



The 10 Best Ways to Dramatically Increase Your Squat!

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As I lay awake at 3AM one morning last week, my thoughts drifted away from counting sheep and were redirected to the bench press article I had read the previous day. Math was always a strong point for me in school, so I'm quite sure when I say that it was the 14,897th such article I've read in the past year.

I mean, honestly, people; do we really need another collection of tips on how to increase our bench press? When us avid lifters are at a family reunion, what's the first question our unathletic uncle-in-law twice removed asks us when he finds out about our passion for the heavy iron? "How much can ya' bench?" We know he asks because he really doesn't know any better.

And, the more we learn about training athletes, the more we realize that while a good bench press is certainly a valuable measure of upper body strength, it tells us very little about the complete athlete. Keep in mind that I've benched 400 pounds myself, so it says a lot for me to admit this!



I'll take a guy with a solid vertical jump, broad jump, pro-agility, and 40-time anyway; these tests are much better predictors of performance. And, given that these are all measures of peak power or power endurance, and a lack of maximal strength can have a ceiling effect on power, it should come as no surprise that a big squat (among other lower body strength training exercises) will be a fantastic measure of an athlete's training status and his "trainability."

With that in mind, there's very little in this world that thrills me more than tinkering with an athlete's squatting technique and watching him dominate weights that felt incredibly heavy just seconds earlier. Here are ten great tips for building a big squat in record time – regardless of whether you're free squatting or box squatting, Olympic-style or Powerlifting style:

Tip #1: Sit Back, Not Down.

Your athletes should always initiate a squat by pushing the hips back. A great cue to use with them is "Imagine someone behind you has a rope tied around your waist and is pulling you back." They should immediately realize that this amounts to pushing the butt back while maintaining a neutral spine with the chest up – not rounding over at the lower back.

Sitting back not only keeps the bar between the two axes of motion – the hips and knees – but also keeps the resistance back in a position that puts the true prime movers at a mechanical advantage. You'll never squat huge weights with quadriceps alone; the hip extensors – glutes, hamstrings, and adductor magnus – are the muscles responsible for building big squats.

Tip #2: Brace Hard and Get a Belly Full of Air

We know that the muscles in the lower body are generating all our force, and we know that the bar is positioned on our upper back. That force has to get from the lower body to the bar somehow, doesn't it? If you're weak in your core, you'll never unleash a big squat.

Sucking in the tummy is just asking for trouble. Ask anyone who has squatted big weights, and they'll tell you that the secret is to brace your midsection by activating the surrounding musculature and drawing the air into your belly. If an athlete breathes in and his shoulders rise, he's not breathing for a big squat. A good trick to teach proper breathing technique for squatting is to put a loose belt on your athlete, and then tell him to breath in until they feel their abdomen pushing out against the belt.

Another great way to enhance core stability for squatting is to "rake the obliques." Once the athlete is up under the bar and about to unrack the weight, dig your fingers into their obliques; you'll notice that the entire midsection tightens right up. This activation is based on the concept of tactile facilitation; touch a muscle, and you can enhance recruitment of it. Just be careful with overstepping your bounds with regarding to touching like this; what is okay with a 250-pound high school offensive lineman is not necessarily going to be okay with a 120-pound field hockey player.

Tip #3: Pull the Bar into your Upper Back.

Your athletes will also never transfer force correctly to the bar if it's not solidly positioned on the upper back. Activating the lats and pulling the bar down into the upper back immediately tightens the entire upper body. Also, given the lats' attachment on the thoracolumbar fascia, it increases core stability as well. That bar shouldn't move from the upper back at all.

Tip #4: Pull the Elbows Forward.

This is a great tip for athletes who have a problem with excessive forward lean. Pulling the elbows forward with the hands already fixed on the bar will automatically pop the chest up. With the chest up, the bar will remain between the knees and hips, and the athlete will be far less likely to look down during the lift.

Tip #5: Bring your Hands in.

Bringing the hands in closer to the body will also help with keeping the chest up. The closer our hands are to our body, the more external rotation of the humeri (upper arms) we have. When an athlete externally rotates his upper arms, he "opens the chest up" because scapular retraction (shoulders back) is a synergistic pattern to external rotation.

A lack of external rotation range of motion is one reason why you see so many big guys squatting with an extra wide grip. If your athletes are having a hard time bringing their hands in, chances are that they need to spend more time addressing flexibility of the shoulder girdle. They should at least be able to get settled into a "moderate" grip width.

Tip #6: Grip the Floor!

This quote might be a bit hackneyed by now, but "You can't shoot a cannon from a canoe."

Your base is incredibly important to generating optimal force; if you don't have solid footing, you'll never reach your squatting potential. The best squatters don't just stand on the floor; they push down into it and grip it in the process. Sprinters and ballerinas want to be light on their feet; squatters want to be rock solid. Grip the floor!

This leads us to Tip #7...

Tip #7: Check Your Footwear.

I cannot overstate the importance of appropriate footwear. The best squatting shoes will have you as close to the floor as possible; most successful powerlifters actually squat in Chuck Taylors (Converse All-Stars) or wrestling shoes, as these sneakers keep their feet as close to the floor as possible. Sneakers with exaggerated heel-lifts should be discouraged, as they shift an athlete too far forward and really just offer an “out” for individuals with poor ankle flexibility (lack of dorsiflexion range of motion). Plus, if there is too much cushioning, the force we’re looking to exert into the ground is “muffled.” Most athletes will do fine with a “middle-of-the-road” sneaker.

Tip #8: Don’t be Lazy!

Untrained athletes will typically only generate as much force as they need to produce to make the bar move, so each rep moves at the same speed – regardless of weight. One of the best ways to teach your athletes to move huge weights is to constantly be reminding them to always accelerate the bar throughout the rep. Don’t let them get lazy in the strongest part of the range of motion (this is one reason why accommodating resistances such as bands, chains, and weight-releasers can be valuable).

In the context of the squat, when working with submaximal weights, the bar should want to “jump off” the athletes’ backs as they fire through the sticking point and into the lockout (easiest) portion. Of course, it won’t be jumping, because they’ll be pulling the bar down (Tip #3).

Tip #9: Chalk your Back and Bands.

An athlete should never miss a squat due to having sweaty hands or a sweat-soaked shirt, so it never hurts to put some chalk on these areas. As long as you’re careful, you can be very neat with chalk in facilities that don’t look fondly upon its use. Invisible “liquid” chalk is also available.

Tip #10: Create a Shelf for the Bar

Young athletes will often complain that the bar feels uncomfortable on their back. The first step to fix this is to make sure that the bar is, in fact, on the upper back and NOT the neck. Cue them to pinch the shoulder blades together; when the trapezius complex and rhomboids “bunch up,” there isn’t any place for the muscle mass to go but “out.” This automatically creates a nice shelf upon which to place the bar. The more muscle mass the athletes add in the area, the better the shelf.

This is also a good place to mention that I am completely against the idea of using bar pads with any of my athletes. They shift the resistance too far forward, and invariably wind up turning squats into good mornings with untrained lifters. Besides, they’re really just a quick fix; the athlete won’t ever learn how to squat correctly without the pad if he is always squatting with the pad. Sometimes, you just need to throw someone into the fire.

Incorporate some of these pointers to your coaching, and you’ll have some happy athletes in the weight room next time you squat. If you’re anything like me, you’ll love it as much as they do!

About the Author

Eric Cressey, M.A., C.S.C.S., has helped athletes of all levels achieve their highest levels of performance. An accomplished competitive powerlifter, Cressey trains his clients at the newly opened Excel Sport and Fitness Training (www.ExcelStrength.com) in Waltham, Massachusetts. Feel free to contact him and sign up for his free newsletter at www.EricCressey.com.