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Full Squats – Pro and Con

Recently, there has been a tremendous amount of controversy on the subject of full squats. According to some people, the practice of full squats is an almost certain road to destruction of the knee tendons – and according to others, full squats are the best single exercise in existence. So, just what is the truth of the matter?

Well, to begin with, just what is a full squat? In power-lifting circles, squatting is limited to a point where the tops of the thighs are parallel with the floor – but to a man with heavy legs, that is a full squat; in fact, many of the heavier power-lifters have difficulty going that low – the backs of their thighs are solidly compressed against the backs of their calves long before they reach a parallel position. And that is exactly why parallel squats are included as one of the three basic power-lifts – instead of full squats. Otherwise, there would have been endless controversy between the lighter men and the heavier men about how low a squat was supposed to be.

Competitive lifting is a dangerous sport – and this is true of both Olympic-style lifting and power lifting, but for different reasons; in practicing the fast lifts, in Olympic lifting, the suddenness of movement is probably the most dangerous factor – such sudden movements, under heavy loads, impose tremendous G forces on both the muscles and tendons. In performing a clean and jerk with 400 pounds, a man may momentarily expose his muscles and tendons to a force that is actually ten times as heavy as the weight being employed; and such forces sometimes tear out tendons or seriously injure muscles.

In performing power lifts, the danger comes from another source – from prolonged exposure to a force that may be more than the skeleton is capable of supporting, regardless of the strength of the muscles involved. At the moment of this writing, at least a few individuals are squatting with over 800 pounds – and since most of these men weigh at least 300 pounds, this means that they are actually supporting over 1,100 pounds on their feet, and most of that amount on their spines. In the author's opinion, the human skeleton simply was not designed to support such loads for prolonged periods of time; for any purpose except power lifting competition, all of the benefits that can be provided by squats can be derived without using more than 400 pounds, and in most cases without using more than 300 pounds.

There is no slightest question about the effectiveness of squats; they are certainly one of the most result producing exercises in existence – and, until quite recently, they were the most result producing single exercise in existence. But it is not necessary to do heavy, single attempt squats in order to derive benefit from them; on the contrary, the most result producing version of squats is the practice of sets of from fifteen to twenty repetitions – with the occasional practice of slightly heavier squats on the 10/8/6 system. In that system, you perform three sets of squats in each workout – selecting a weight that will barely permit ten repetitions in the first set, and then increasing the weight approximately ten percent and trying for eight repetitions in the second set, and then increasing it another ten percent and trying for six repetitions in the final set.

If two sets – or a maximum of three sets – of squats are practiced two times weekly, and if a weight is used that will barely permit the performance of between fifteen and twenty repetitions, then this work will stimulate enormous overall growth, while increasing endurance, improving condition, and building great strength in both the legs and lower back as well as building a lesser degree of strength throughout the body from the previously mentioned "indirect effort."

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Then, during the third weekly workout, if the 10/8/6 system of squatting is used, this will build almost the ultimate degree of overall bodily strength that can come from squatting – and without the danger of extremely heavy squatting.

Insofar as the "depth of squatting" is concerned, squats should be carried to the point where the backs of the thighs first start to contact the backs of the calves, and at that point the squat should be stopped by muscular action – instead of by bouncing the thighs off of the calves. Performed in that manner – the correct manner indicated here – there is no slightest danger from the performance of squats; not to the knees, at least – and very little danger of any kind if common sense precautions are observed. On the contrary, squats will do more to prevent knee injuries than any other exercise – or any other combination of exercises.

The greatest single disadvantage that squats have is the fact that they are brutally hard if they are practiced in a manner intended to give much in the way of results; and many weight trainees are simply not willing to work as hard as squats force them to. Such people – who exist in their thousands – have been quick to spread the rumors about the supposed danger to the knees from squats; because, then, they have an excuse for not performing them.

Joints are not damaged by normal movements – on the contrary, such movements are required to maintain the normal functioning of joints; held in one position for a period of several days, a joint becomes literally incapable of movement – held in one position a few months, a joint may well become permanently incapable of movement.

And while squatting – as a form of sitting – is much out of style in most parts of this country at the moment, it still remains, world-wide, by far the most common means of sitting; such figures are literally impossible to come by with any degree of accuracy, but if accurate figures were available, I would be more than willing to bet that knee injuries are far more common in this country – where squatting is almost never practiced – than they are in areas where squatting is still done as a routine matter of course.

So – by all means – include squats in your training program, and carry them to the lowest safe position, whatever that may be in any particular case; do them smoothly, under full control at all times, and stop at the bottom by muscular action – that is all that is required, and exactly the same rules apply to every other exercise you can think of.

If you still remain unconvinced, then ask yourself just why I am so anxious to convince you of the value of squats; after all, it makes no slightest difference to me whether you do squats or not – or "how" you do them, if you do them. Squats are not something that I can sell you, nor did I invent them – they are simply a very good form of exercise that cannot be duplicated insofar as benefits are concerned by any other single exercise.

Do them, or don't do them – but if you don't, then you probably will suffer from knee injuries, especially if you play football.