

## *Five Ways to Go Deeper*

### Five Ways to Go Deeper How to Get "Ass to Grass" when Squatting by Ian King

PUBLISHED 07-18-03 10:00

King, I., 2003, Five Ways to go deeper, T-mag.com, July 2003

#### Leave a Stain on the Floor

If you're a shallow squatter and have no desire to go deeper — either because you think you don't need to or because your ego can't take the hit — then you may want to skip this article. If you're already putting your butt on your heels, that's another reason why you might not want to read it. But if you'd like to reap the benefits of the deep squat yet are challenged in doing so, then this article is for you.

First, let's touch very briefly on the benefits of depth in the squat. The theories relating to the benefits of deep squatting attract varying opinions, but short of those who think the bench press is a dangerous lift, there's significant agreement that going deep in the squat is worthwhile for hypertrophy and to develop strength through range. Put simply, if you subscribe to the old physiology/neuromuscular theory that the more a muscle is stretched, the more it can contract, you have an argument for depth.

#### How Deep is "Deep"?

If you're an Olympic lifter, you'll be looking to get your butt as close to the floor as physically possible. If you're a powerlifter, "deep" is breaking parallel as required in competition.

For a bodybuilder wanting to exploit the hypertrophy benefits of deep squatting, I believe the optimal depth is just before the point where you can rest your butt on your calves and take an effortless break. This will be deeper than the powerlifting competition requirements, but not as deep as an Olympic lifter may go.

#### When Not to Go Deep

Are there lifters who shouldn't go low? Yes. For example, if you experience knee pain at these lower angles or if you risk lower back injury by going to this knee/hip angle, you should skip deep squatting. The tradeoff for the hip is similar for the knee. The more the knee bends, the greater the stretch on the quads, yet the more loading on the knee. In the hip, the greater the degree of trunk flexion, the greater the stretch on the hamstrings, glutes and lower back, but the greater the load on the lower back.

The greatest risk to the lower back is during the concentric or lifting phase when you allow the hips to rise faster than the shoulders, thereby increasing the trunk flexion. So as a general rule, I discourage depth if your trunk flexion is going to exceed 45 degrees relative to the

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floor.

If this movement is pain free and low risk for you, then let's get into how you can get deeper in the squat!

### Five Ways to Go Deeper

#### 1) Change Your Movement Pattern

What I'm going to share with you here may be somewhat of a surprise. The two main theories as to why some people can't squat deeply are lack of flexibility and the ratio of limb and trunk lengths. I agree with these, although I don't believe we can always know what the limiting factor is, and sometimes we don't need to know! We just need to get a result!

However, in addition to these two common reasons, consider this: when I train a person who self-reports the inability to get low, the majority of the time I can get them to squat deeply within a few reps! Most are in total shock when they're able to do it! So what's the story?

I have a theory that most lifters develop a certain technique for squatting and stick to it. It doesn't mean they *can't* physically do it differently; it means they *think* they can't do it any differently! After all, a squat is simply a combination of movements at different joints. So where do they get this movement pattern from? For most, I suspect it's a case of imitating or performing what they *think* is the way they were meant to squat. Combine this with the adaptation they make to the use of excessive loading and you get some terrible patterns of movement. Many may have had some coaching, but that coaching was either "limited" (I'm trying to be polite) or they drifted from that teaching over time.

How do I find out? I get the athlete to squat with only the bar while I push, pull, and poke him into the positions I want during the lowering and lifting. If I can achieve a different movement pattern, I know it's not a true physical limitation, but rather a coordination/movement pattern limitation (which is usually the case!).

How can you do this test yourself? Here's the technique I recommend: the assisted squat.

Stand in front of a vertical frame. It may be a squat rack or it may be the frame of a pulley device. Hold the vertical bar with two hands, at shoulder height, arms nearly straight but still with a slight bend at the elbow. Now start squatting down, holding onto the frame as you go. If you need to slide your arms down the vertical frame, do so.

Now, as you go down, I want you to force yourself into a different position, either a deeper position, or even better, apply the technical squatting tips I've shared previously with you. The aim and benefit of holding onto the vertical frame is that you're not going to overbalance and fall to the ground, complete with associated embarrassment. So make sure you use your arms to give yourself the confidence to push your body into new positions.

Yes, I know this isn't totally specific, because if you can do something different with your arms holding this vertical frame and you were to suddenly take that away, you may fall to the ground! So this is how we go from this newfound (but supported) position to being able to

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perform it in the usual, free standing squat. Continue to perform reps in this fashion, using a slow speed (e.g. 814 — that's eight seconds down, pause for one second, and four seconds up) in this new position. Each rep or two, reduce the use of your arms.

If you get to ten reps and still aren't confident of letting go fully with the arms, take your usual rest period and come back to a second set. Come back to a third and fourth set if you need to! If needed, perform multiple sessions and keep going! Don't be concerned if you don't create mastery of this new position with one session. The longer you've held your previous movement pattern, the longer it'll take to alter.

Now, if you're one of the few who have a true physical limitation, you may need to apply the next technique. For those with limiting beliefs like, "This will never work for me!", guess what? You're right! Just go back to what you used to do until you have a mindset that embraces change.

### 2) Use Heel Blocks

No, using heel blocks isn't overly revolutionary, but I'll share with you some valuable insights into how to use them wisely and effectively. (And I know that for some, the debate of whether to use them or not would justify reviewing this info.)

I believe some lifters should start out with heel blocks when looking to master a new technique. This would include those who struggled to get a result using the assisted squat technique I shared above. Taller athletes would also benefit from heel blocks.

Heel blocks aren't "bad" as you may have read, but I'd prefer to wean athletes off them as fast as I can. For anyone who's also looking to do deadlifts or power cleans, there's no future in having to use heel blocks. What heel blocks do is shift the center of gravity forward, which means two things — more stress on the knee and greater involvement of the anterior thigh muscles. The former is only a concern if it's a medical issue, and the latter is good unless you have an imbalance between quad and hip muscles. This is my suggestion — use heel blocks initially, with the intent of progressively reducing the height of this block over time, say, every month or so.

Here are some suggestions to further refine your use of the heel block:

- Only use the minimum height you need. Don't go higher if it's not needed.
- Make sure the heel block is parallel to the squat rack.
- Make sure you have the same amount of each heel/foot on the block.
- Make sure your feet are symmetrical in their external rotation (assuming you have external rotation in your foot position, which most will).

A heel block will reduce the limiting factor that's been challenging your squat depth. Remember, it's not a solution in itself, so don't look for long-term use. If you use heel blocks, do so with the intent that they give you the opportunity to apply a new technique or range (or

both) and then look to retain that technique/range as you reduce the height of the block and then finally remove it altogether. Just don't remove the heel block totally if you haven't mastered what you set out to master. Unfortunately for some, this will be the case.

### 3) Understand the Impact of "What Moves First"

Generally speaking, there are two types of squats based on the "what moves first" analysis: hip-break and knee-break. If your hips move first (even just a little) before you bend your knees, it's called a hip-break squat. If your knees bend first, even if only slightly before the hips, it's a knee-break squat.

A hip-break squat means that you'll increase the stretch and involvement of the hip muscles (hamstring, glutes and lower back) relative to the quads because you'll have more hip flexion. A knee-break squat means you'll increase the stretch on the quads compared to what you have in a hip-break squat. This is because you bend your knees more. Consider this: if you initiate heavily with hip-break, you shorten the upper end of the quad faster than you lengthen the lower end!

Typically, an Olympic lifter will knee-break and a powerlifter will hip-break. Why? Because a knee-break squat allows the trunk to stay vertical and the hip-break squat increases the involvement of the hip muscles, which means you can lift more. Olympic lifters want to lift more, but need to keep their trunks vertical, especially in the case of recovering from the snatch. It's pretty hard to counterbalance a few hundred kilos overhead if you have a forward flexed trunk!

So what does this have to do with you and your depth challenges? I've heard a misconception that goes like this, "You need to keep upright in the squat." This has been confused with the general belief of keeping a flat back. A flat back doesn't mean a vertical trunk! It means a straight line between hip and shoulders, be it when the hip is vertical or when it's flexed forward.

If you inadvertently try to keep your trunk vertical, you'll likely find the end point of your range well before you get adequate depth in the squat. Most people need to have some hip-breaking along the way to avoid hitting this end point in range before the hip is below the knee.

So the first mistake here is to knee-break for the misguided belief that your trunk should be upright in the squat. Don't do this. What I generally recommend is a 50/50 hip-knee break technique, where the hips flex at the same time and same rate as the knees. This means being prepared to flex the hips from the outset of the movement, something that I've seen considerable reluctance in people who end up being depth challenged.

What I ultimately do when I'm troubleshooting someone's squat technique is experiment with the movement initiation (use different ratios of hip-knee break and knee-trunk flexion) until I get the combination that works best for the person, then I encourage him or her to "pattern" on this combination.

The second mistake that invariably results from an unintentional hip-breaker who subsequently struggles for depth is when he hits the end point of range at the ankle or

whatever joint is the limiter, then suddenly and excessively flexes forward at the hip. You need to come up the same way you went down in the squat, and this last description — this delayed and significant hip flexion — isn't something that you'll be able to do in mirror-image reverse during the lift! It'll result in the hips rising faster than the knees and most likely a back injury!

#### 4) Stretch Before Squatting

This brings us to a topic that's been controversial for as long as I can remember but for different reasons. Provided you have faith in my insights into the training process, accept this — you'll get *much* more depth in the squat if you stretch first! And if you don't believe me, experiment. Do a few sets and note the range and smoothness of range. Then stretch for 20 to 30 minutes and then squat again. What was the difference?

When stretching for the squat, focus on all the lower body muscles, but in particular:

- Hip flexors. These are key! This is the fastest way to lengthen the hamstrings! And if you have any impingement to the front of the hips towards the bottom of the squat, this will be magic! For a good hip flexor stretch, see my article [here](#).
- Tibialis anterior, the front of the shin. You'll be amazed at how this can reduce any impingement you may be experiencing to the front of the ankle joint. Kneel on the ground such that your foot is extended, leg under your body, and put some weight on the heel of this leg, forcing the joint further into extension.

Now I don't say the above to encourage you to ignore the rest — just that these muscle groups, specifically for squat depth, are key. Cover all the lower body stretching exercises in this pre-squat stretch. Apply all the keys to stretching as I've outlined in previous articles or in my flexibility video series available at [www.kingsports.net](http://www.kingsports.net).

#### 5) Get Some Massage

Short of hiring a masseur with the skills to perform a pre-training massage, here are a few techniques that you (or your training partner) can do that may result in increased depth:

- Make a fist and run the knuckles down the outside front face of the shin (over the tibialis anterior), from top to bottom, a few times. This may loosen up the ankle and reduce or remove the depth limitations.
- Take your thumb and stick it into your abdomen region under the belt line and just inside the hip. You're looking for the top of the hip flexor. Apply pressure for a few seconds. If you're not sure you're in the right place, go easy. This should help loosen up your hip flexors, thus complimenting the stretch.
- Sit with your knee bent and cup one hand over the knee. Run the thumb down the VMO (the teardrop muscle on the inside and above the knee joint) from top to bottom a few times.

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This could give you freedom in the squat in unexpected ways.

### Conclusion

So there you have it, five ways to get deeper in the squat. Even if it takes you some time to master these techniques, don't give up on them! If you master them, you're guaranteed to reach new heights, or rather, new *lows* in your squatting ability!

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