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Going Heavy at Regionals

Olympian Chad Vaughn offers tips for attacking the heavy dumbbell snatches and hang cleans at the Reebok CrossFit Games Regionals.

By Chad Vaughn

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Mike Warlentin/CrossFit Journal

I remember being very surprised when the Regional events included heavy dumbbell snatches.

My trade is, of course, getting a barbell over my head with two hands, not raising a dumbbell with one, so I was actually unsure that I could even handle the 70-pounder. Obviously, I had no choice but to try, and in the end it actually wasn't that bad. It was mostly just a matter of comfort with the movement. But I can definitely understand why so many have struggled, though many more have handled the 70s and 100s far more comfortably than I would have predicted. In the end, I believe 70 and 100 lb. were the right weights—and great separators.

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To me, the weight used on this exercise is a statement of what HQ is looking for in the CrossFit Games: the truly fit. First, we really didn't see very heavy weights in the Open, though Event 12.2's heavy snatches certainly tested those who were able to get to them. But in the Regionals, there is a complete lack of mercy with the loads in some workouts. They are heavy—love it!

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CrossFit founder and CEO Greg Glassman wrote this: "We'd not trade improvements in any other fitness metric for a decrease in work capacity." With that in mind, you had to

have ridiculous work capacity to even survive the Open and get through to Regionals. I know many athletes who didn't qualify for the Regional fun but could have fared very well at the events. But you have to make it there first. It's great if you are capable of all the skills, but if you are unable to make it through the Open, then you have work to do in the area that CrossFit holds dearest.

At the Regionals things got heavier, but the requirement for huge work capacity didn't change. Let's see if you're strong as well!

How about a bunch of Energizer Bunny, bulletproof tanks at the 2012 Reebok CrossFit Games? That should make for a great show!

Snatching a Dumbbell

As for technique with a movement like the one-arm dumbbell snatch, is it important? As always, absolutely! But, with all variables involved, being able to "muscle" the weight if needed gives one a huge advantage.



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After setting up with hips lower than shoulders, athletes should use an aggressive "elbow-out position" followed by an aggressive punch to lockout.

First of all, all the basics of the two-arm barbell snatch are the same for the dumbbell version of the lift: the back is tight, and the set-up finds the hips lower than the shoulders (to involve more of the legs). The dumbbell needs to stay close to the body throughout the movement, and power needs to be exerted through an arm that stays straight to full extension: hips completely open, heels lifted, shoulder shrugged and torso slightly leaning back. That extension is followed by an aggressive elbow-out position leading to an aggressive “punch” to lockout overhead.

There are some key differences between the barbell and dumbbell snatches, starting from the floor. Your foot position will be a little wider than normal in the dumbbell



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The dumbbell should stay as close to the body as possible throughout the entire lift.

snatch. Your feet might even be slightly outside your squat stance because the dumbbell will need to be set lengthwise (as a barbell) between your feet. Your body will be lower, of course, because the dumbbell sits lower than a loaded barbell, but the back position should be at least comparable between the two movements. Exact foot-and back-position differences are dependent on overall body type, limb lengths, etc. But you have no need to overthink the positions: just set your feet comfortably outside the dumbbell to leave plenty of room for the load to travel between the knees. Set your back with the feel of your regular barbell set-up in mind.

As you stand, fight hard to keep the dumbbell close to your body all the way up—actually between the legs during the leg drive. With a barbell, we want to position the knees back to create vertical shins by the time the barbell clears the knees to keep the bar in a straight path, but with the dumbbell it's OK and maybe even necessary for it to pass at least slightly between the knees to help keep it closer to the body.

The more important thing is that you keep the shoulder over the dumbbell and even exaggerate the position to bring the shoulder slightly in front of the dumbbell up past the knees. That will allow the use of more posterior chain to get the dumbbell overhead. If the back is too erect and the shoulder is behind the dumbbell too soon, you'll be using more quad and less overall body power. You'll also be forced to use more muscling with the arm, which can result in less control and a less solid landing position with the weight overhead.

In comparison to a barbell, where we want contact at the lap in extension before the arms pull the body under the bar to lockout overhead, you want to keep the dumbbell as close as possible without this contact. With the use of only one arm and the awkward shape of the dumbbell, any contact will be far less smooth and create an increased chance for the load to be knocked off an ideal straight path. But as the weight moves further away from the body, extra muscling will begin.

The body should extend up and back in the finish. If the body is only straight up, then the dumbbell will have to go out and around, which will either leave it forward or create some unwanted backward momentum as the dumbbell goes overhead. The body should also be leaned slightly to the side opposite the dumbbell as only the loaded shoulder shrugs to aid in the heave and the directing of the dumbbell overhead.

In the dumbbell snatch, especially for reps, you will use far more muscling and far more upward pulling of the weight with the arm. In the dumbbell lift, there is much less pulling under with the body than in a normal snatch, which you want to ride down to as deep a squat as possible. In the Regional lift, the dumbbell should be caught only with a slight breaking of the knees and nowhere near that full squat—provided you have the strength and power to get the dumbbell up high enough to catch it with a slight break of the knees.

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Shoulder stability for this movement is key and will be the first thing to go. Conservation of this much-needed element will likely take place with a higher catch and a slight drop under the weight. But consider that if the arm and/or shoulder lack the strength to 100 percent muscle the dumbbell overhead with no drop underneath (at least while fresh), is one prepared to drop under the weight? And then what happens if you have the strength when fresh but then fatigue and have to start dropping under?

In addition, to aid in stability overhead, I recommend keeping the feet—or at least the toes—in contact with the floor. With a barbell, most will benefit in many ways by picking up the feet and putting them back down in an exaggerated and aggressive fashion as they go under the barbell. This resetting of the feet is mainly for better extension, speed under the bar and achieving the best deep-squat/catch position.

With the dumbbell, I still feel it's necessary to extend up onto the toes to better adhere to the all-important core-to-extremity principle, but the feet leaving the floor any more than this is much less necessary because the feet are already wider than normal and the body hopefully won't be dropping with blinding speed too far under the dumbbell anyway. I'm not saying you should be moving slowly, of course, but the drop under the load requires more speed in a barbell lift than in the dumbbell variety. So, most importantly, with the feet staying more in

contact with the floor, the catch will be much less jarring on the shoulder and will have a much better chance of being solid.

Finally, don't forget about the proper completion of the lift, which will help maintain the dumbbell's proper line of action as it goes overhead and further contribute to the best possible shoulder stability. Remember to direct the dumbbell in this path by aggressively flaring the elbow out and up as the dumbbell stays in, and be sure to punch the lockout.

The dumbbell snatch is definitely a fun and interesting yet evil movement. Good stuff! Jon Gilson and the Again Faster crew put together a great tutorial on the Again Faster website. Watch it here: <https://www.againfaster.com/en/blog/2012/05/01/single-arm-dumbbell-snatch/>.



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

Triple extension of knees, hips and ankles will transfer maximum power to the dumbbell. Vaughn recommends keeping the toes in contact with the floor at the end of the lift.



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Vaughn recommends using a hang power clean rather than a squat as long as the athlete has the power to allow reception in a quarter squat or higher. When fatigue sets in, a hang squat clean can become more efficient.

Cycling Heavy Hang Cleans

Workout 2 of Regionals finishes with 30 heavy hang cleans at 225 lb. for the men and 135 lb. for the women. There are two things I want to discuss and hammer in for this movement: the importance of mimicking the ideal positions with a clean from the floor and maintaining a quality reception of the bar.

Those ideal positions that you are trying to create from the floor are all about keeping the bar in line and activating the posterior chain for the most possible power. As you set up from a standing position with the bar in your hands for the hang clean, you want to keep only a slight bend in the knee while pushing the hips back and leaning over the bar with the shoulders (all while locking the back in of course). This is correct whether it's necessary for you lower the bar down the leg one inch or all the way to the knee. Once in the right position, explode from there.

If you have an efficient squat clean, then why not go the smooth route and use your legs as shocks rather than brakes?

If the back stays erect as you excessively dip with the legs, or if the knees bend too much and create a forward angle in the shin as the bar slides down the leg, then the bar and body will likely have forward momentum as you return to extension. Also, from this position you will be using more of the quads. The quads are very strong, yes, but by creating more tension on the hamstrings and tying the hips in with a tight back (posterior-chain activation), you are in a better position of power and can take advantage of the so-called rubber-band effect.

From the floor, most people either don't know how to create these specific positions or struggle to do so. If you know these positions, they are definitely easier to get into from up top as you are learning. In fact, it's not uncommon for beginners, intermediates and even some vets to lift more from the hang than from the floor, so take advantage of this set-up in the hang cleans at Regionals.

Heavy ... (continued)

(Please see my *CrossFit Journal* article [Oly Optimization](#) for more detail on how to stand and explode from these positions.)

With regard to the reception of the bar in the hang clean, the question is whether to catch the weight high in a power clean or to sink to the squat clean. I think most would want to stay high and save the legs for overall energy conservation, but is this really the case? You have to consider how the body reacts as the weight gets heavy or as one wears with high reps: the feet typically jump out further and further, the body drops lower and lower anyway, and the rest of the body begins to contort. What this means is that you are using up more energy than you think in fighting against yourself.

Heavy or tired power cleans are very jarring on the body when the body is in inconsistent positions. If you have an efficient squat clean, then why not go the smooth route and use your legs as shocks rather than brakes? Think about which makes more sense athletically: the energy consumed out of less than quality positions far outweighs the extra leg work with a full squat.

My recommendation to some of the competitors was to use the hang power clean as long as they could do so with good quality. I defined quality as movement in which the feet do not jump outside the athlete's normal squat stance and the reception of the barbell is no lower than about a quarter squat. Otherwise, just sink.



Mike Warkentin/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.