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The mh3 Deadlift Guide

Everything I teach about the deadlift in my reels and on the floor at mh3, in one place. The full setup sequence, the brace, the mistakes that cost you the most weight, and the exact 6 week block structure we program at the gym.

Save this page, it is not going anywhere.

By Matthew Henry, head coach at mh3, Dubai

READ THIS FIRST

Strength is pressure, held while you move

The real issue with most stuck deadlifts is the same one: people start moving the weight before they have actually created tension and found stability. Strength is nothing more than your ability to build pressure and hold it while you move a load. If you do not lock that in before the bar leaves the floor, your body will move however it can to find something that works, which is why technique breaks down the second it gets heavy.

Think of the deadlift as a leg press. On a leg press machine, the machine gives you the stability and you just push the platform away. In a deadlift you have to create that stability yourself, with your brace, your lats and your grip. Once it is there, it is the same job: push the floor away. Your back does not lift the bar. Your back holds the bar, it is an isometric hold. Your legs are the movers.

Stronger lifters are not just stronger. They are more patient, and they respect the time it takes to set up correctly. That is the whole guide in one line. Here is the system.

PART 1

The sequence: feet, grip, brace, push, shins, lats, stand

Every rep goes through the same sequence of events. It never changes, from your first warmup to your top set. Feet, grip, brace, push, shins, lats, stand.

1 Feet

Bar over the middle of your foot, halfway between the heel and the toe. Your hip position is a result of your foot position and where the bar sits, so set the feet first and do not let the bar move.

2 Grip

Hinge down and grip the bar with your hands directly under your shoulders, index finger just inside the knurling. Straight arms, vertical lines, the shortest possible path off the floor. Any wider and you start holding tension up high in your traps, which is a poor transfer of force into the legs where the power actually is.

3 Brace

Big breath into your belly, as much air as possible, and force it outwards. This comes before you create any tension anywhere, because the brace is what locks that tension into your body. Full detail in part 2.

4 Push: take the slack with your whole body

Do not just tug the bar with your arms. Use your legs to push your body away from the bar and push your chest as far from your hands as possible. You are creating upwards tension through the whole system, hands to feet. You will hear the bar click against the plates, that is the bar starting to bend. Think of springs loading underneath you. Once you have that tension, you never let it go. It is leverage.

5 Shins

Now use that tension on the bar to load your legs. Your chest stays still. Your legs come to the bar, shins pull back until they touch it. This is the wedge. You are pulling yourself into position, not dropping into it, and by the time your shins meet the bar your quads and hamstrings are loaded and ready to push.

6 Lats, at the very last opportunity

Only now do the lats lock in. Not shoulders back, never shoulders back. Squeeze your hands back towards your shins and squeeze your armpits. That pins the bar to you and holds the bar body relationship, so the bar drags up your legs in a straight line instead of swinging away.

7 Stand

Push the floor away. The deadlift is a push and a pull at the same time: legs pushing the floor down, hands pulling the bar into you. At the top, tuck your chin and squeeze your glutes. Try it standing right now, squeeze your glutes then tuck your chin, you will feel them fire even harder. That is lockout: hips through, standing tall, no leaning back. Eyes forward and slightly down the whole pull.

The brace: the first fix for everything

If you are struggling with any lift, fix your brace before you change your stance, your grip or anything about how you move. A brace is not just a held breath. Here is how to learn it: take in as much air as you can, then blow it all out as fast as you can. Feel what happens, your abs tense, your ribcage comes down, you get locked in. Now do it again, but do not let the air leave. Close your lips and push that air outwards inside your body. That pressure, that tension everywhere feeling, is the brace.

Want more? There is still room in your lungs after the big breath. Take one more short, sharp sip of air at the top and lock it down. That double breath fills you completely and gets you even tighter. And if you wear a belt, the belt is not the brace. The belt gives you feedback, something to push into so you can brace harder against it. You still create the pressure yourself.

Timing matters as much as pressure. Brace before you create stretch on the muscle, never during. In the deadlift that means brace at the top, before you take the load, and hold it the whole rep. Let it go at lockout, under tension, then get the bar back to the floor and reset. Never dump your air halfway up, your body relaxes the moment the breath leaves and that is when backs round. Between reps, stand tall and take your breaths there. If you get lightheaded after big pulls, this timing is almost always why: exhale slowly under pressure at the top instead of gasping it all out at once.

PART 3

The 3 mistakes that cost you the most weight

1. Retracting your shoulder blades

Pulling your shoulders back before the pull feels tight, so everyone does it. But it parks all that tension up high in your upper back, and when a heavy bar leaves the floor that tension has nowhere to go, so you lose your lower back and get that ugly rounding on the way up. It is a really poor transfer of load.

Instead: Get tension upwards on the bar first, then pinch the bar back with long levers.

Squeeze your hands back towards your shins, squeeze your armpits. Here is what it should feel like: put your hand under your armpit and clamp down on it as hard as you can. That is shoulders back in a deadlift. The shoulder blades look after themselves if the lats are doing their job.

2. Chasing a perfect flat back

People arch hard and force a textbook flat back before they pull, then wonder why their lower back still hurts. The truth: the brace is the key, not the shape. A bit of roundness in the upper back is fine, I pull my competition deadlifts intentionally round up top. The rule is anti flexion, not extension: whatever shape you start in, it does not move once the bar leaves the floor.

Instead: Stop chasing a perfect flat back and start chasing a perfect brace. Lock your shape in with pressure, and do not let any MORE rounding happen during the pull. Held in place, you are safe. Losing the brace mid rep is the danger, not the starting shape.

3. Moving differently when it gets heavy

The weight gets heavy and the instinct is to change something: lean back, snatch at it, find tension in some new direction. Now every heavy rep is a different lift and you are training panic, not strength.

Instead: Nothing about your setup changes from your first warmup to your top set. The only thing that changes is how hard you squeeze. You cannot move differently when it is heavy, but you can brace harder and harder. If you want to feel this, take a comfortable weight and lift it off the floor as slowly as you possibly can. You will have to get tight, there is no other way to do it. That tightness is what your top sets should feel like.

PART 4

The 6 week block: how we actually program the deadlift

This is not a generic 5x5. This is the exact structure every deadlift day at my gym runs on, the same one our training app automates. Every main day has three kinds of sets, and each has a job:

The indicator comes first. One set, same reps as the top set, at a weight you are very sure of, about RPE 6.5. It is your reading for the day. Bar moves like it should? Proceed as planned. Feels heavier than it should? Today's top set stays lighter, no argument. The plan bends to the day, not the other way round.

The top set is one all in set at the day's target RPE. This is the set that drives your progress. One rule from the gym floor: through a session, weights only ever hold or come down from what the indicator told you. If you feel genuinely great, you add to the top set yourself, 2.5 to 5kg, no hero jumps.

The back offs are your top set weight minus 10 percent. Exactly 10, not roughly. They bank the volume that actually builds the lift, at a weight where your positions hold together rep after rep.

RPE 8 means about two good reps left in the tank, RPE 9 means one. Do not get attached to numbers: you get to lift as much as you can by having lifted less than you can. Maxing out every week just digs the hole deeper.

Warm up the same way every session: a few plate hug RDLs first, hug a plate to your belly, brace against it, hinge. Then singles up to your working weight, there is no need to do full sets of five on the way up. Grip note: learn to pull without straps first so you learn to connect with the bar through your hands, then use straps on any set you need them. If you pull mixed grip, let the bar hang in the fingers of your palm up hand, do not palm it, and your biceps are safe.

WEEK 1

Day 1: Indicator 1 x 5 @ RPE 6.5, top set 1 x 5 @ RPE 7.5, back offs 2 x 5 at top minus 10%

Day 2: Paused deadlift 3 x 3 @ RPE 7 (1s hover just off the floor), RDL 3 x 8, Pendlay row 3 x 10

Entry point for the top set: a weight you are certain you could pull for 8, done for 5. Write down what you lift, everything builds off this week.

WEEK 2

Day 1: Indicator 1 x 4 @ RPE 6.5, top set 1 x 4 @ RPE 8, back offs 3 x 4 at top minus 10%

Day 2: Paused deadlift 3 x 3 @ RPE 7, RDL 3 x 8, Pendlay row 3 x 10

Reps drop, bar climbs. If last week's top 5 was honest, add 2.5 to 5kg and the RPE 8 will be right there.

WEEK 3

Day 1: Indicator 1 x 3 @ RPE 6.5, top set 1 x 3 @ RPE 8.5, back offs 3 x 3 at top minus 10%

Day 2: Paused deadlift 3 x 2 @ RPE 7.5, RDL 3 x 8, Pendlay row 3 x 10

Heaviest week so far. Nothing about your setup changes, only the effort you put into getting tight.

WEEK 4

Day 1: Deload: 3 x 5 at week 1 top set minus 10%. No indicator, no top set.

Day 2: RDL 3 x 8, Pendlay row 3 x 10, both two reps shy of last week's effort

Deload does not mean easy and pointless. We are lifting lighter for volume. This is where you dial in positions, hover pauses on every warmup single.

WEEK 5

Day 1: Indicator 1 x 3 @ RPE 6.5, top set 1 x 3 @ RPE 9, back offs 2 x 3 at top minus 10%

Day 2: Paused deadlift 2 x 2 @ RPE 7, RDL 3 x 6, Pendlay row 3 x 8

The heaviest triple of the block, fresh off the deload. Stay patient off the floor and trust the pattern you have built for five weeks.

WEEK 6

Day 1: Test: singles up to your opener, then ONE all in set of 3 to 5 reps @ RPE 9

Day 2: Rest, or easy RDLs and rows if you want to move

Not a 1RM day, no grinding singles. Pick your reps, pull one honest set, then plug it into the formula below for your new max estimate.

Scoring your test: estimated max = weight x (1 + reps x 0.033), and because you left one rep in the tank at RPE 9, count one extra rep. Example: 140kg for 4 with one left is $140 \times (1 + 5 \times 0.033)$, about 163kg. That number seeds your next block: it is what the indicator, top set and back offs all calculate from.

On the RDLs: this is a strength exercise, not a stretch. Do not shove your hips back trying to get the bar far away from you. Take your chest as far past the bar as possible so the bar stays close to your hips, short moment arm, then build pressure and push the floor away. The bar stays glued to you, same as the main pull. On the Pendlay rows: hips over the bar, not behind it, every rep from a dead stop. Strict rows build strict backs.

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