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## The King of Lifts

Champion weightlifter Donny Shankle says the competition isn't over until the last clean and jerk comes down.

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By Donny Shankle

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

The second of the two exercises in the sport of weightlifting is the clean and jerk. It is my favorite of the two simply because there is more weight on the bar.

The clean and jerk is also the most recognized lift for those people unaccustomed with the sport. To clean a barbell means to pick it up off the floor and bring it up to your shoulders in one continuous effort. The jerk follows the clean, and it involves taking the bar from the shoulders and sharply locking it out overhead.

The clean has evolved over the years and has gone through some theatrical changes. Originally, the bar could not touch the body on the way up. It had to be lifted cleanly away from the weightlifter—hence the lift's name. This gave way to the continental clean, the split clean and eventually the squat clean, which is what weightlifters today practice. Today the bar is allowed to make brief contact with the body so long as the exercise remains uninterrupted. The squat clean (or just clean) implies picking the barbell up off the floor and receiving it on your shoulders in a full squat position—hips below knees.

For a clean to be technically passable in competition, the elbows cannot touch your legs at the bottom, and the bar cannot be repositioned on your shoulders in the bottom or as you stand up. Great weightlifters know cleaning well requires confidence, strong legs, an understanding of oscillation, and a commitment to not waste any time once you are at the lowest point of your squat.



*Olympic weightlifting judges are on the lookout for the slightest arm bend once the bar goes overhead in the jerk, so a decisive lockout is essential.*

Strong legs are a requirement to cleaning well, just as having a great lockout and strong shoulders are required in the snatch. For this reason, weightlifters will spend years in the squat rack moving some tremendous poundages over their career. Squatting is often also important because the clean is very neurologically demanding. Weightlifters will squat to keep their legs strong without zapping their nervous system constantly. At one point I was squatting up to maximum weights 18 times a week in training. In order to even be on this team, you had to be ready to warm up with a minimum of 120 kilos (265 lb.) because that is what we always left on the bar.

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**Your gut was nauseous from  
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Your legs were always in pain, but they were strong. Your shoulders and upper back were always raw from where the bar rested, but they too were strong. Your gut was nauseous from the mere sight of the bar, but your nerves were as cool as the other side of the pillow.

Squatting that much, that heavy and that often develops the strong hips and legs you will need for the clean. The repetition sets in motion the coordination you will need to clean like a professional.

There is no wasted time during the clean. Once the bar comes into you off the floor and you bring your hips through aggressively, you are standing. Never sit in the bottom of a clean for any amount of time. Let me repeat that: never sit in the bottom of a clean for any amount of time. Just in case you still do not understand the gravity behind how important this is, I will say it yet again: never sit in the bottom of a clean for any amount of time. Once you receive the bar on your shoulders—move!

Oscillation is the bend you get from a heavy bar, and you can use this oscillation to help you stand up from the bottom of your clean. In order to do this you cannot be lazy. The back has to be as rigid as a sailor at full mast on liberty, and you have to use the stretch reflex in your legs. Your hips and knees will naturally bounce you up slightly as you hit the bottom of a squat or clean. In training, you are learning to use this stretch reflex to your advantage in combination with the oscillation of the bar.

Applying all of the techniques described above makes for a beautiful clean.

### The Jerk

The jerk is the fastest of the three lifts, and just as in the clean, oscillation plays an integral role in your success. Feel the bar wrap around your shoulders during your dip, and drive hard with the legs. The arms have to be completely locked out once you have heaved the bar off your shoulders during the jerk. The judges in competition are always looking for that slight elbow bend at the completion of a jerk. They can be a bit fastidious here at times, so it is best to just snap yourself down under the bar like lightning each and every time. Give them no reason to speculate.

Notice I said “snap yourself down under the bar” instead of “snap the bar up.”

Bar velocity on the jerk is different than for the clean or snatch. There is no gradual acceleration. A jerk is what it is by definition: a sharp, sudden movement. Remain vertical on your dip and drive, get your back knee down and feel your weight equally on each leg while in the split.

The big kahuna, however, is making some noise with your lead foot. This is where the power is. If you are trying to slap that lead foot out sharp and fast and you have weightlifting shoes on (which I hope you do), then the sound of your lead foot hitting the platform should crack an echo like a 9 mm going off. Weightlifting is not ballet, so stay off your toes. Toes do not slap; the flat of your foot does. The gym is not a library, so make some noise. The next time you jerk, think about a huge, ugly, venomous bug creeping towards your foot. Stomp the life out of that creepy-crawly before he bites you. Crack that lead foot down at the exact same time your arms lock. Whatever you need to do to find that powerful change of direction between your dip and your drive, do it. Don't miss the jerk. Missed jerks have a tendency to stick with you and leave a bitter taste in your mouth.



*The key to a successful jerk is stomping down your lead foot just when your arms lock out overhead.*





Staff/CrossFit Journal

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## The gym is not a library, so make some noise.

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That is what weightlifting is. It's about doing what you need to do to find a way, and never, ever stopping.

This is what the clean and jerk looks like in training: you go into the gym and put a new personal record on the bar. You begin to pull the thing, and in the back of your mind there is a little fucking gremlin that convinces you it is too heavy. With style points, you just pick it up slowly into your hips, but you are too chickenshit to go under the bar.

A week goes by, and this time you make up your mind not to look like a nob-head. You get set, pull, finish hard and move under. No chance! The bar shoots your ass back about five feet, sending you crashing into the wall behind you. A few more crashes like this and you are likely to bring the whole damn gym down.

Another week goes by, and this time you pull it, finish hard, and receive it with your elbows up, but you fail to stand up.

Two more weeks go by, and this time you pull it, finish hard, receive it and stand up with a struggle. You are so excited at this point you begin to get dizzy, and as you try to jerk you have nothing left in you, so you just dump it off of you and collect yourself as you sit down.

Another week goes by and this time you clean the weight beautifully. You dip and drive the bar to lockout but fail to gain control in the split.

Another two weeks go by, and this time you clean it and jerk it like a champion. Your coach says, "Down," and with a sense of pride you give the air a double fist pump. The last time you felt this good was when your girlfriend whispered vehemently in your ear, "You are an absolute god in bed."

Now put on another kilo and do it all over again.

Weeks will eventually turn into months, months into years. Nevertheless, that is weightlifting.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

***In weightlifting, there is no room for doubt.***



Staff/CrossFit Journal

*Few things feel as good as a rock-solid PR clean and jerk.*

### Beyond the Snatch ...

The competition isn't over until the last clean and jerk comes down. You get six attempts at a weightlifting competition: three for the snatch, three for the clean and jerk. The same way a powerlifter knows it's not over until the bar comes off the floor, or a 400-meter runner knows it isn't over until the last leg, the weightlifter knows nothing is final until his last attempt at the clean and jerk is down. The last clean and jerk is what wins the competition, and to make it you have to be conditioned.

To go out there and make all your lifts shows you have not only taken your training seriously but you have also put in the exact amount of time training your clean and jerk as your snatch. Many amateur weightlifters get caught up chasing a bigger snatch over and over in training. They burn themselves out to the point where they are not putting the same amount of effort into their clean and jerk. This is a mistake. Put just as much hard work into the clean and jerk, and in competition never think you are out of it just because you happened to not snatch well.

Take this lifter's experience in competition as an example:

At the end of the snatch portion of the competition, Gloria walked over to the leaderboard. She was disappointed in herself for missing her opening snatch and her third attempt. Showing the discipline of a true champion, she said to herself, "It is what it is. Time to put that performance behind me and get ready for the clean and jerk."

As she looked up at the leaderboard, she saw she was still not that far behind. Even though Gloria had made only one snatch, the girl in front of her was but 6 kilos ahead of her. Gloria's coach came up to her as she was re-taping her thumbs.

"Remember to move your feet and attack the bar on these cleans. Easy clean, easy jerk, right?"

"Right."

"Don't let this girl think she has beaten you. You have trained harder than anyone else here, and it will show during these next three lifts. Attack the bar, Gloria. Be aggressive."



As she started warming up she noticed she was feeling strong. She knew all the extra time spent in the squat rack was about to pay off. Over the past 16 weeks she had increased her front squat by 12 kilos, which is huge for someone like her who has been weightlifting for eight years. Her legs looked like they could split coconuts. On each jerk she did, she made sure to slap her lead foot hard and punch her head through.

"That's right. Same way we practiced in training. Move the light ones fast, and the heavy ones will be fast too," her coach said.

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On each clean, Gloria felt the stretch reflex in her legs and stood up immediately. The more weight her coach loaded on the bar, the easier the lifts were getting. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied her competitor dancing all over the platform like a newborn baby giraffe as she jerked.

"Chicken legs," Gloria whispered under her breath with a sneering half smile.

She was up. Her coach opened her up at the exact same weight as the girl in front of her in the snatch. After tightening her belt and taking a few slaps on the legs from her coach, she went out and killed it. The crowd was aghast with how easy she made the weight look compared to the other girl. Gloria cleaned her opener with such ease that even her coach was in shock. Like a stoic queen, she walked back into the warm-up room and sat down.

On her second attempt, she had to wait longer than she or her coach expected. She was ready for this, though. Ms. Chicken Legs and a few other lifters were missing cleans left and right. Gloria took a light weight in the warm-up room because she had to wait so long in between attempts. All the hard work she had put into conditioning and working the clean and jerk in training was showing, and these extra attempts to stay loose were no problem.

On her second attempt, her coach called for a weight that would put her 3 kilos above everyone else in the clean and jerk. Again, like a methodical master, she got up from her chair, tightened her belt, waited for some slaps down her legs from her coach, and walked up to the bar with such confidence you could feel it perforate your own skin.

She cleaned the bar yet again with such ease that you could hear the crowd sigh in amazement. "One, two, three," Gloria counted to herself as she found her heels and pushed her elbows up. Her dip and drive was so fast you would have missed it had you blinked. Gloria was down under the bar with a startling crack of her lead foot that reverberated like a cat-o'-nine-tails lashed across a criminal's back. Her coach applauded and told her to sit down. Anyone in the crowd not showing an interest at the start was all eyeballs and ears now.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

***A tough fight with a clean can sometimes make the jerk  
an even greater battle. Easy clean, easy jerk.***



Staff/CrossFit Journal

***No matter the weight on the bar, when practicing the clean and jerk, always move quickly and decisively.***

The way Gloria was lifting, her coach decided to make sure she had the last attempt. Ms. Chicken Legs had one attempt left too, and she was convinced her 3-kilo lead in the snatch was still enough to win overall. Out she went for her last attempt. After a valiant but ugly clean, she had nothing left in her legs to even try to jerk. Gloria was up now. Her coach called for just enough weight on the bar to tie the girl in the lead in total. Gloria already had the win for the clean and jerk, and because she was lighter she would be the overall winner as well should she make the lift.

On her last attempt, Gloria went through the exact same steps as before. She wasn't excited. Instead, she had her poker face on and was focused. As she walked up to the bar and grabbed it, her mind was clear. She emptied every thought from her mind and accepted that at this moment all that mattered in the universe was to pull this bar like she was ripping the head off a god-damned lion.

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**Gloria was down under the bar with a startling crack of her lead foot that reverberated like a cat-o'-nine-tails lashed across a criminal's back.**

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She dropped her hips, set her back and pulled. Both her hips and her chest came off the floor at the exact same time as she pushed her knees back. Her hips came through once the bar passed her knees and hit the bar with such ferocity it's a wonder the bar didn't break in two. Like a falcon diving for its prey, Gloria was under the bar, caught the bounce and was immediately back up again. "One, two, three, heels," she went over again in her head before she jerked. The crack of her lead foot was not as loud as her previous attempt, but it was loud enough. She jerked it. As she brought her feet together and waited for the down signal from the judges, she had a wide smile across her face. After she received her three white lights, she stripped the bar, letting everyone know the competition was decided and she was the winner.

Keep your cool—always.

Remember, snatches are cute, but clean and jerks win. I have seen countless weightlifters work themselves up in a frenzy because they snatched poorly. The best weightlifters make all their lifts, but if they should happen to not do well in the snatch, they know it isn't over.

Gloria knew that, and that's why Gloria won. She worked hard in the gym on her clean and jerks and on making her legs strong. Her experience kept her cool under pressure.

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**Snatches are cute,  
but clean and jerks win.**

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*Every kilo is earned.*

### Get on the Bar

The clean and jerk is the king of lifts, and the lifter who lifts the most here will walk king among men.

There is something raw about the clean and jerk or just weightlifting in general. There is a great satisfaction in picking something heavy up off the floor and putting it over your head. This satisfaction is intensified if you manage to do it easily. People will come up to you and ask, "How do you make that look so easy?"

In your mind, you know there were no easy steps.

"Hard work and I am really fuckin' strong," is what you say back to them.

There are no secrets behind weightlifting. The first thing I always say to someone who is interested in being a weightlifter is, "Be prepared to lift a lot of weights." I guess that goes with anything you want to be good at. No matter what it is, be prepared to work hard and put in the time.

I love seeing a person's confidence spiral outwards for the world to see once he or she starts weightlifting. Both the snatch and the clean and jerk have a way of making you feel a great primal sense of accomplishment. The snatch will get away from you, roll out, launch you forward, fall on you and question your resolve.

The clean will crush you, squish you, round you, rip you, shoot you, and knock you back on your heels and bury you.

That last one has happened to me more than once, and I learned real quickly why the plates are the diameter they are.

The jerk will tease you and test you, but go after every one of them no matter what the clean ends up looking like.

Making your lifts in training and always trying to add another kilo is what weightlifting is all about. You have to fight for each kilo or half kilo and work harder for the next one.

This is how you get strong and how you become a great weightlifter.



*Courtesy of Donny Shankle*

### 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.