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The lifting of Scottish Stones is of keen interest to many strength athletes across the world.

Some lifters satisfy themselves with lifting atlas stones. Others progress to natural stones in their local area. The truly insane get on a plane, then in to a car, and ultimately find themselves in a muddy field in the Highlands of Scotland with an audience of bored sheep and a lump of granite between their legs.

Often that disobedient lump of rock defies their grasp. Apparently it is unaware that they have impressive barbell numbers. It clearly does not know that they are in 'beast mode' and planned to 'rip it', 'smash it' and 'dominate it'.

The stones don't care. The sheep don't care.

It's a disappointment that can be avoided with careful preparation. Therefore, this article will focus mainly on the 'round/oval' stones in Scotland and how to

train for them. Let us start by take a look at some of the hand positions in successful stones lifts.

Dalwhinnie

At first blush, the Dalwhinnie stone appears to be very similar to lifting an Atlas stone. However notice that the contact points on the forearms are much lower than on an atlas stone. Also notice the very open position of the hand which requires a significant amount of wrist strength to maintain.



Newtonmore

The Newtonmore stone is entirely different from lifting an Atlas stone. Pay attention to the asymmetrical hand positioning required for the irregular shaped stone. the right hand is virtually 'flat palm' and the left hand is 'finger tip' on what passes for a ledge on a Scottish stone.



Wallace Putting Stone

At this point the pattern should be becoming obvious. The right hand is flat and open, while the left hand takes the weight in the crook of the wrist while curling the fingers for extra purchase.



Auchernack

There are some similarities with an Atlas stone lift here. The left hand has very little forearm contact with the stone. Conversely, the right forearm is used to take most of the weight. Again, the right hand is largely open with flat fingers.



The video compilation below was created to show the parts of the lifts normally omitted from people's videos. Look how much trial, time and effort is required to find a good grip on a smooth stone.

How To Train For Such Lifts

Many a strongman has come undone by assuming atlas stones are the same as the stones he will face in Scotland or elsewhere. As you can see from the pictures/video above the pickup is entirely different. The contact points on the forearm are smaller in size and do not allow a lot of sideways squeezing pressure that is essential to picking up a McGlashen stone.

Training for stone lifting must be multifaceted. Simply working on improving your overall strength in a gym will not suffice, however, it must also not be ignored. A compromise must be reached between developing the necessary base of strength required to lift the kinds of weight demanded by the unwieldy beasts, and the requisite skill set and 'implement' practice needed.

Developing the necessary base of strength should start with the basic compound movements that any strength athlete is familiar with. Squats, Deadlifts, heavy rows, and for the sake of overall strength development, overhead pressing & bench press work.

Impressive back and hip strength is the primary requirement. In fact, the entire posterior chain should be a huge focus. This is where squatting and deadlifting in their various forms are important. Squats, front squats, SSB squats, Deadlifts, Trap bar deadlifts and stiff-leg deadlifting are weapons of choice.

Heavy dumbbell rowing would be number one for upper back assistance development, followed by barbell rowing, and seated rowing among others.

Specific arm training I personally don't consider especially important. I do believe direct grip work can help however, as can some direct abdominal work. Grip training will be addressed later on in this article.

Specific implement training for natural stones can be difficult to achieve as each and every stone in the wilds is completely unique and as indicated

above, presents its own individual set of challenges.

Exposing oneself to as many different stones in training as possible is a great start. It will help an athlete understand the great variance to be encountered on natural stones and stones in general, including atlas stones.

Similar set/rep schemes as barbell training can be applied to stone training without over complicating things. Access to stones can be an athletes biggest limiting factor, though lifting with any stone is better than none at all.

Looking at sets of between 5-10 reps with moderate weight stones and lower 2-3 rep sets for heavier stones is a good guide. Loading onto platforms of varying heights, shouldering or simply triple extending with the stone are all perfectly acceptable methods.

Stone training should be restricted to at most twice per week if other events and regular training in the gym are also being performed. More than this will become too taxing on tendons and injury will surely follow. Personally I would never train stones more frequently than once per week.

Natural Stones and certainly any stones of renown, will be lifted with the assistance of chalk only. Due to the nature of the majority of natural stones, the use of tacky is frivolous anyway and will likely be more of a hindrance than a help. Woe betide any person who attempts to touch a traditional Scottish lifting stone with tacky.

Training should reflect this, predominantly training only with chalk. Tacky may be used for overload on heavy atlas stones and also to give tendons a break during extended stone training periods, but should not become the focus.

There are multiple ways to lift stones and each style of lift should be trained if desired to be attempted in the wild. Examples may include shouldering, extending, overhead pressing, bear hugging, loading and even walking with the stones.

Below is a compilation video of natural stones being lifted. It demonstrates a great variety of surface conditions, stone shape and size, and lifting methods.

Although none of these are Scottish lifting stones, the principle is the same. Lifting stones as mother nature made them, where mother nature placed them, with little or no assistance save for your own strength.

The next video is of a natural stone lifting run in competition at the Southern Highlander contest in Victoria. The variation in size, weight and shape of the natural stones is again apparent, as is the variation of grips and lifting techniques required to lift them.

Lower Arm Strength

Specific grip training is often neglected by strongmen as the events themselves tend to work the grip quite well anyway. However, additional grip specific work can be very beneficial, as strong hands and wrists are very much a requisite when lifting stones of any description.

Strongman events like farmers walking and frame carries are designed as the ultimate grip tests in the strongman world. Besides being an actual event, they are also excellent exercises for strengthening and conditioning the grip in general.

Double overhand axle deadlifting is another great grip exercise. In fact double overhand deadlifts even on a regular bar are important for developing a world class grip. Early sets in a deadlift workout should be completed double overhand until it is necessary (due to grip fatigue) to swap to an alternating grip. Ignoring this opportunity for an incidental grip workout during a posterior chain workout is just silly.

Lifting atlas stones is another strongman specific exercise that along with improving overall stone lifting ability very directly improves arm and wrist strength immensely.

These must be your grip bread and butter and quite obviously, these movements are very important for developing strength as a strength athlete or stone lifter overall.

There are many grip specific exercises that few people outside the grip world would ever attempt, but that can be beneficial to the budding stone lifter too for a little additional development.

Grippers in the fashion of CoC style are great for developing crushing strength which helps develop finger tendon strength. Plate pinches, inch dumbbell lifting or thick handled dumbbell lifts, upside down kettlebell lifts or blob lifts can all be used to great effect for developing overall hand strength and durability.

On-The-Day Considerations

On the day of the stone lifting attempt conditions may vary wildly. Mother nature may have decided that you will be lifting in the rain, snow, wind, or direct sweltering sunshine. Each condition presents its own challenge and may indeed make the stone lift infinitely more difficult.

First consideration once you have arrived at the location and found the stone itself, is the ability to have a sufficient warm-up before attempting the lift, to avoid injury and making this attempt your last. The problem is that in the remote paddock, hilltop or glen you've found yourself, nobody thought to provide you with a beautiful set of shiny barbells and machines at the location to do an extensive and complete warm up. How inconsiderate.

The reality is you are not getting an extensive warm up in before lifting this monster. All you can do is the best you can with limited resources. Powerbands (a big rubber band), familiar to powerlifters in particular, are a very practical and easily transported tool that may be used for an acceptable warmup.

Your next best bet is locating some smaller stones in the vicinity to have a few goes at to provide a stepping stone to the big daddy. Ultimately you must trust that you have prepared correctly and sufficiently in training.

Natural Stones being just that, natural, generally aren't located in the most convenient of locations. Some traditional Scottish lifting stones have been relocated, due to helpful human intervention, to much more accessible positions. These stones generally sit on flat unremarkable ground, making the lift as comfortable as possible, all things considered.

Many stones however, still reside in their original positions in the wilderness. This brings with it wilderness style challenges. Uneven ground, long grass, soft boggy earth, sloping treacherous hillsides, rocky unstable ground, soft sand, the list goes on. Add to this the unpredictable weather conditions mentioned earlier and you may have a very trying time indeed.

There isn't much you can do to negate these external factors. You must learn to embrace them and realise that this is stone lifting at it most pure and how it was meant to be done all along. Much pride may be derived from triumphing over the force of nature and the seemingly immovable object, not to mention the extensive historic qualities of the Scottish stones.

Wet stones are to be expected. There isn't much you can do the control this. Taking a towel along to give any wet stones a quick once over may help. Using some lifting chalk on your hands and arms will also help. Beyond that just hope that your strength and technique are up to scratch.

Conclusion

Hopefully, this article has whet your appetite for natural stone lifting and some of the unique challenges you have to embrace to be successful at it.

Each stone is unique as are the conditions under which you lift it. It is man-versus-stone rather than man-versus-man. With Mother nature always present and ever changing.

We hope this appeals to you as much as it does to us.

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