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Coaching the Low Catch

Pull it higher or pull yourself under? Bob Takano explains how to get under heavy bars fast.

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There are two components involved in getting a bar overhead or up to the shoulders from the ground.

The most commonly conceptualized component is to lift the weight up to the required height. The second is to lower the body under the bar. In the sport of weightlifting, both components are combined simultaneously by proficient practitioners. Many aspiring trainees, however, understand only the first and can't seem to quite conceptualize the second—or combine the two. For these lifters the default is always to lift the bar higher.

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The task, therefore, is to coach the second aspect and provide training that will combine the two. Whether the lift is a snatch, a clean or a jerk, lifting the weight and dropping under the weight are combined. In this article, I'll focus on the snatch and clean as it seems that fewer people have trouble learning the jerk.

Before I get into the specifics, I need to lay out a few things about technical training exercises. They are primarily used during the technique-learning phase for two purposes:

1. They are helpful for learning positions and motor patterns.
2. They can strengthen specific areas of the anatomy that are imbalanced for lifting weights.

Once technique is mastered and the lifter is balanced, the technical exercises probably won't be employed again unless a lifter is recovering from injury. Some athletes like a particular exercise, and it becomes a "pet exercise." They then spend an inordinate amount of time and effort developing tremendous strength in the specific movement. While this isn't bad, it does siphon off time and energy that could be put to better use in training.

In the process of learning technique, high repetitions per set are counterproductive. Each repetition should be attempted with the intent of perfect performance. Fatigue and lack of proper mental preparation will inhibit proper performance. If the move is explosive, it should be practiced at the beginning of the session when the athlete is fresh.

The Snatch: Finding Home

Before you can teach athletes how to get to a certain place, you need to teach them what it feels like to be there and—if possible—to get comfortable with the position. Many athletes do not go into a bottom position because it is not familiar or comfortable. The following exercises will teach the feeling of the bottom position for the snatch.

The Snatch-Grip Squat Press

This exercise has mistakenly been dubbed the Sots press. The Sots press was actually a pet exercise of Viktor Sots, the 1981 100-kg world champion who employed the power jerk rather than the split jerk in competition. He credited his proficiency in the power jerk to a unique exercise in which he would press the weight overhead from in front of the neck while sitting in a front squat. He claimed a personal best of 160 kg in this exercise, which later came to be called the Sots press by people other than Sots.

To perform the snatch-grip squat press, one must have sufficient range of motion in the ankles, hamstrings and shoulders as well as sufficient strength in the lower and mid back to maintain an erect posture of the torso. I've seen very strong men who were unable to use a 20 kg bar for this exercise due to shortened range of motion.

The lifter begins the movement by supporting the bar on the shoulders behind the neck, taking a snatch-width grip, then descending into a full squat with a flat-footed stance. The movement is to press the bar to arms' length overhead before lowering to the shoulders and repeating. This should reinforce the bottom position and allow for opportunities to develop balance in this position.

The Overhead Squat

In this movement, the bar is taken from a rack while being supported on the shoulders behind the neck. The grip is at snatch width. The lifter steps away from the rack and places the feet in a comfortable squatting stance. The weight is then push-pressed overhead, and from this position the lifter proceeds to squat all the way down and then rises to full stance.



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Both the snatch-grip squat press and the overhead squat are excellent exercises to develop the strength and flexibility needed for the bottom position of the snatch.



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In a pressing snatch balance (above), the feet do not move as the lifter presses down under the bar. In a heaving snatch balance (Page 4) or snatch balance, the feet move from the pulling to the squatting position as the lifter drops under the bar.

Getting Comfortable With the Descent

Pressing Snatch Balance

In this exercise, the lifter begins by taking the bar from a rack, supporting it on the shoulders behind the neck and assuming a snatch-width grip. The lifter steps away from the rack, places the feet in a squatting stance and is ready to commence. The movement proceeds with the lifter pressing the weight overhead while simultaneously descending into a full squat. This is a slow movement and one designed to accustom the lifter to lowering the body under the bar.

Heaving Snatch Balance

The next exercise in this progression begins in the same position as the previous one except that the feet are placed at pulling width. For this exercise, the lifter descends slightly by bending the knees as if to jerk the bar and applies sufficient drive to get the bar moving. He or she then drops under to the overhead-squat bottom position while simultaneously moving the feet to a squatting stance. This requires a speedier descent than the pressing snatch balance: it's a little more dynamic and a little less controlled.

Snatch Balance

The final exercise in this progressive sequence begins in the same position as the previous one. The movement requires the lifter to suddenly drop out from under the bar, simultaneously move the feet out to a squatting stance and catch the bar at arms' length in an overhead-squat bottom position. This is the most dynamic of the three and most accurately mimics the rapid descent into the bottom position.

Learn to Pull and Drop Under

As the athlete masters the descent into the bottom position, the exercises from the previous group can be minimized or eliminated from the training program and replaced by the exercises in this group, which focus on the transition from the pull to the drop and catch. At an intermediary point, the trainee may be using snatch balances as warm-ups before using one of the following exercises.

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As the athlete becomes more comfortable with dropping under the load, snatch-balance drills can be replaced by pulls from the toes or blocks.

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Blocks set to place the bar at the power position allow an athlete to emphasize the second and third pulls in a snatch or clean.

Snatch on Toes

In this movement, the lifter takes a snatch-width grip on the bar, which is resting on the platform. The lifter then deadlifts the bar so that it is hanging down at arms' length. The lifter then performs and holds a heel raise. This is the starting position. From this point, the lifter can only elevate the bar by shrugging and arm pulling. Most will not be able to lift much weight this way.

The movement commences with the lifter upright rowing the bar and then suddenly descending rapidly, moving the feet to a squatting stance and pushing the body down while pressing up against the bar. This exercise cannot be done with very heavy weights.

Snatch on High Blocks

This requires blocks that are adjustable in height. The blocks should be adjusted so that the bar is at the power position for the lifter. The acceleration of the bar should be generated by the extension of the legs and hips, followed immediately by a shrug and arm pull. Immediately upon full extension, the lifter should drop rapidly into the low squat while moving the feet into the squatting stance.

Snatch

When the lifter is proficient and comfortable with the previous two exercises and executes them precisely, it is time to focus efforts on the full movement. The best way



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After extension in the clean, the athlete pulls under the bar with aggression. The proper receiving position finds the bar resting on the shoulders with the elbows as high as possible.

to practice technique is to perform many singles, with sufficient rest and proper mental preparation before each one. Having a knowledgeable coach available is also highly desirable. The weight on the bar should require sufficient effort, and it should not be so light that it turns the exercise into a pantomime.

On to the Clean!

Attaining a low position in the clean is usually a little less daunting because it appears that catching a weight on the shoulders is not as perilous as catching the weight overhead. Furthermore, once the squat snatch is mastered, the conceptualization of lowering the body to catch a weight is more soundly ingrained into the athlete's psyche, and learning the descent into the clean is more easily achieved.

The Clean: Finding Home

This is basically the front-squat bottom position. Most of the difficulty in performing a front squat is found with athletes who are longtime bench pressers and find it comfortable to support the weight by keeping the wrists straight and the shoulders pulled back. The bar is then resting on the upper chest rather than on the deltoids. Once the athlete conceptualizes the proper supporting of the bar on the shoulders with the hands and arms serving merely as brackets that keep the bar from rolling forward, the proper front squat can be practiced.

Some adjustment of the grip and coaching of the proper support position by a knowledgeable coach should expedite matters. An appropriate range of motion at the ankles and stretchable hamstrings will also facilitate the achievement of a solid bottom or receiving position.

Enough front squatting needs to be done so that the athlete becomes comfortable sitting "in the hole" with relatively heavy weights. If the weights are not sufficiently heavy, the wrists will not bend back sufficiently to achieve the desired rack position.

Learn to Pull and Drop Under

Clean on Toes

With the exception of the grip width, this exercise starts from the same position as the snatch on toes. The weight employed should be heavy enough that it cannot be pulled very much higher than the catch position in the bottom. One of the aims of the athlete should be to catch the weight at the height to which it is pulled and not let it crash down on the shoulders.

Clean From High Blocks

The bar should be placed so that the lifter can grip the bar and maintain a power position with the center of pressure on the balls of the feet. In this variation, the hips, knees and ankles extend, and very slightly later the shoulders shrug and the elbows rise. From this full extension, the lifter drops immediately into a squat for the catch. The weight employed can eventually exceed the 100 percent figure for the clean.

Clean

This drill should not be conceptualized as a power clean transitioning into a front squat. It should be conceptualized as a proper pull, a catch in the bottom and an immediate rise to erect stance. If enough work has been performed on the previous two movements, this final transition to the classic clean should be relatively easy.

In Closing

The training of technique is often misrepresented and as such can provide unnecessary difficulty. Coaches who don't know how to coach proper technique consider it difficult to learn.

In comparison to the technique coaching in sports such as gymnastics and diving, the snatch and clean and jerk are not that difficult to coach. In programs where highly talented athletes are selected, the learning of proficient technique is not especially difficult. Athletes from sports in which they learn complex technical moves by simply watching and imitating have little difficulty learning the snatch and clean and jerk. Most of the problems develop when athletes who are not good motor learners attempt to master the lifts under the supervision of coaches who are not used to coaching technically challenging movements.



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About the Author

*Bob Takano has developed and coached some of the best weightlifters in the U.S. for the past 39 years. A 2007 inductee into the U.S.A. Weightlifting Hall of Fame, he has coached four national champions, seven national record holders and 28 top 10 nationally ranked lifters. Fifteen of the volleyball players he's coached have earned Division 1 volleyball scholarships. His articles have been published by the NSCA and the International Olympic Committee and helped to establish standards for the coaching of the Olympic lifts. He is a former member of the editorial board of the **NSCA Journal**, and an instructor for the UCLA Extension program. He is currently the chairperson of the NSCA Weightlifting Special Interest Group. He is a member of Mike Burgener's seminar team for the CrossFit Olympic Lifting Trainer Course. Website: www.takanoathletics.com.*