

The Zercher Experiment

By Steve Belanger RKC

In this article I'm going to explain how one can maintain their strength in the deadlift and even increase it with minimal deadlifting using the Zercher lift.

First of all what is the zercher lift? The original way to do the lift was created by a man named Ed Zercher Sr. back in the 30's. He did these by deadlifting to an upright position. Then squatting down to parallel with the bar balanced on his mid thighs he then hooked his arms up to the elbows under the barbell. From there standing to an upright position while the bar still cradled in the crooks of his elbows. Then the lift is reversed in the same manner back to the floor to the thighs and back up for the desired number of reps and then set back down to the floor. It is said he started doing these because his basement gym lacked squat stands. These days most everyone just does the top part of the lift taking the bar off hooks in a power rack squatting down and back up. I call this style zercher squats. The next style is off different pin heights in a power rack to a standing position then back down. I call this style Zercher lifts. I will be talking about the "the off the pins" version since it is closer to the deadlift and could be called the dead Zercher.

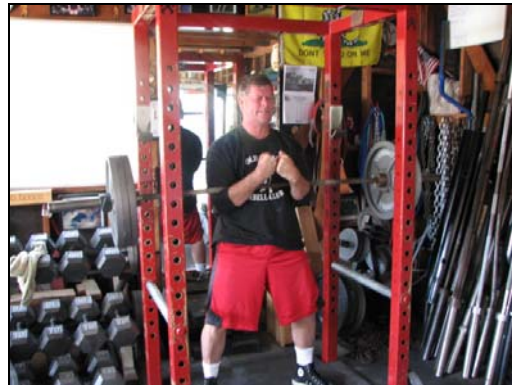
I will now give you a little back ground to how I ended up using this lift in my workouts. About five years ago while working out in my martial arts class I was thrown to the floor landing directly on my elbow breaking it. Not knowing at the time it was broken I did the usual ice and Advil therapy. The elbow eventually felt better but my arm healed in a permanent at a 30 degree angle because it hurt to extend it out when it was healing I kept in a bent position most of the time. After it healed I was able to do most of the average things I could do before the break even with my slightly bent arm.

Enter the deadlift. When I got back to deadlifting, I noticed pain in the elbow forearm area of the previously broken elbow when getting into lifts at 400+lbs. At first it wasn't too bad but over a period of time the pain became more intense to the point I could not even pull a 400lb deadlift. I easily had the strength to do it but had to set the bar down after only lifting one foot off the floor because of the severe pain. Not being even able to pull 80% off my DL max this lift was taking a nose dive fast. A little depressing since the deadlift is my favorite of the three powerlifts. Speaking one day with Pavel about my dilemma he made a suggestion I give Zercher lifts a try. An idea he picked up from Bud Jeffries. I felt the deadlift volume I was doing was probably irritating scar tissue or tendons or both and the Zercher lift seemed like a logical choice to cut down on my DL volume, give my elbow a break and keep my deadlifting muscles strong. So begins the Zercher experiment. Pavel recommended twice a week with one day being a heavy day and one day a light day and minimal deadlifting to be done on both days. I do my Zerchers as I described above, in a power rack off pins.

I feel doing them this way somewhat simulates the deadlift better as there is not a stretch reflex as in the squat variety Zercher and posterior chain muscle groups are hit hard. On my heavy day I set the pins so the bar is about 4-5 inches above my knees. On light days the pin level is set so the bar is set at the lower part of the knee. There is roughly a six inch difference between the high and low pins. Deadlifts are done after a few warm up sets of Zerchers for no more than five singles and as few as three singles with a weight of 50% to 70% of a max single DL in my case, basically to keep in touch with my technique. After that it's back to the meat of the workout on the Zerchers. Here I work up in percentages from 70% to 100 % of my best single Zercher with reps ranging from 1 to 5 with 3's being the most commonly used. I also established PR's on the 1, 3, and 5 reps at both the high and low pins for variety and to keep me motivated. I use six week cycles .That would be six workouts on the heavy day/high pins and six workouts on the light day/lower pins, twelve workouts total for the cycle. I follow a percentage format using Prilipins table as guide line for sets and reps. After six weeks I change the pin height either up or down one hole in the rack to slightly change the stimulus. I also establish PR's at these levels. Lately I have been using even more variety with the Zerchers attaching kettlebells on bands to the bar which hits the obliques and intercostals hard due to the unstableness of the bar or putting a jump stretch band around my neck and standing on the other end and standing up with it while cradling the in my arms which really hits the lumbar's and glutes .As you can see I like to keep it interesting which helps keep me from getting stale on the lift.

Let's talk about performing the Zercher lift. First I would recommend not using a belt to get the full benefit of the lift. Most of the same rules that apply to the deadlift that apply to the Zercher: Flat back, pinching the glutes, intra-abdominal pressure, head looking forward and driving the hips through, the whole time staying tight throughout the lift.

As the bar rests on the pins hook your arms under in the crooks of the elbows. A wide stance with arms between the legs or a narrow stance with arms outside the legs are both ok to do. It's up to you to see which style works best for you. Mixing them from cycle to cycle is also ok .Get that belly full of air and glutes tight and proceed to a straight standing position while trying to hug the bar close to the body. Then simply reverse the movement bending at the hips first and back down to the pins with a flat straight back. Release the bar, set up again, and repeat for the desired number of reps.



A couple of things to be aware of if you have never done Zerchers there will probably be some pain in the crooks of the elbow and forearms. I myself use neoprene elbow sleeves or a long sleeve sweat shirt to take the sting off. Forget about wrapping a towel or using foam around the bar because you won't have a good secure placement with the bar on your arms. You'll need to be secure throughout the lift. Some like to use a thick on these and feel they help ease the pain. You will eventually get use to it but it may take a few weeks.

Do they work?

Well for me in March of this year I couldn't even pull 405lbs because of the severe pain. By the time the Venice push/pull meet came around in June and a few weeks of some heavier DL singles I pulled a 451 DL with a little to spare with minimal pain. So in my case they did work. And as I speak I am working on getting back to a 500 lb pull with the Zercher lift as important part of the journey to get me there. If you want take a break from deadlifting or just want to try something different that will keep you strong give this classic old forgotten lift a try you won't be sorry you did.



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