would like to improve your sumo deadlift for any reason, here are some tips and cues to help you become a confident sumo puller.

1. **The Sumo Deadlift Mentality:** The very first thing that a lifter needs to keep in check is their mentality when it comes to a sumo deadlift. This is especially important for somebody who is converting from a conventional style. Sumo is *entirely* different from a conventional deadlift, and this lies mostly in the importance of sound technique. When a conventional puller makes a technical error during their lift, it is possible to grind through it and finish the lift as long as they avoid hitching (using their legs as leverage for the barbell). If a sumo puller makes a technical error, such as being knocked forward, it is almost impossible to correct because of the less stable base of support from a wider stance. This is why many sumo deadlifters will not have trouble with hitching, but rather

with downward movement of the bar during the transition between locking the knees and locking the hips. This brings me to my next point, which is: the sumo deadlift is a *two-part* lift. This is where many make a mistake. The first part of a sumo deadlift starts from the floor, and ends when the barbell passes the knees. The second part begins when the knees are locked, and only entails the very quick motion of locking the hips and shoulders. Locking the knees just before the hips makes for a much easier lockout. If a sumo puller has trouble with their lockout—and it is not because of an over-rounded upper back—it is typically because they end their lift by locking the hips and knees at the same time.

Another very important thing to remember when conducting a sumo deadlift is that one can never be too patient at the start of the pull. Compared to a conventional deadlift, the start of a sumo pull constitutes having the knees and hips in a more closed position. This makes the very beginning of the pull the most difficult. If a lifter is normally able to pull a barbell off of the floor with ease, and struggles to lock out, this can be discouraging when making the switch. Too often, new sumo pullers have difficulty with this and either give up too soon when a lift is heavy for them, or attempt to “grip and rip” to use momentum to their advantage to make the start of the pull easier. Unfortunately, yanking on the barbell at the beginning of a sumo pull can lead to the back changing position, causing a more difficult lockout. The closed position of the knees and hips and the nature of the stiff USAPL competition bars makes for an extremely slow start of the pull, therefore, patience is one of the most important cues for sumo. Many successful sumo pullers may take one to four seconds to break the weight

from the floor. However, if a lifter has sound sumo deadlifting technique, it is very likely that the lift will be finished as long as the weight leaves the ground.

Switching to or learning the sumo deadlift can be mentally challenging for some, but the dedication to doing so correctly can be very rewarding. Mastering the technique is not a simple and easy task, and that is why an important thing to keep in mind is: ***don't get deadlift ADD***. Some training days will be easier than others, and not every deadlift will be perfectly executed. That being said, being consistent and practicing over and over will pay off. Switching back and forth between deadlift styles when things get tough will make it extremely difficult to progress in either one.

2. **Foot Position and Sumo Stance:** The sumo stance is defined generally by a foot position outside of the lifter's grip on the bar. This leaves a beginner wondering where the perfect sumo stance is. A narrow or "modified" sumo stance, made popular by the world-famous powerlifter Ed Coan, has made a larger appearance in the powerlifting world recently. An extremely wide, "toes-to-plates" stance also has its own appeal of decreasing the ROM as much as possible. There is also the most commonly used middle-ground between the two stances. But what stance is the best for you? The easiest answer to that question is: ***it depends***. It is possible for a sumo deadlifter to feel comfortable using any of the three stance variations, and can ultimately progress their deadlift in each one. When a lifter doesn't know where to start, their best bet is to first begin their stance experimenting with a stance that allows their shins to be perpendicular to the floor in the starting position. Usually, only minor adjustments will need to be made from here. A starting position with perpendicular shins is commonly used in sumo deadlifters, but most elite sumo pullers are most comfortable with a stance slightly wider than this. This

stance allows the lifter to focus on “spreading the floor” with their feet rather than pushing downward.

With each change in stance width, the foot position must also change. As a lifter’s deadlift stance becomes wider, the knees will track more outward rather than forward, like in a modified sumo pull. A sumo puller must keep their bar path straight and effectively push through the floor, and thus, would benefit from keeping their toes and knees aligned when in the starting position. It is a common mistake to have the toes pointed too far forward, which can cause a lifter to struggle to keep their hips down or fall forward during the lift.

Many variables will come into play when choosing the right sumo stance. The first is the lifter’s proportions, such as limb and torso length. Those with long torsos and short limbs may struggle with finding a stance that keeps the torso most upright. Powerlifters with long limbs may find themselves wishing that they could pull with a barbell longer in length, to accommodate for their long legs. These lifters usually benefit from a very wide sumo stance; however, they may be limited by mobility. The stance that is optimal for one’s body proportions does not always work well with their hip mobility. Previous injuries, muscle imbalances, or muscular composition also come into play when choosing a stance. When a lifter is totally indecisive, they may benefit from taking photos or videos to analyze their strength, speed, shin and back angle in each position. Despite all of these variables given, the perfect sumo deadlift stance is ultimately affected by one’s personal preference. Although a lifter may know that their current stance is not necessarily *optimal*, it is fine to continue using a stance that they

love. It is much easier to make progress in a lift when it is performed with comfort and confidence.

3. **Grip:** Although the sumo hand placement differs from a conventional deadlift in relation to the knees, the actual hand placement on the barbell is very similar. A common mistake made by lifters transitioning to sumo is starting with a grip that is too narrow, making it more difficult to lock the shoulders back.

A typical hand placement used with sumo is slightly wider than holding the arms straight downward. For many lifters, this usually means that each hand will be touching part of the knurling, and part of the smooth part in the middle of the barbell. However, the width of knurling is different on each bar, so it is best to establish a comfortable grip without relying on looking at the barbell for hand placement.

While the majority of powerlifters use a mixed (overhand/underhand) grip for deadlifts, the double overhand hook grip is also widely used. Although the hook grip is helpful in preventing a bicep tear, a lifter should use whichever is most comfortable.

With a mixed grip, the lifter may find that they have better balance if their underhand is placed about 1 to 2 centimeters closer to the end of the barbell than the overhand.

4. **The Sumo Deadlift Set-up:** The starting position of the sumo deadlift is possibly the most important because of its tendencies to be slow at the beginning of the pull.

Although the sumo deadlift allows for a more upright torso, it should not be treated like a squat. It is imperative for a lifter to find the *natural hip position* that they should pull from. It is common for a new sumo puller to attempt to start the deadlift with the hips too low to keep the torso upright. Unfortunately, once the deadlift begins, the hips will shoot

up back to their naturally strongest position, and thus, shifting the torso forward and making the sumo deadlift more lower-back dominant than it is intended to be.

When a lifter tries to pull with their hips too low, it is likely that their back position is also incorrect. The ideal back position is one where the scapulae are centered over the bar in the starting position. With the scapulae too far backward, and the hips too low, this makes for a much harder start of the pull.

With these points made, it is completely up to the discretion of the lifter regarding their complete deadlift set up. Many who also compete in equipped powerlifting may choose the set up that entails beginning the deadlift almost immediately after finding the starting position. Although this is a good choice, it is also common to see lifters finding their stance and hand placement first, and putting the hips into position only just before starting the pull. This may be a better option for those that struggle to find the perfect starting hip position.

5. **The 1st Half of the Sumo Deadlift:** The most important part of the sumo deadlift begins with the starting position. This part also requires the most patience. Some good cues to remember the first half—spreading the floor—are the following:

To keep your back tight, it is much more efficient to tuck your lats than to shrug your shoulders. The lats should be tucked downward, to shorten the ROM. This will help keep a neutral back position and lead to an easier lock out in the second half of the deadlift. When weight gets heavy, it is possible for the upper back to round slightly, and this is no reason for worrying about fixing technique. As long as the lats are tucked, and the bar path remains in a vertical plane, upper back rounding is a form of technique breakdown that can be improved, but accepted.

The sumo pull should always begin with the hips in their natural starting position, and with a neutral head position. Although it may be tempting to look upward to keep an upright torso, this can cause unnecessary lumbar vertebrae extension and strain on the neck.

Lastly, focus on *SPREADING the floor with PATIENCE*. This part of the deadlift is usually made easier by pushing outward through the feet, rather than downward. And to come back to the sumo deadlift mentality, one can never be too patient when it comes to this part of the pull.

6. **The 2nd Half of the Sumo Deadlift:** This part of the sumo deadlift begins once the knees are fully locked after the 1st half. This leaves only one thing left to do: lock out the hips. Locking the knees just before the hips makes for a much easier lockout.

A cue to remember for the 2nd half of the sumo pull is to *SQUEEZE the glutes as quickly as possible*. This part of the sumo deadlift is very simple and should be FAST. It is typical sumo nature to have a slow start of a pull, and a strong, powerful lockout.

7. **The Transition Between “Spread” and “Squeeze”:** Learning to lock the knees before the hips and effectively conduct a strong lockout upon finishing the 1st part of the pull can be very difficult to master, especially for a new sumo puller. This is usually where technique errors are made, causing missed lifts in competition.

The transition can be learned through a lot of repetitive practice. It should be practiced with all different intensities and volumes, especially submaximal weights (80-90%) where a deadlift can have quite a bit of speed, but still be heavy enough to pose a challenge of keeping balance during the transition. Finding an optimal stance and set up will help with this as well because of a good back position. A solid choice for accessory

work for this skill is pause deadlifts—a normal sumo pull performed at a lower intensity, and with a brief pause just below the knee. This will help build confidence and strong technique through the transition in a regular sumo pull.

8. **Finishing Touches:** Although the basics have been covered regarding helpful tips in the sumo deadlift technique, there are a few small suggestions that could be of use as well.

Firstly, since patience is a virtue in the sumo deadlift, it may be very helpful to train with a USAPL competition style bar if possible. The stiffness of these barbells (Ivanko, Eleiko, Titex, Ohio Power Bar, Texas Power Bar, etc.) eliminates any whip that could be used to the lifter's advantage in the beginning of a deadlift. Even a standard gym bar cannot match the stiffness of these bars, so it can be very useful to practice specificity and be prepared for the slow start of a sumo deadlift in a competition.

Secondly, it may be a good idea to incorporate complete reset deadlifts into your routine. Conducting each deadlift rep like a single not only imitates the one-rep style of a powerlifting meet, but also eliminates any stretch reflex that could be used as an advantage. Complete reset deadlifts also allow for a lifter to be sure they are using the exact same starting position for each rep. Complete reset deadlifts can be time consuming and may be unappealing for very high rep sets. However, they are a good thing to practice when intensity increases and repetitions are 6 or below per set.

Lastly, a sumo puller may benefit from using shoes that “hug the feet” to feel secure throughout the lift. Wrestling shoes seem to be a popular choice to aid in properly spreading the floor without manipulating the foot, but converse and other options are also widely used. Many lifters love using deadlift slippers because of how thin they are, but

spreading the floor can be difficult while wearing these, especially with a rather wide sumo stance.

In Conclusion: The sumo deadlift is a very technically complex lift that requires practice and patience. It is difficult to learn, and doing so may be overwhelming. While some of these tips may be already known by many, I hope that the readers benefit from this article. A technically sound sumo deadlift is a great work of art, and it is my intent to help any lifter to achieve that.

May the modified sumo deadlifters have strong lockouts, and may the wide stance pullers successfully protect their toes.