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Cues for Weightlifting Coaches

Bob Takano goes over the finer points of cueing lifters in training and competition.

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Coaching cues are a form of communication that can be unique to a particular coach and the specific situation. They are in fact abbreviations of concepts that would take a great deal of time to explain.

They can and should be used in the early developmental period as technique is taught, and they can be of even greater value during competition when there is a need to quickly focus on a specific point about technique while the competition clock is winding down.

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The Training Phase

A good coach will break down a complex movement like a snatch, clean or jerk into learnable chunks. Depending on the individual, each “chunk” will have a point or two in need of greater emphasis.

For instance, in learning the pull off the floor, an athlete might have trouble maintaining a rigid spine. After explaining the need for this action, I usually provide a cue like “big chest.” Whenever the lifter begins a pull off the floor, I can just say, “big chest,” and it triggers a reminder to keep the spine rigid. After a while, the correction is integrated into the firing pattern of the athlete and may rarely or no longer be necessary.



In a competition, there's no time for long explanations, so a coach and athlete must rely on the short cues they've developed over time.

During the learning phase, the emphasis should be on one chunk and one problem within the chunk—hence the use of only one cue. Too many cues can be confusing and will inhibit the learning process.

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Because any beginner has a history of movement patterns, some of them are easily adaptable to the technique of the Olympic lifts. Other appropriate movement patterns may be missing altogether. Because of this, all the chunks will not be mastered at the same rate.

When teaching technique to beginners, the catch positions should be mastered first, and the attendant coaching cues should be installed. They should be practiced first in the session while the nervous system is fresh. When the newcomer fatigues, technical training should cease, and the training can then progress on to chunks that are more nearly mastered. The rest of the session can be used for balancing the structural development and increasing training capacity.

At the end of several weeks, the athlete should have mastered most of the technique of the competitive lifts and be only in need of a few cues during the course of the ensuing training.

The Competition

During a competition, the athlete and coach should have established a strong relationship, and part of that relationship is the collection of cues.

Once an athlete has experience with competition, the altered state is achieved. In that state, the lifter can only hear the voice of the coach clearly. All other voices are muted or muffled.

Events are taking place rapidly within the competition, and even an experienced coach can find his or her lifter moved to the front of the queue for a given weight with unexpected suddenness. This can take place in a matter of seconds and is not conducive to long explanations. This is where the use of short cues is especially helpful.

At this point, the lifter is conditioned to the very few cues that should be appropriate. For each phase of each lift, there should only be one cue that focuses on the weakest technical point of the lift. For the pull in the clean or the snatch, the cue might be “tight lats” or “elbows out” depending on the particular weak aspect of the lifter’s movement pattern.

There were all too many coaches shouting out unnecessary cues at the recently concluded London Olympics simply because it was the Olympics and the cameras were rolling.

We’ve all seen coaches at local competitions who are calling out a variety of cues, certainly too many to be properly assimilated by the lifter on the platform. It might also be noted that the same assortment of cues is used for every lifter coached by a particular coach. It is altogether possible that all of the lifters on the team are in need of the same cues because that coach is emphasizing the same points with all of them. Another consideration, however, is that the coach is simply using the coach’s station as a means of attracting attention.

If a coach has performed coaching in the most effective manner, there will be almost no need for any action other than a very few cues—or none at all. I mention this because there were all too many coaches shouting out unnecessary cues at the recently concluded London Olympics simply because it was the Olympics and the cameras were rolling.

So How Do You Proceed?

What you are trying to do is develop a series of stimulus/response actions that are unmistakable and brief. You are looking for triggers that will initiate a specific response from your lifters, a feeling that will enable technical proficiency.

If you’ve been a lifter who was coached by someone who knew what he or she was doing, you probably already have some favorite cues you’re comfortable with. Within the coaching/teaching realm, the most successful individuals are those who have assembled a unique collection of strategies they’ve incorporated from other mentors they respect. So borrow the ones that work, that are most poignant.

Don’t borrow cues that people use just to use. There are some that have a counterproductive aspect but are used anyway. My least favorite of these is “reach.” For some reason, many coaches shout this one out when their athletes are snatching or jerking. When most people hear “reach,” they are going to extend their arms upward and shrug the shoulders. This shrugging will require the bar to be lifted to a greater height. That is counterproductive.



Coach Mike Burgener is a master of giving short, effective cues to his athletes.

Your cues should be brief, and your lifters should know exactly the meaning of each cue. Your cue might be cryptic to bystanders. It might even be just a sound or a grunt. If, however, it has a perfectly clear meaning to your athletes, it's a valid cue.

One thing to keep in mind, though, is if your cues are a little on the cryptic side, there is the possibility that your athlete might someday qualify for an international meet you cannot attend. In that case, a national coaching staff member may have to take over the reins, and if your cue is a little too cryptic it could lead to confusion.

Cues should be delivered with enough time for your lifter to get into the proper headspace. You might deliver the cue just as your athlete mounts the platform. Most lifters like a few seconds of silence to get "in the mood" before the lift actually commences. A cue at this point could be disruptive.

If your athlete responded properly to the cue and then missed the weight or was slightly off form on a given attempt and has another attempt soon, you need to be able to detect what this different technical error was and pull up the cue to correct it. This has to take place at the same time that the opposition is lifting, and you have to make a decision as to your athlete's next weight selection. This is where short cues are invaluable.



Some cues are nonverbal and make sense only to the coach and athlete.

Above all, if your lifter is performing wonderfully, no cue is necessary and should not be given. You did your coaching in the gym, and no further response is warranted.

Be a good coach: develop short cues, use them judiciously and allow your athlete to shine!



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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 43 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. For the past year he has been coaching at CrossFit Olympic Lifting Trainer courses. Website: www.takanoathletics.com.