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## Running the Bars

Aja Barto snatched every bar in Workout 5 of the South Central Regional. Olympian Chad Vaughn explains how he did it.

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By Chad Vaughn

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All images: Staff/CrossFit Journal

There are quite a few things that Aja Barto did really, really right that significantly helped him not only complete the snatch ladder but also make 295 lb. look light!

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The base of his success, of course, is technique. Barto was maintaining and creating all the right angles and positions as the bar traveled up the legs, where he then fully extended with hips open and arms straight before those arms pulled and pushed the body under the bar. His body moved around and underneath it to lock it out overhead. All these positions help keep the bar closer to the body and the bar path in line, and they set the body up to exert the most possible power by activating the proper parts at the right time for a smooth, powerful, fast lift.

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Barto was also consistent in his movement: he squat-snatched every rep from 155 to 295 lb. Most of these weights would be easy power snatches for him, so some might wonder why he wasted his legs and didn't choose the squat squat snatch only when necessary. Really, it's all about preparation and insurance. The whole body is engaged differently in the two receiving positions: think about the shoulders, hips, wrists, knees, ankles, width of the landing, etc. If you are trying to put the most weight overhead, you want the muscle memory to be wired into what you'll be doing with the heaviest weights as much as possible.

Many of the competitors were power-snatching as many bars as they could, and many failed at the weight that forced them to start dropping under more. It's a fact that most, especially while learning, can power-snatch more than they can lift in a full snatch for many different reasons. It's mainly due to a subconscious hesitation to use a weak or non-existent catch/bottom position, but this should not be the case at the regional level. Actually, many of the culprits missing bars were ones I've seen use the squat snatch very well many times!

Were they trying to save the legs and conserve overall energy? If so, you have to consider how the body reacts as the weight gets heavier and heavier in a power snatch. The feet jump out wider and wider to the point of creating

an excessively wide landing, the body begins to contort more and more, and the bar lands shorter and shorter for tough press-outs—if you're lucky enough for the bar to land overhead. All these movements are very inefficient and create a lot of unnecessary energy consumption as one fights against the positions.

How about starting to drop when the power snatch starts to break? That's still not good enough because the body is not prepared and typically says "no!" That's especially true in a workout like this, where you have only 50 seconds to perform double-unders and then a lift. You don't really have time to adjust with a miss. As I watched the South Central Regional, it happened time and time again: as the competitors decided to or were forced to drop lower, the weight typically won!



*Aja Barto's snatches looked very similar from the opening bars to 295 lb. at the end of the ladder.*

I would say that squat-snatching all bars—even if the technique is not needed—would add at least one or two more successful lifts to an athlete's score.

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### Rip from the floor with a heavy weight and you'll most likely be decelerating—that bar ain't goin' up!

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#### Mirror, Mirror

In addition, Barto's snatches were a mirror image of one another in regards to rhythm, speed and the height at which the bar was met with the legs to receive. Again, it all comes down to preparation with practice and consistency so the body knows how it will need to move with the heaviest loads.

For the rhythm, we are talking about the entire process from ritualistic set-up through the actual lift. If this changes and is rushed, there is greater potential for something basic to be missed (tightness, bar closeness, etc.), and that can leave a lot of ground to be made up with a load that's



***Barto's pulls were deliberate and controlled, and his ideal positioning allowed him maximal speed on extension.***

already a challenging weight. This is typically when you see the weight go up and over the top to fall behind the lifter. On the other end, at this point it becomes easier for negative thoughts to sneak in and bring hesitation, usually on extension or the drop under. Typically, you'll see a dump forward when an athlete hesitates.

The speed of the bar is part of the overall rhythm as well. The entire pull should be in rhythm and not just a rip from the floor with a dive and a prayer. Barto was calmly controlled as he initiated the lift and then built the speed through extension.

The lift is not made with speed from the floor! Deliberateness is important to ensure tightness, positioning and bar closeness. In addition, you will have a higher chance of positive acceleration on extension if that effort to build speed is at least slightly held off. Rip from the floor with a heavy weight and you'll most likely be decelerating—that bar ain't goin' up!

As a note, while you are learning it will not hurt and is usually necessary to go excessively slow all the way up to the power position (at the lap with a slight bend in the knees and the shoulders over the bar). Think about this: the slower you go, the more likely you are to maintain tightness, positioning and overall quality. On the other hand, the faster you go, the greater your chance for error. You can always speed up later as you learn and build comfort, but your speed should never be to the point of ripping and outside of acceleration at extension.

Barto was controlled on the heavy weights to ensure the tightness, positioning and speed of extension, and on the light ones he had used the same rhythm and speed as optimal preparation for the heavy bars.

As we drop to the overhead-squat position to receive the bar, it is important that we use our legs as shocks and not as brakes or as nothing at all. If we use the legs as brakes and stop the body right where we meet the bar and come up from there, it is very jarring and hard on the body, and it gives up a lot of potential. If we use the legs for no real purpose and drop straight to a rock-bottom position without interacting much with the legs, it creates a lack of control and doesn't leave much room for error.



Pull up a video of a world record—an admittedly extreme example—and it looks as if the lifters are indeed shooting straight to the bottom position. Slow the video down and you'll see the arms locked out overhead with the squat height at about parallel. So, just like Barto did, the body begins to slow the bar in this part of the reception and then rides it down smoothly to a deep, flexible, strong and seemingly relaxed and comfortable bottom position. So, for Barto, this was necessary to control the heavy weights, and it was necessary on the light weights to reinforce that specific height of reception and a portion of his overall timing.

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### Love the Bottom

Finally, let's examine Barto's bottom position with the bar overhead and his body at its lowest point in the squat. I love it! I spend so much time every day teaching this position and talking people into it, which is complicated due to all the misconceptions about squatting below parallel and as low as possible. I noticed how Barto had a slight pause down there, particularly with the heaviest bars. Most of them were slightly forward but were nowhere near a problem because of Barto's bottom position. He simply sat, relaxed, and easily pulled it back in, probably without many even noticing.

In a squat that is anything above rock bottom, there is usually no saving a lift: it's either over the top of you, dropped behind or you are attempting to run forward underneath. One of the best things that you can do to improve your overall potential for the snatch is snatch-grip overhead squats with a 3- to 5-second pause in the bottom on each rep—and strive to go lower and lower. Most will need to spend a lot of time here to even begin to open up flexibility (ankles, hips, shoulders, etc.) and create awareness to work toward a lower and lower position.



*By riding the bar down to a deep squat (Frame 2), Barto was able to stabilize the heavy load before standing under control to complete the lift.*

## Bars ... (continued)

In either case, you have to get to the point of excess strength and comfort here because this will help erase that subconscious hesitation to go there. The body will instinctively use strengths and comfort zones—so create some!

Also, rock bottom goes hand in hand with weightlifting potential and the flexibility development associated with the best overall athletes. This is why I recommend squatting in a way that will work flexibility on every rep and not lock it. Reinforce low and upright positioning every chance you get, on all types of squats.

Again, Barto's performance was very impressive, especially within the timed ladder set-up. Congrats to all the competitors at the South Central Regional, and thanks for a great show!

Hit me up on [CrossFit Centex's Facebook page](#) for a few pointers.



*Aja Barto: locked and loaded.*



Mike Markentin/CrossFit Journal

### About the Author

*Chad Vaughn is a two-time Olympian, a seven-time national champion and an American Record holder in the sport of Olympic weightlifting. He was introduced to CrossFit in 2008 and began working within the community in early 2010. Chad is now part owner at CrossFit Centex, where he holds weekly weightlifting classes while doing occasional seminars throughout the U.S. Chad has a natural, matured understanding of how the body best moves and is highly motivated to help anyone interested find his or her "perfect snatch" and heaviest clean and jerk.*