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BREAK BEFORE YOU'RE BROKEN

Pat Sherwood explains why going unbroken isn't always possible—or smart.

BY PAT SHERWOOD





Invest wisely: Doing unbroken sets early in the workout can cost you a lot of time in later rounds. Evaluate each workout carefully.

“But what if I can’t do it unbroken?”

From time to time, I hear this posed as a legitimate question from athletes as they read over a workout description. They look at the movements, the loading and the rep scheme. They assess their current capabilities. Quick math is done in their heads. Their facial expressions change and the question shoots out of their mouths: “What if I can’t do this unbroken?”

My answer is always, “Well, then break it up.”

I’m not sure when going unbroken became “a thing” or how many athletes the mentality affects, but I’ve heard the question asked often enough that it should be addressed. I will highlight the two most recent workout examples that pop into my head:

Example 1

CrossFit Linchpin: Test 5

For time:

20 back squats (225/155 lb.)

2-mile run

20 back squats (225/155 lb.)

When I posted this workout, the “what should I do if I can’t do the squats unbroken?” question was asked several times. I let people know the workout description did not call for unbroken squats. But somehow the need to avoid racking the barbell entered their heads. Perhaps all of us normal folks follow too many CrossFit Games athletes on Instagram and therefore put unrealistic/unnecessary expectations on ourselves. Maybe the pressure is coming from somewhere else. I can’t pinpoint the source, but it’s out there.

I let people know that even though I could perform the squats unbroken for this workout—at least the first set—I had no intention of doing so. For me, stringing together 20 back squats at 225 would be so taxing that it would destroy my 2-mile run and therefore lead to a slower overall time. If memory serves, I did the first 20 reps as 6-5-3-3-3. I made sure to take very little rest between the sets, and then I was off on the run. The final set of squats was broken up even more.

I could’ve done the final set of 20 as maybe 10-10 or even 15-5. However, I would have had to slow my run down to a non-challenging pace or run fast and then stare at the barbell for 90 seconds before doing my first squat.

Doing something unbroken does not necessarily mean you will do it faster. If the goal is to accomplish the overall task as efficiently as possible, then that is the goal—not doing it unbroken.

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Example 2

3 rounds for time of:

30 wall-ball shots (20/14 lb.)

20 toes-to-bars

10 front squats (225/155 lb., no rack)

I attempted this workout as prescribed but the plan changed quickly. A 225 front squat for reps is never “easy” for me, but it is realistic. I knew that even if it was possible to do the first set unbroken, it would not be wise. So my plan going in was 5-5 or 4-3-3 with short rest to complete the opening round.

I did the wall balls (which I despise), then the toes-to-bars (broken), then power-cleaned the barbell. Immediately it felt like the heaviest 225 lb. I had racked in a while. I knew the 5-5 plan was out the window. Maybe it was the wall balls, maybe the toes-to-bars, or maybe I simply overestimated my fitness. Whatever the reason, I had to deviate from my plan to knock this out “as RX’d.”

Moving to Plan B: 4-3-3. I did 4 front squats and dropped the bar. I was also more out of breath than I expected. When I felt ready, I set up on the bar and hoped for a power clean, but it turned into a squat clean. Let me clarify: It turned into a failed squat clean. I was ejected about 3 feet back from the barbell. Right then and there I saw the writing on the wall and dropped the loading to 205. I completed the workout, and it was miserable.

I posted the workout on [Instagram](#)—which is required as far I know. Someone I don’t know posted a comment with two questions: “If you couldn’t do 225 for 10 easily then what is the point of putting it last in the workout? What’s was (sic) the goal of this wod?” I did not respond because who wants to type that much on a phone? However, the questions made me see that perhaps some people don’t realize there are many different ways to program workouts for a variety of goals.

Let’s take the first question: “If you couldn’t do 225 for 10 easily then what is the point of putting it last in the workout?”

Since when do things need to be easy in Round 1? It was intended to be quite a big challenge from the very first round. After



With gymnastics movements, pushing close to failure to go unbroken is seldom a good idea.



If a movement is in your wheelhouse and you have the fitness to continue afterward, go unbroken.

Round 1, the following two rounds were supposed to feel like a trip through hell. Nothing about this workout was ever designed to be easy. I truly thought I was going to be able to do it as prescribed, but that was not the case. Scaling the loading to 205 allowed me to finish the workout, but even then it was not unbroken. Not everything has to be unbroken and easy from Round 1. Sometimes a workout is designed to be unbroken and super fast, but that was not the case here.

Question 2: “What’s ... the goal of this workout?”
My short answer: fitness. A slightly longer answer: I wanted to hit the legs with a fast high-rep movement like the wall-ball shot, then tax the midline and grip through the toes-to-bars, and then challenge the athlete’s legs again—also attacking the midline and grip—with some miserably heavy front squats from the floor.

If you cannot do something unbroken, please do not feel pressure to do so.

Truly being fit means being well rounded, versatile, highly capable and ready for anything. Sometimes life throws challenges at you that are much harder than you anticipated right from the first second. Not all of life’s tasks are like that, and so not all of our workouts are like that. We strive to expose ourselves to as many loadings, time domains, rep ranges, pieces of equipment and other factors as we can. This workout was just a singular piece in a very large puzzle laid out over weeks, months and years.

Going unbroken on a single movement or entire workout is almost never required unless the workout specifically demands it. Workouts like that are rare. Going unbroken might or might not be the fastest or most efficient way to accomplish the work. If you cannot do something unbroken, please do not feel pressure to do so. Managing your personal tolerance of work-to-rest ratio will yield the greatest results for you.

If you can’t do something unbroken, don’t. ■

About the Author: Pat Sherwood is an analyst on the CrossFit Games “Update Show.” He is also a CrossFit Media project manager as well as a former flowmaster. He’s done just under 200 seminars all around the globe for CrossFit Inc. and competed in the 2009 CrossFit Games. He hates HSPU and loves ice cream.