

A weightlifting expert discusses the controversy surrounding this popular exercise



Bruce Klemens photo

Romanian weightlifter Nicu Vlad inspired many US coaches and weightlifters to perform a unique back exercise that has since been named *the Romanian deadlift*. Since Vlad was apparently the only lifter from his country performing it, perhaps it should have been called, *a Romanian's deadlift*?

The Case Against the *Romanian Deadlift*

BY KIM GOSS

One of the most important variables in designing strength and conditioning workouts for athletes is exercise selection. There are barbell exercises, dumbbell exercises, medicine ball exercises, plyometric jumping exercises and...well, you get the idea. But despite the complexity of proper exercise selection, often our choices are based not so much upon anatomy and

biomechanics as upon emotion. Such is the case with Romanian deadlifts.

At BFS we've tried to keep the matter of exercise selection simple. We describe "core" exercises, such as squats, that are used year-round to develop strength. And then we have "auxiliary" exercises, such as glute-ham raises, that are used at specific times during the year depending upon what sport an athlete

is participating in. These auxiliary lifts train specific movements in sports or are done as prehab exercises to work frequently injured muscles. Under the BFS system, a Romanian deadlift would be classified as an auxiliary exercise. But the question is not so much "What category does this unique exercise belong to?" as it is "Does performing it do more harm than good?"



FIGURE 1. The Romanian deadlift is a partial deadlift performed from the top down, with the knees slightly bent.

Dawn of the Romanian Deadlift

The Romanian deadlift became a popular exercise in the US because it was seen being used by Nicu Vlad, a Romanian weightlifter who won the Olympics in 1984 and broke numerous world records. During a clinic held in San Francisco at the Sports Palace Gym in 1990, Vlad was seen performing the exercise. When someone asked him what the exercise was called, he and his coach, Dragomir Cioroslan, didn't have an answer – it was simply an auxiliary exercise he used to strengthen his lower back. Sports Palace owner Jim Schmitz said that Vlad and Cioroslan put their heads together and decided, right then and there, they would call it the “Romanian deadlift.”

The Romanian deadlift is a partial deadlift, performed from the top down, with the knees relatively straight (Figure 1). Proponents believe it emphasizes the

development of the lower back muscles used in core lifts such as the squat and power clean. The emotional appeal is that it is a unique, special exercise from an Eastern Bloc country that will no doubt give athletes an edge. But will it?

To determine the value of the Romanian deadlift, I decided to interview Bud Charniga, a former top US lifter who snatched 352 pounds in 1976, which was only five pounds off

and someone who has visited the training halls of European weightlifters on many occasions. Since this exercise is supposedly a popular exercise among elite weightlifters from Romania and other Eastern Bloc countries, Charniga would have the inside scoop on its use and value.

Whether or not the Romanians were the first to use the exercise is a matter of debate, says Charniga, but

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— Bud Charniga

the American record. Charniga is one of the foremost experts on the training methods of Eastern European weightlifters, having translated from Russian many Russian weightlifting textbooks,

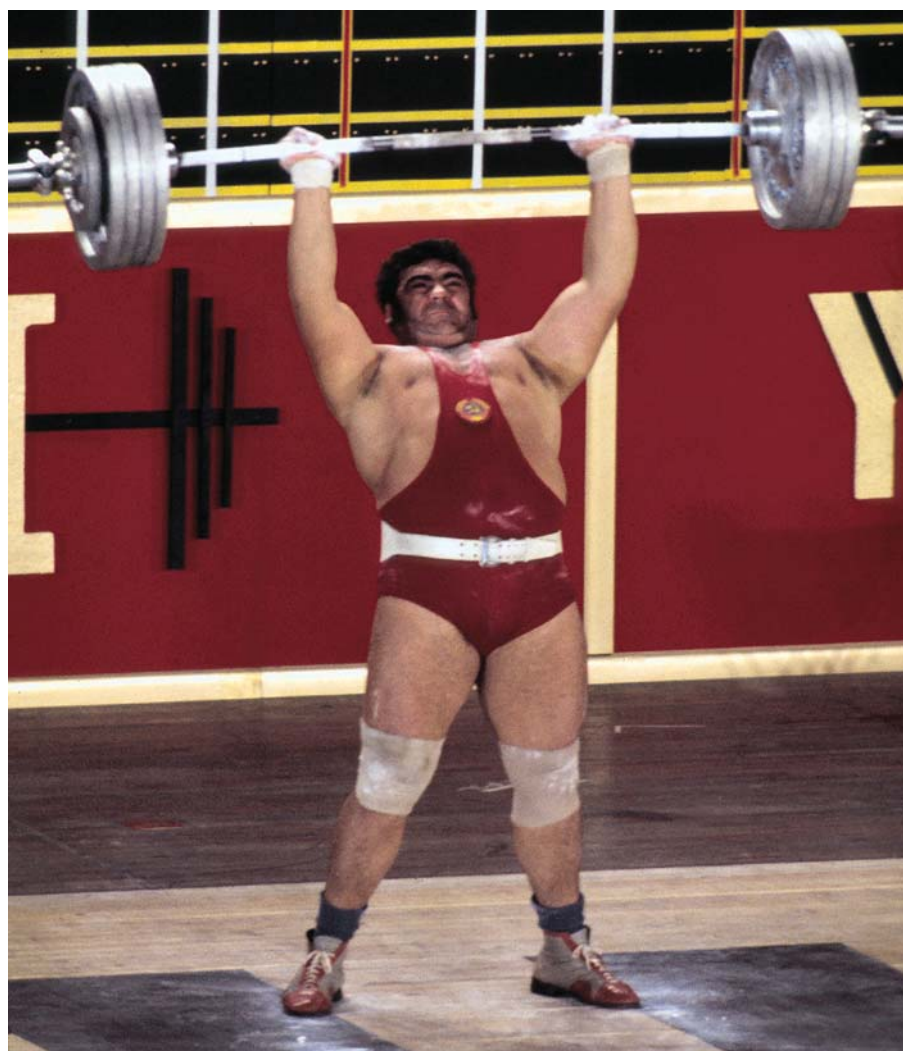
most lifting coaches see the value of performing extra lower back work. Charniga says that this was especially true after the Olympic press was eliminated from competition in 1972. He even cites an article in a Russian weightlifting yearbook that suggested that with the press gone, special supplemental

exercises might be necessary to strengthen the lower back. Further, Charniga says that just because one athlete uses this exercise, such as Nicu Vlad, doesn't necessarily mean that others do.

For example, about 20 years ago powerlifting great Fred Hatfield wrote about the famous “Russian Squat Program,” which he learned about when he visited Russia. According to Charniga, however, this was a squatting program one coach at one weightlifting club used for several of his athletes who had problems arising from the squat position, not a program endorsed by all Russian weightlifting teams. The same may be true of the Bulgarian split squat, heavily promoted by Bulgarian coach Angel Spassov when he first came to the US about 20 years ago to do seminars. “The exercise has become a part of current exercise culture. I’ve been to Bulgaria four times, and I’ve never seen any Bulgarian do any such exercise,” says Charniga. “But the issue is not whether or not a Bulgarian lifting team did it; it’s that nobody seems to take the time to figure out if this exercise has any value – they just do it.”

Just how popular is the Romanian deadlift among elite weightlifters from other countries? Apparently, it’s not. “I’ve been to many world and European championships, and I rarely see anybody doing anything that resembles a Romanian deadlift.” Further, Charniga says that a more common weakness in lifters is not the top pull, but the initial pull off the floor. As such, he says a more appropriate deadlift exercise for a weightlifter would be a snatch or clean-grip deadlift from the floor to the knee. “And rather than performing deadlifts, Vasily Alexeyev was known to occasionally perform snatches and cleans with smaller-diameter plates to improve his initial pull.”

Charniga believes that one of the problems with American strength coaches, especially those who work with football players, is that they often try to take the easy way out and just copy what the best athletes are doing. One example



Bruce Memens photo

When the Olympic press was eliminated from competition in 1972, the Russians believed that additional exercises for the lower back would be necessary. As shown in this photo of Russian Vasily Alexeyev, who eventually pressed 521 pounds, the press put tremendous stress on the back.

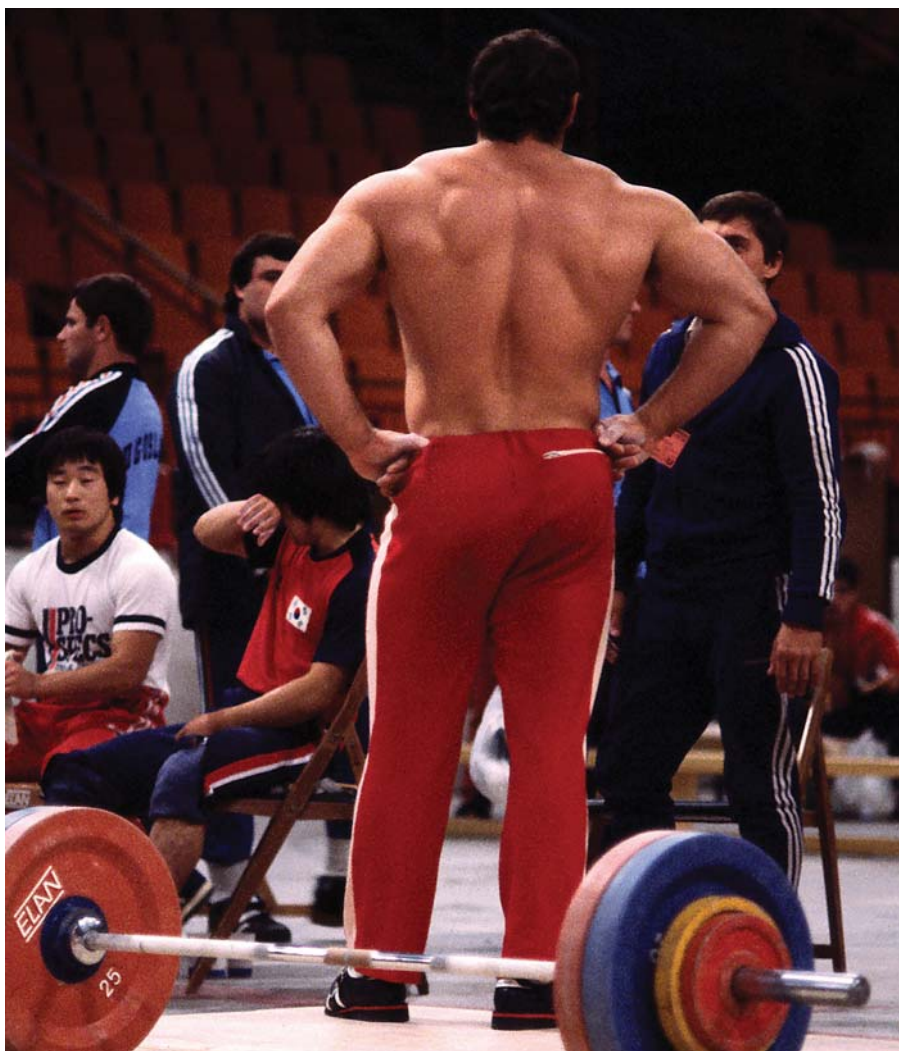
is the recent success of the Chinese lifters, who often perform a great variety of exercises, including several types of pulls. “Our coaches don’t take the time to ask, ‘Are the Chinese weightlifters doing so well *because* they perform so many exercises or *in spite of the fact* they perform so many exercises?’”

To press his point, Charniga says that back in the ’60s the Russians analyzed several common assistance exercises used by Olympic lifters and found that many of them had no carryover to the full Olympic lifting movements, but lifters did them anyway, especially in the US. “You also have to consider that

China has a lot of athletes participating in Olympic lifting – their national training center has 65 platforms! – and that is a lot of competition. It’s not like in the US, where a distance race may have 20,000 contestants but 19,900 are recreational runners – all the athletes who are training in the Chinese training centers take their lifting seriously and are striving to reach the highest levels.”

But Does It Work?

From a biomechanical standpoint, Charniga says that the major issue he has with the Romanian deadlift, especially when performed with heavy weights, is



Bruce Kemens photo

fraction of a second that your hip extensors are on their own during a pull,” says Charniga. “In other words, when you reach a point when you lift a weight to above knee level in the snatch or the clean, there’s an instant where your legs are almost straight and your back is pretty much on its own. At this point your knees automatically shift forward so that your legs and your trunk together can straighten your body. In a Romanian deadlift, you’re doing something where you’re moving your trunk in isolation – your legs stay still – and as a result it has a negative transfer to the pull. In weightlifting you’re trying to use your legs throughout the whole movement, rather than passively using your legs as is done during a Romanian deadlift. This exercise has nowhere near the coordination structure of a snatch or clean, and as such I would strongly discourage any lifter from performing it.”

Bud Charniga, along with the coaching leaders at BFS, believes that, as with many exercises, the Romanian deadlift has developed a mystique in the US but that its potential value has been blown way out of proportion. Charniga advises, “Perhaps exercises such as the Romanian deadlift become popular because a top athlete was seen performing it, or it was pitched at a seminar – I don’t know. But the main thing I want to get across is that with any exercise or training method, you have to sit down and ask, ‘Just how valuable is this exercise to my sport?’ BFS

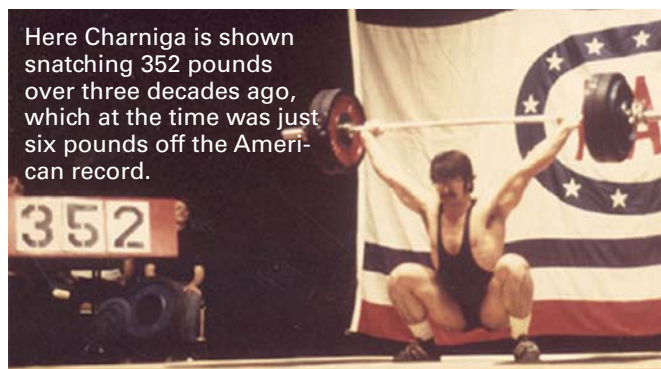
As evidenced by the tremendous physique of Russian Anatoly Pisarenko, who could clean 600 pounds at a bodyweight of 286, the Olympic lifts are great exercises for developing the lower back.

that it encourages excessive use of the lower back. “First, it teaches you to move your trunk in isolation to your legs – to use your back too much.” Charniga says this is also a problem with performing exercises such as power cleans from the hang, an exercise that he discourages any athlete from performing.

Regarding the Romanian deadlift as a hamstring strengthening exercise, Charniga points out that three of the four heads of the hamstring are two-joint muscles that are involved in hip extension and force transfer from the hip to the floor. “I don’t know if you really need to develop these muscles

in this almost static fashion with the knees slightly bent as is performed in a Romanian deadlift. A better exercise would be a straight-leg deadlift, but certainly not with heavy weights.”

Along with the issue of overtraining the lower back, Charniga says there is also the issue of sport specificity. “The Romanian deadlift is trying to simulate Olympic lifting, but the fact is it’s only a



Here Charniga is shown snatching 352 pounds over three decades ago, which at the time was just six pounds off the American record.