



📷 'Are you sure you're just 80kg?' Cali Joseph deadlifts Phil Daoust at the Fantastic Creatures gym in Walthamstow, east London. Photograph: Alicia Canter/The Guardian



Phil Daoust

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One of the lovely things about getting older is realising there's always something more you should be doing to look after your body. Did I say *lovely*? Obviously I meant *tedious*. But how you feel about it doesn't change the facts. If you take the slightest interest in your health, and want to stay strong, mobile and pain-free in your 50s, 60s, 70s and beyond, you'll have to pay attention to the exercises that many of us avoid in our 20s, 30s and 40s. Or, in my case, until you're 61¾.

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Like deadlifts, which help with one of life's most basic tasks - bending over and picking stuff up. Training these also involves bending over and picking stuff up - usually a barbell, but sometimes a kettlebell or pair of

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dumbbells. “Here’s a few things deadlifts help with,” says [Laura Kummerle](#), a Georgia-based physiotherapist and personal trainer (PT). “Lifting your grocery bags off

the ground on to the counter, lifting your laundry basket off the ground, lifting your kid/grandkid (especially out of their crib when you can’t squat), lifting a piece of furniture or a heavy rock for landscaping ... They work the hip hinge, which is a fundamental movement pattern for strength training, but more importantly for daily life.”



📷 ‘Start with a little hinge and push your bum back’ ... Joseph coaches Daoust at Fantastic Creatures gym in Walthamstow, east London. Photograph: Alicia Canter/The Guardian

“If I could only do one exercise in the gym ever again, deadlifts are the one I would do,” says [Cali Joseph](#), a PT based in Walthamstow, east London. “They’re the pinnacle of weight training.” That’s because even though you’re lifting the weight no higher than your thighs, the way you hinge rather than squat means they work everything from your hamstrings, quads, glutes and back to your core, shoulders and arms.

They also make a lot of people very happy, and not just because of some kind of lifter’s high. [Mira Taylor](#), a

personal trainer based in north Wales, began focusing on deadlifts five years ago and is now a British and European deadlift-only champion. “I think it’s pathological for me at this point,” she says. “Obviously the sense of progression and hitting or chasing personal bests is intoxicating, but it’s also the fact that you have to clear your mind completely when you’re lifting a heavy barbell. That’s very therapeutic.”

Some people will tell you deadlifts are risky, especially if you’re getting on a bit, but then some people will tell you running is risky, or cycling, or picking up anything more substantial than a golf club. “Anything can be dangerous,” says Kummerle. “Drinking too much water can be dangerous; stepping off a kerb can be dangerous. Everything we do has risk, but the benefits outweigh the risks of deadlifts, for sure. I’m not saying everyone should be maxing out their deadlift, but loading the movement with what feels like a light to moderate weight can reduce the risk of injury in daily life. That way when you go and pick up your kid or help a friend move house, your body is used to that stimulus.”



📷 'You have to clear your mind completely' ...
Mira Taylor celebrates a record lift at the British Single Lift Championships, May 2024.
Photograph: Shots Like Sumo

It's also useful for rehab. "Deadlifts are good for any injury to build back general strength once you're able to do the hip hinge pattern safely," says Kummerle. "They can be particularly helpful for knees, hips and backs, but I can also see them being useful for ankles, shoulders and even necks."

My own physio's definitely a fan. I'm recovering from a knee injury, and she had me deadlifting less than two months after surgery for my torn meniscus.

Even as a beginner, and one who's careful to take things slowly, I've been deadlifting 50kg - more than half my own weight. More experienced lifters might aim to shift double or even treble their bodyweight. Taylor, who competes in the under-60kg category (based on what competitors weigh, not their barbells), lifted 170kg at last November's World Powerlifting Congress World Championships.

But the heavier you lift, the more form matters. "The problem with a deadlift is that you can brute-force it," says Joseph, who has agreed to help me with mine. "If you're strong, you can just get the bar off the ground and stand up - but that's how you ended up getting injured." She's speaking from personal experience.

So off to the bar we go - all 7ft and 20kg of it. Bars come in various lengths and weights, some more suitable for home workouts, but it's this "Olympic" size that you'll find in most gyms. When people talk about how much they lift, that includes the bar, so if you're lifting 30kg, that means you've stuck a 5kg "plate" on either end of yours.

It's important that you set up correctly, Joseph says - the first step being to make sure you're in the dead centre of the bar, hands evenly spaced and

about shoulder width apart. There should be markings to help with this. This may sound basic, but it's surprisingly easy to pick up a bar off-centre, especially if you're taking it from a rack rather than the ground, as we are today.



📷 'Every time you deadlift, give it your all' ... Joseph checks Daoust's form. Photograph: Alicia Canter/The Guardian

If you're new to the game, or need to warm up for a session, you'll probably want to try a few lifts with just the bar. It's still 20kg, remember.

I've already warmed up, though, and this is not quite my first rodeo, so we start with two 10kg plates, making a total weight of 40kg. The bottom of the plates is just resting on the ground, but this lifts the bar enough that I don't have to bend too much to get my hands around it in an overhand grip. If I had longer legs, or shorter arms, I might have had to raise it off the ground a little. I'll be holding it barehanded as the weight is light and I have a strong grip, but if needed I could dust my hands with chalk, or use lifting straps. There's no shame in giving your grip some help if it's all that's standing between you and a personal best.

■ **Take your time over your set-up. Wherever you feel your hips should be, raise them a couple of inches**

First, though, my feet need to be in the right position. For conventional deadlifts - which is what we're focusing on today - that's pointing forward (it's OK for them to be turned out *a little*) and roughly shoulder width apart. But only roughly. "I always say

you should be in your 'power stance'," Joseph tells me. "If I said to you, 'Phil, for a million quid I want you to jump as high as you can', that's how your feet should be. You shouldn't be too wide and you shouldn't be too narrow, but the precise position will be different for different people."

You also want to be close to the bar. "Feet in your power stance, laces underneath the bar. You want your shins to be almost touching it. We want the bar, the weight, to travel the shortest path - straight up and straight down. It's us that gets in the way or out of the way. The closer it is to us, the more easily we can control it, the more we can harness that power.

"Now," Joseph says, getting into position to demonstrate, "you start with a little hinge and push your bum back. Then you bend your knees as much as you need to reach the bar. For me, that's quite a lot - I've got short arms and short legs. At this point, your shins might touch the bar, but that's OK. As long as you're comfortable with that, that's fine.

"Then, when we're here, we need to build tremendous tension in our body."



📷 'If I could only do one exercise in the gym ever again, deadlifts are the one I would do' ...

And how do we do that? "First of all I'm going to bring my shoulders towards the ceiling and lock out my arms as much as I can. Then it's chest up, shoulders back. And now my last little cue: elbows in. I internally rotate my elbows to take out the last bit of slack that I may have in my body." This rotation has the effect of engaging your lats, or latissimus dorsi muscles, which sit below your shoulder blades and cover most of your back.

That back, by the way, should be flat during your lift, or at least flattish.

"Don't get too hung up on the perfect-looking deadlift," says

Cali Joseph. Photograph: Alicia Canter/The Guardian

Taylor. “I used to spend hours poring over my videos trying to have a perfectly flat back. Now I’m a round-

back puller. Deadlifts look different for everyone, depending on proportions.”

That doesn’t mean all the rules can go out the window, though. “Take your time over your set-up,” Taylor says, “and wherever you feel your hips should be, raise them a couple of inches. A lot of people seem to want to start too low.”

And now you’re finally ready for the lift. “The only difference between when we’re set up and when we’re actually lifting the weight,” says Joseph, “is the little push that we give to the ground to shift it.”

The little push? Aren’t we actually pulling the weight up? It might seem that way, but the conventional deadlift is a push and pull movement. It’s a push from your quads that straightens your knees and gets the bar moving past them; then comes the pull, as you thrust your hips forward and your hamstrings, glutes, back and arms come into play.

That hip thrust is a vital part of the deadlift, and the one that most clearly distinguishes it from the squat. But you can only thrust your hips forward on the way up if you have first thrust them back on the way down. One cue that PTs sometimes give, Kummerle says, is: “Pretend your booty hole is a flashlight and shine it backward.” You’ll also hear: “Pretend you’re pushing a car door shut with your bum.”

There’s no getting away from bums with the deadlift. From set-up to finish, Joseph sums it up like this: “Bum back, bend knees, arms long, chest up, shoulders back. Then push into the ground. *Push, push, push, push*, drive hips forward - and that’s the pull.”

“Every time you deadlift,” she adds, “you give it your all. I don’t care if it’s your warm-up sets, or it’s your heaviest: we lift with intent.” That’s even the case when you’re deadlifting a person, as she demonstrates when she picks me up for the sake of these photographs. As her human barbell, I can only say I’m glad she takes it seriously.

“Sometimes I have to have a mental battle to be in the right frame of mind to attack the bar,” says Taylor, though let’s not forget that sometimes she’s lifting almost three times her bodyweight. “If you’re not 100% committed to making it move, it won’t. In case of emergency, banging music can help.”



📷 Wider stance ... Daoust tries a sumo deadlift. Photograph: Alicia Canter/The Guardian

Once the barbell is up, you can either reverse the movement to lower it, or just drop it. If you're in a gym, you will almost certainly be using weights that are designed to be dropped.

When the time comes for me to show how much I've taken in, the answer is: not as much as I should have. "Get a bit closer to the bar," Joseph tells me. And: "Hip hinge ... bum back, bum back!" And: "Bend your knees, bend your knees, bend some more, *bend, bend, bend!*" And even: "Tuck your chin!"

At least, I think it's "tuck" she says.

It's like whack-a-mole - no sooner have I ironed out one fault than another pops up. The one that survives longest is shrugging my shoulders at the top of the lift - but even that succumbs when Joseph gets me to engage my lats properly. Apparently I need to imagine someone's trying to tickle me.

Eventually I'm looking solid enough to play around with sumo deadlifts, where your legs go much wider and your arms go between your knees, rather than either side of them. It's enjoyable enough, but I feel I'm getting distracted from the conventionals just as I'm beginning to get the hang of them. So back we go to my "power stance" and Joseph increases the weight to 80kg.

This feels significant, as it's what I weigh, give or take a kilo. And as I struggle to lift the barbell, I get a glimpse of why this exercise means so much to so many people. As Taylor puts it: "Heavy lifts feel like they take two minutes - and then you watch them back on video and it's about half a second." However long the lift really lasts, this weird slowing-down gives you time to feel the strain, think about giving up as you push, push, push and pull, pull, pull, and decide to persevere. You have to commit and stay committed, so that when the lift works out it means something.

I recently asked a few people why deadlifts matter so much to them. "They make me feel like I own the world," one woman told me. "They're the first time I've ever felt strong," said another. I think I know what they mean.
