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Way Down in the Hole

Donny Shankle takes you on a guided tour of the darkest place in weightlifting and explains how to get out.

By Donny Shankle

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Coming out of a clean quickly is a trained action. You can squat all you want to get stronger, but if you are not refining your skill at the clean, then your strong legs are not being put to use.

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When viewing a weightlifter in the bottom of a clean, you should be able to draw a line that puts the bar directly over the shoulders, hips and heels. The back must be held vertical in order for this to happen, and keeping a straight back is the weightlifter's golden rule. Once you receive the bar with a vertical back, you must stand up immediately and not waste any time. Training yourself to stand up with your cleans at once is something you patiently learn with each repetition. A great weightlifter is not just strong but also efficient with the strength he has. An efficient weightlifter does not waste any time.

There are two trained skills behind the clean that you will find useful. The first is learning to feel oscillation or bar whip, and the second is timing the stretch reflex in your legs in conjunction with the bar whip. These two actions together will actually pull you out of your cleans, and combined with strong legs they will set you up with plenty enough energy for the jerk. The moment you approach the bar, think to yourself, "Easy clean, easy jerk." Many weightlifters will put in countless hours practicing their jerk when all

along it's the clean holding them back. If you are going to dip straight on the jerk, you need to stand straight with the clean, and, if you are going to have the energy necessary to jerk quickly, your legs can't be thrashed from standing up through a grueling clean.

Bar whip is one of the last important skills a weightlifter learns because you need to be very strong to feel it, and you use it to push yourself toward new personal records. Initially, daily practice will bring you progress. Then as you get stronger, you take your progress even further with the efficiency you have developed. Later on, your style begins to shine through as your confidence builds, and this brings you more gains. Repeated competition teaches you things you can't learn in training, and this, too, pushes you toward even more personal records.

Finally, great weightlifters begin to match the skills they have learned perfectly with the strength they have, and this can be combined with a champion's mind to push their progress even further.



Cheryl Boatman / CrossFit Journal

A smooth clean will make the jerk infinitely easier. Struggle mightily with the clean, and you can usually expect an even greater fight with the jerk.



Cheryl Boatman / CrossFit Journal

Driving the bar overhead requires a great deal of leg strength, and you can conserve that strength by taking advantage of bar whip and your muscles' stretch reflex in the clean.

Rising From the Dark Place

Timing bar whip is one of those final skills learned by the weightlifter to push him to loftier heights in training. A teammate of mine once said to me, "Weightlifting is easy so long as you have strong legs and you know how to oscillate the bar." He was right, and I would only add that keeping your back straight makes it even easier.

If you happen to watch training videos of great weightlifters in action, you might notice some of them load the bar with the lightest plates first, with the heavier plates towards the end of the bar. For example, instead of loading a 160-kilo bar in the order of red, blue, yellow and green on each side, he may load it with the yellows on first and the reds at the end. By loading the bar in training opposite of how it is loaded in competition and putting the heavier plates toward the end, you increase the whip of the bar. Obviously, this does not make a 160-kilo bar feel heavier or lighter, but it does make it whip more.



Courtesy of Donny Shankle

Note the bend in the bar as the author receives the weight. Working with the oscillation of the bar makes standing up much easier.

You can also increase bar oscillation by loading 2.5-kilo collars first with your weight on top of them. This “lengthens the bar” so it whips more. By training the oscillation with a lighter weight or by putting collars on first, the weightlifter prepares himself to feel the bar whip of a heavier load, and if you learn to stand with the whip of the bar at the reception of your clean, you are actually pulled up out of the hole. You then use this same oscillation to help you jerk the bar.

Therefore, the clean and jerk, in my opinion, is more difficult to master than the snatch because it is made up of two lifts, each of which uses oscillation once the weight becomes really heavy.

The stretch reflex in your legs is the muscles lengthening and returning back to their original state. When you hit the bottom position of a deep clean with a heavy weight, the muscles in your legs are stretched, and this gives you just enough push back to normal out of the bottom of your clean so long as you keep your back vertical and the bar in line with your heels.

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the doggedness of a soldier
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lover alive.**

This is just one of the reasons why it is vitally important you make your back as strong as possible. If the back rounds at the bottom of your clean and you let the bar crash on you, the stretch reflex is lost, as well as the timing of the bar whip. With enough practice over time, your body will get stronger and you will learn how to use the stretch reflex and bar whip together to pull off some beautiful heavy cleans.

Aside from spending time in the squat rack making your legs stronger, there is one more thing I need to talk about if you plan on improving your cleans. You need to yank hard at the finish of your pull. The finish of the pull is when you are completely extended with your hips through and the bar has reached its maximum height. The harder you finish, the faster you will change direction, and this speed



Michael Brian / CrossFit Journal

A perfectly upright torso allows you to use the stretch reflex in your legs at the bottom of a clean.



Agust Sigurjonsson / CrossFit Journal

Technique aside, vicious aggression and unbreakable confidence are key to lifting big weight.

will enable you to move under the bar confidently with a vertical back.

A weak finish will not move you fast enough under the bar to catch the bar whip in time. By finishing violently, you permit yourself the chance to time the whip of the bar and the stretch reflex in your legs to stand immediately. Still, speed is also a conscious effort on the part of the lifter to not waste any time. Stand up with your cleans with the doggedness of a soldier fighting to return home to his lover alive. If you can apply these three principles together at the same time in a split second during your clean, then your cleans will be much easier.

All that's left once you can do this is for you to spend hours in the squat rack.

Iron Obsession

Squats are an obsession for the great weightlifter. If you plan on pursuing this sport for many years to find out how great you can really be, then be prepared to live in the squat rack. The squat rack must be your temple where you create the long-term vision you have of yourself as a strength athlete.



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

After mastering the back squat, the front squat will be your next obsession.



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

The squat rack: home to every great weightlifter.

The center of your gravity is where all of your strongest muscles reside, so it only makes sense to train this area of your body diligently. The swimmer trains the lungs like the weightlifter trains the hips, the boxer beats his fists like the weightlifter beats his hips against the bar, and the archer's vision is determined and sharp like the weightlifter's attitude.

Squats in your training must become such a fixation initially that the exercise consumes you. The pyramid to getting stronger may look simple on its surface, but underneath this pyramid lies sweat, soreness and stubbornness on your part. The reason you squat so much as a weightlifter is because the nervous system takes a huge beating while snatching, cleaning and jerking. The squat is not as hard on the nervous system and allows you to keep pushing the muscles to maximum, making them stronger for when you have rested. Also, the squat teaches you about stretch reflex and bar whip on top of making your legs stronger.

All great weightlifters master the back squat first to make their bodies strong and give themselves an introduction to three elementary "musts" that need to be applied for the snatch and clean: the bar must be kept over the heels, the back must be kept straight, and the hips must be trained to move confidently below the knees. After learning the back squat, the weightlifter spends the majority of his time refining his front squat, which imitates the clean much more closely.

Get your legs and back strong and pull the bar like you are ripping the head off a god-damned lion. Practice timing your stretch reflex and bar whip to work with each other, and your cleans will no longer feel like you have been buried by the grave digger.

Training is struggle, and if you do not want to be smothered, you must have the mind of a fighter, a mind that can reach levels of nirvana like a Buddhist all in the blink of an eye.

World-record cleans look easy because they have to be. Everything must line up perfectly in the clean if you plan on nailing the jerk with the ease and precision of a surgeon at the operating table. Far too many lifters train the clean half-heartedly and wonder why it's not improving the way their snatch is. You are moving more weight during the clean, so be patient in waiting for your strength to catch up—but your patience does not allow for you to take the attitude that "it will get better one day." Aggression is everything for the weightlifter. If you can turn your aggression on when you are lifting like you turn on the lights in your

kitchen, you will always be attuned to what you could be doing better.

A Tale of the Clean

John had been struggling on his clean for years. He had been stuck at a 195-kilo clean and jerk forever, it seemed, and he did everything in the book to help him break past this comfort zone. Over the course of a year, he pushed his front squat up another 30 kilos and even increased his body weight another 20 lb. out of sheer frustration. Even with this added body weight and increase in leg strength, he was still stuck at 195. His confidence had nearly reached a breaking point, when his teammate Ethan told him to fly out to the East Coast and train with a great Russian weightlifting coach lifters called "Uncle Viktor."

"If you really want to get your cleans better, then go train with Uncle Viktor for a few weeks. A word of advice if you do decide to go, though, is make sure you do not mind being in pain."



Cheryl Bootman/CrossFit Journal

Success in moments like this is assured with thousands of reps and endless hours in training.

Michael Brian/CrossFit Journal



"All the weightlifters looked like winter was coming—or something as bleak as winter." —Donny Shankle

"What's he do differently?" John asked.

"Nothing I can get across to you in words. You will have to experience it for yourself."

John had always been jealous of the way Ethan came up so easily with his cleans. He and Ethan were in the same weight class, but Ethan was clean-and-jerking 10 kilos more than John. What was more frustrating was that John could front-squat 10 kilos more than Ethan. After the day's training session, John packed and zipped his training bag up and told his girlfriend he would be gone for a few weeks. Little did he know he was about to enter a frenzied whirlwind of shit and torture that felt much the same way his cleans had been feeling: like a black hole inhabited by demons with whips that cracked your ass if you tried to crawl out.

After getting off the plane with nothing but the clothes on his back and his gym bag thrown over his shoulder, John took a taxi to Uncle Viktor's gym. He had spoken on the phone with him only once before leaving, and the conversation consisted of polite introduction followed quickly with, "If you want to get better, then why are you not here already?"

Uncle Viktor lived in his gym, which was really a loft apartment that had the rugged look of a Scud bunker covered with dust and chalk and came with the sweet mixed smell of muscle rub and sweat. The weightlifters had this look in their eyes of death and life rolled up together into some twisted psychotic taco. Their expressions reminded him of that TV show *Game of Thrones* he had watched with his girlfriend. In it, the Northerners always commented on how winter was coming, and this attitude gave their eyes an expectant and hard look. All the weightlifters looked like winter was coming—or something as bleak as winter.

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John saw Uncle Viktor walking down the stairs in a jumpsuit that looked like it had seen better days. It had probably been washed too many times in blistering hot water because it was faded and snug enough around Viktor's twig and berries to throw modesty out the window. The first thing Viktor did was shake John's hand. He was always happy to see new lifters come into his gym, as all weightlifting coaches are. Then Viktor immediately gave John a pinch on his midsection and said, "What is this?"

"This fat is not good for training, my friend. This could be better."

"Thanks for helping me out with my cleans, Viktor. Ethan told me about you."

"Call me Uncle. How old are you?"

"Thirty-two."

"Thirty-two! Ah, I cannot build whorehouse with old whores, but you have good muscles, so I will try my best. Will you try your best?"

"Of course. I want to be an Olympian."

"Ha! Who doesn't?"

**"I cannot build whorehouse
with old whores, but you have
good muscles, so I will try
my best."**

—Uncle Viktor

John changed into his gym clothes and met Viktor in the gym. He was sitting in a chair positioned in the corner of the gym at just the right spot to allow him to supervise everything that went on. He walked up to Viktor and asked, "What would you like for me to do?" This immediately made a few of the other weightlifters around him quietly laugh under their breath.

"I don't know. What do you want to do?" Viktor said.

"I want to learn how to clean better."



Michael Brian/CrossFit Journal

***Waste no time in the bottom of a clean.
Stand up with purpose and move on to the jerk.***

"Then clean."

John took a few minutes to stretch and warm up with the bar, then he began his cleans from the floor with 50 kilos. He then put on 70 kilos followed with 90 kilos.

"Stop."

"Did I do something wrong?"

"Take these warming weights again, but do them from above your knee and set your back tighter."

John did as he was told and stripped the bar back down to 50 kilos and picked it up into his hips, set the arch in his back extra tight, lowered the weight down to right above his knees and then pulled it into his hips before cleaning it. He did this all the way up to 120 kilos, when Viktor chimed in.

"Now begin your attempts from the floor."

John's next attempt was 140 kilos, and when he did it he noticed he stood up pretty easily. All the extra attention keeping his back tight above the knee initially was carrying over as he went back to the floor. He proceeded to work all the way up to 180 kilos before looking over at Viktor and saying, "Should I keep going?"

"Keep going. It looks easy! Try 190."

John loaded the bar to 190, and he clean-and-jerked it easier than he thought he would have been able to considering he had just gotten off the plane a few hours ago. The clean was a little tough but much better than any 190 he had attempted ever before. He looked around at the other lifters and was excited to make a personal record in front of them on his first day of training in their gym, so he loaded 196 on the bar and took a seat to rest his legs. One of the lifters by the name of Timothy walked over with a cup of coffee and handed it to John. Timothy was the team's super-heavy weightlifter, and John had seen him in competition moving 220 kilos like you would lift a suitcase you thought was full but was, in fact, empty.

"Thanks," John said.

John had never been a coffee drinker before but did not want to turn down anything handed to him by the giant. After a sip, he stood up and walked to the bar. He set his

hips low, raised his eyes and pulled but was too slow moving under. The weight ended up rounding his back out and shooting his ass backwards about five feet.

"Is this as hard as you can pull?" Viktor said. "You pull too slow for all this muscle."

These words pissed John off just enough that on his next attempt he actually racked the bar across his shoulders over his heels but did not stand up right away.

"What you wait for? When you clean, you must use these chicken legs you have and stand up immediately."

On any other day John would have called his cleans there and moved on, but he remembered what his friend Ethan had said about always being in pain. This last clean felt like Jesus stomping the serpent, and John felt like the serpent. He looked over at Viktor for a second before his next attempt, and Viktor said to him laconically, "This time try lifting with both your balls instead of just one, yes."



Tai Randall/CrossFit Journal

The platform is no place for trepidation. A violent finish will allow you to pull under the weight with confidence.

That was apparently what John needed to hear because on his next attempt he cleaned the weight. It was ugly but it was the personal record he had been fighting so long to achieve. His back looked like a question mark coming up, and it was either pass out, jerk it or drop it. With a deep breath, John went after the jerk but kept dipping until he and the weight both went down together. After taking a knee, he saw Uncle's feet underneath his eyes and looked up.

"Very good, my friend."

Viktor reached his hand out and shook John's hand with a pat on the back as he helped him up. Viktor then walked behind John and grabbed him by the shoulders pulling his shoulder blades together.

"This needs to be much stronger. This back needs to be much stronger. Tiffany, come here."

**"Only a strong man and
fantastic weightlifter can squat
his best and more multiple
times. This is good training."**

—Uncle Viktor

Tiffany was the team's 53-kilo lifter. She had racked up a few consecutive national titles and world team placements training with Viktor and was now pushing to make the Olympics being held in two years. Uncle Viktor walked John over to the jerk blocks and had him put his hands on them while telling him to bend down so that his torso was parallel with the floor. He then had Tiffany sit on John's upper back, which stretched his pecs, shoulders and back, causing that poor excuse for a flat back to flatten out perfectly. John felt like a horse being broken in but didn't mind feeling Tiffany's soft ass atop him.

"We need this every day. This back must be kept much straighter for you to clean above 200 and jerk it."

John said nothing but simply did as Uncle Viktor wanted him. After he was finished having Tiffany sit on him, John was told to eat something and rest for 20 minutes before squatting. The night ended with John working up to a

front squat that was 30 kilos more than what he had just cleaned, and Viktor had him squat it for six singles, which was more work at one weight than John had ever done before.

"Any man can squat his best for one or two in one training, but only a strong man and fantastic weightlifter can squat his best and more multiple times. This is good training. Do you understand?"

"Yes," John replied.

Training went this way for a month before John was finally cleaning 200 kilos. He had lost 15 lb., which surprised him considering he was able to clean personal records. Viktor had reminded him more than once though that muscle and not fat moves weight, and muscle driven by the right mindset can move a lot of weight. Each training session began with Tiffany helping him stretch his back, and he learned to enjoy a cup of coffee with Timothy before lifting while they exchanged stories. Seeing everyone in the gym fight was the icing that topped the cake that made John push just as hard as they did.

Every warm-up set John did he made sure to set his back tight above the knee before moving to the floor, and with patience he began to learn how to use the whip of the bar and the stretch reflex in his legs to help him stand up with his cleans. A week after his first 200 clean, he successfully clean and jerked it and gave Uncle Viktor a shake of the hand.

"I guess this whore isn't that old, Viktor," John said with a smile.

"Ha!"

Make It Easy

Getting better at the clean takes persistence. Everything you try to get better at takes persistence.

The clean teases you inch by inch until you finally stand with it only to realize in your excitement you still have to jerk it. When it does come, though, it feels like a weight has been lifted. This is not just a poetic statement but also a truth. The first time I ever cleaned 195, it was a 7.5-kilo personal record for the day, and in my joyous delight I was overwhelmed instantly with a feeling of wonder. "How did I make it so easy?" I thought to myself.



Easy clean, easy jerk.

It wasn't the stars that had aligned that day, but I had finally learned how to align the bar perfectly to me. The bar was flush against my throat and seated perfectly on my clavicles, and my elbows were up. I was on my heels, and my back was straight, and as the bar whipped up I pushed hard with it. I stood up with it so easily, in fact, that I jerked it just as easily.

Once frustration begins to set in, it's amazing how you can use that frustration to help you lift better—so long as it doesn't own you. The only thing I have ever been good at in life on the platform is being stubborn, and I use that stubbornness to keep searching for new answers and to continue attacking the bar with the same joyous passion I have had since my first weightlifting practice.

That story about John is not a dramatic interpretation. Personal records do come that easy once you change your surroundings and actually go after personal records and break free of your comfort zones with the tenacity of an enraged charging bull. The first step in making personal records—on snatches, cleans or jerks—is to put the weight on the bar and go after it with the right attitude over and

over until you can say, "Job done."

Work hard to keep your back vertical during your cleans so you can strongly support any weight you put across your shoulders, and learn to feel the whip of the bar to the point you actually feel it pulling you up.

Bust your ass in the squat rack but realize strong legs are not always the missing piece to the puzzle. If you want to get better at the clean, you have to apply what Uncle Viktor said to John during that first practice: "Then clean." There is no complex overlay to the clean. You just have to catch the bounce and stand your ass up.

Easy clean, easy jerk.



About the Author

Donny Shankle is a five-time U.S. national champion in the sport of weightlifting. In 2007, he was awarded the most inspirational lifter award at the annual Arnold Classic held in Columbus, Ohio. Donny is a Marine Corps veteran and resides in Fort Mill, S.C. Today, he is in pursuit of the Rio Olympics to be held in 2016.