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Cueing the Power Position

Olympic-weightlifting coach Mike Burgener has changed his cues for beginners to produce optimal results. Andréa Maria Cecil explains.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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Many lifters miss the pockets position or don't accelerate at the right time, so Coach Mike Burgener has altered his cues to help them find correct positioning and timing.

Mike Burgener used to be "real big" on using the coaching cue "pockets" for anybody performing the snatch or clean.

"For years I emphasized 'mid-thigh' to 'pockets,'" said the longtime Olympic-weightlifting coach. "I emphasized the hell out of it."

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In this photo, Olympian Chad Vaughn has just slid his knees under the bar and is preparing for the violent extension at the end of the second pull. Note the bar tucked against his hips at the pockets position.

Then he noticed one of his own trainers giving the “pockets” cue to a beginner. The result: the athlete did not begin accelerating the barbell until it was at his pockets, or hips.

“Whoa, this is way too slow,” Burgener recalled saying to himself.

Instead, the bar should begin its acceleration earlier—once it’s past the knees, he said recently.

“People are going to seminars and coming back and teaching pockets to their clients,” Burgener explained. “The person wouldn’t start acceleration until they hit pockets. It became too slow. They end up missing 6 to 8 inches of acceleration.”

What’s Pockets?

The point at which the barbell hits the hip area or the pockets is known as the power position in Olympic weightlifting. It’s the “position where ‘power spike’ and impulse against the floor occurs,” according to USA Weightlifting, the governing body for the sport of weightlifting in the U.S.

In the power position, the knees and hips shift forward and down slightly to the jump position, the lifter’s balance shifts toward mid-foot while the heels stay flat, the elbows stay out, the arms are straight and the head is in a neutral position, states a USAW coaching manual.

“Speed is the most important part of this whole thing.”

—Mike Burgener

“Once it starts its acceleration pattern, then the bar will hit mid-thigh or hip pockets,” Burgener explained.

Every Olympic-weightlifting coach should know and understand what the mid-thigh and pockets positions are all about, he noted.

"I still teach it, but I don't spend as much time on it as I was before because it was slowing people down," Burgener said. "Speed is the most important part of this whole thing."

He added: "The real art of this coaching is being able to bring the bar from the ground to that 1-inch position above the knee and start the acceleration from there."

Burgener has never had to emphasize or even explain pockets to Olympians or other elite-level lifters, including daughter-in-law Natalie Burgener.

"It's just a matter of emphasis of position teaching," he said. "I still believe in pockets. I just don't want to overemphasize it to the extent of slowing down."

Besides de-emphasizing pockets to beginners, Burgener said "staying back" has been a bit of an issue, as well.

"I'm really emphasizing staying back more than I did before, and I will sit there and as they bring the bar from the ground to mid-thigh or take-off position ... I will stand behind them and nudge them forward," he continued. "If the bar is pulling them forward, they're not going to finish."

The Natural Evolution of Coaching

These changes, Burgener noted, are a typical part of coaching.

"Your coaching clearly depends on the athlete you're dealing with. I don't coach every athlete the same. You just can't do it," he said. "You have to come up with cues that your athlete will believe in—that's the bottom line—and that they understand."



Once the bar is above the knee, it should be accelerating all the way up the thigh for a violent finish at the pockets position. If you wait too long to begin your acceleration, you'll miss out on valuable power.



It's important to realize that a beginner and an advanced athlete need different cues for success on the platform. Tailor your coaching to your athlete for best results.

Burgener's cues for his son Casey are different than those for beginners.

"I never said the word 'jump.' Didn't have to," he explained. "But for somebody like a brand-spankin'-new trainer that doesn't get the double knee bend, I have to say 'jump.'"

Learning to whittle down cues is something he learned while coaching high-school athletes.

"My kids taught me that," Burgener said.

After Coach Burgener constantly repeated the phrase "triple extension," a teenager asked him, "Why don't you just say 'jump, coach?'"

Today, short cues, he said, are his favorite:

- Finish.
- Stay back.
- When the arms bend, the power ends.
- Shoulders lead, arms follow.
- And, of course, junkyard dog "for aggressiveness."

"What I'm trying to do is keep everything simple," Burgener noted. "For me, when I was coaching the best, the less I said the better."



*Andréa Maria Cecil is the Regional Community Media Director for the Australia, Europe and North East regions. She was also the North East Regional Media Director for the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games. Cecil has been a freelance writer and editor for the **CrossFit Journal** since 2010 and also writes for the CrossFit Games site. She spent nearly 13 years as a professional journalist, most recently as managing editor of the **Central Penn Business Journal** in Harrisburg, Pa. The 34-year-old is a native of New Orleans who lives in York County, Pa. There, she's been doing CrossFit since 2008 at **CrossFit York**, where she coaches Olympic weightlifting as a USA Weightlifting Level 1 Sports Performance Coach. Additionally, Cecil dedicates four days a week to training the Olympic lifts herself at **McKenna's Gym**.*