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Five Important O-Lift Drills

Bob Takano recommends five drills perfect for anyone learning the snatch and the clean and jerk.

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“Drill” is not a term we use very much in the weightlifting community.

If we think of drills as exercises or activities performed to learn and refine technique, then it is appropriate to discuss those exercises, but it's more important to know how and when to implement them into the technique training of a weightlifter.

I've developed a list of favorites that I've found to be quite effective. They may not be the same ones other coaches use, but they work for me as I teach technique to new lifters.

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The jerk balance teaches athletes to keep the torso erect and drive forward under the bar.

I'm going to digress a bit here and address the issue of exercise selection by coaches. It is perfectly natural and normal for many coaches to address their own shortcomings or strengths while designing training, especially during the early days of the coaching career. Coaches who had poor lockout may have their athletes training to improve lockout even when it's unnecessary to do so. On the other hand, there might be coaches who were excellent pullers and so design training that overemphasizes pulling. Both extremes are incorrect. Coaches mature when they learn to solve the shortcomings of each athlete they are coaching.

Now, on to my selections. I wouldn't call these essential, but I do use these movements most frequently, so I believe they apply to the most universal shortcomings. The number of times they are employed in training is strictly individual.

Jerk Balance

Many athletes find it difficult to conceptualize supporting a weight directly overhead and stepping forward into a lift to do so. This movement helps to remediate that situation, which is particularly prevalent with people who have a strong bench-pressing background. There are two reasons for this:

1. Their shoulder mobility is often limited so overhead support is difficult.

2. They're used to looking up at the bar they're lifting, which causes a bending of the torso away from the line of support.

The first variation of the jerk balance is to perform the movement with the bar resting on the shoulders behind the neck. This will make it easier to position the bar directly overhead. The feet should be positioned with the lead foot approximately 30 centimeters ahead of the hind foot. The hind foot should be balanced on the ball of the foot with the toes pointed inward or straight ahead.

The movement commences with the athlete bending the knees to dip and then driving up so that the bar is driven overhead. At the peak of the leg drive, the front foot steps forward into a standard lunging distance and the bar should travel upwards to a locked-arm position.

When this exercise becomes comfortable and the athlete is familiar with the finishing position, the movement can then be practiced with the bar resting on the shoulders in front of the neck. The same movement pattern and dynamic are employed, but this version places more stress on the torso to maintain an erect position and is more similar to the actual jerk. It also forces the shoulders into the most proper position of overhead support. Furthermore, it places an emphasis on maintaining a rigid torso during the drive, drop and overhead-locking phases. It also teaches the athlete to push forward off the back foot, the lack of which is often a cause for jerks being lost forward.

Four sets of 2 to 4 reps at appropriately taxing weights are prescribed.

Halting Deadlifts

The snatch and clean variations of this movement are both exceptionally valuable for teaching the most difficult phase of the pull, and they can also be employed throughout the training of the athlete to increase strength in the correct motor pathway once technique is mastered. Halting deadlifts should be employed early in the technique-training process in sets of 2, 3 or 4 reps per set with a weight that taxes the weakest muscles employed in that particular phase.

The first variation is the halting deadlift to the knees. This phase teaches the simultaneous rising of the shoulders and hips until the bar reaches knee height, where it is stopped for 3 seconds on each rep. An emphasis should be placed on “pushing the floor down with the feet” and keeping the bar close to the body by forcibly contracting the latissimus dorsi muscles. Coach the athlete to perform this movement as slowly as is necessary to maintain form. Doing so will teach the rippers to learn to control the first pull.

The shoulders should remain above or in front of the bar. The pressure on the foot goes from the ball of the foot to the front of the heel. Some athletes may have seen

world-class athletes starting with a low hip position and then raising the hips to a more conventional starting position in an attempt to generate more momentum early in the first pull. This is an advanced technique and should not be attempted until the conventional first pull is thoroughly mastered and the physical development is balanced.

The second variation is to continue further and lift the bar to the power position. This requires performing the first variation correctly, and then shifting the knees and hips forward while slightly extending the hips and keeping the shoulders over or ahead of the bar. Simultaneously, the pressure on the foot shifts from the front of the heel to the ball of the foot. The latissimus dorsi are extremely important in maintaining the proper angle between the torso and the arms.

After the first variation is mastered, the second variation should be practiced until it is performed nearly perfectly. From this point of accomplishment, the lifter is ready to proceed to learning the entire pull.

Push Press

Although at first glance the push press appears to be a pressing movement, it is actually a jerk-driving movement. If sufficient jerk drive does not propel the bar above the top of the head, the pressing portion cannot be completed.



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The push press develops driving power in the legs and pressing strength in the arms. Notice the bar is supported on the shoulders in Frame 1, allowing the legs to transfer momentum through the torso to the bar.

Important ... (continued)

The bar must be supported on the shoulders so that the shoulders and torso are supporting the weight, and not the wrists and forearms. The elbows must be raised to the front sufficiently to prevent the bar from rolling off the shoulders. The knees should be unlocked.

The athlete bends the knees, keeping the torso erect, with the pressure on the heels. The knees bend until power-position depth is reached, and then the athlete drives upward by extending the knees and hips until both are straight. This should provide enough momentum to drive the bar above head height. At this point the arms and shoulders begin pressing the weight to a locked position overhead.

Four to 5 sets of 2 to 4 reps should work well. After its use during the technique-learning phase, the athlete can continue to use the push press in training to develop jerk-driving power and pressing strength.

Muscle Snatch

Much emphasis is often given toward pulling the athlete under the bar in the completion of the full snatch, but little attention is given to the role of the arms in aligning the body under the bar. Great snatches are also the result of the lifter pushing the body under the bar once the bar has reached a sufficient relative height. Most experienced lifters will tell you that they achieved the lowest squat they ever got into by pushing themselves lower off the bar while performing a snatch.

The correct pathway for pushing under the bar in the snatch is learned by performing muscle snatches, either from the floor or the hang.

The pull is the same as for a typical power snatch, but once full extension is reached, the knees do not re-bend. The torso remains erect, and the elbows come from a pulling position forward to a pressing position. The movement is completed by pressing the weight overhead without any lowering of the torso. This pressing movement is the one that is employed to push the body under the bar at the bottom of a squat snatch.

Four sets of 2 to 4 reps are recommended. Although not used extensively in advanced training, the muscle snatch is an excellent warm-up movement for top-level lifters.



Practicing a muscle snatch during your warm-up will drill correct arm positioning and help you practice aligning your body underneath the barbell.

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Notice the position of the athlete's torso remains unchanged, even as the bar travels overhead.

Snatch-Grip Squat Press

This movement forces athletes to sit more upright in the overhead-squat position, allows them to position the shoulders so that they can press under the weight, and teaches the stabilization of the scapula by contracting the rhomboids. All of these three aspects must be mastered in order to become a proficient snatcher.

Some athletes with tight hip flexors may have a difficult time maintaining an erect torso while overhead squatting. Others have tight hamstrings, weak gluteals, weak spinal erectors or any combination of these conditions. The snatch-grip squat press will force all these situations to improve.

The athlete should support the weight on the shoulders behind the neck and take a snatch-width grip. Squat into a flat-footed bottom position and commence the movement by pressing the weight overhead while staying in the squat. If an erect torso is not maintained, the movement is difficult if not impossible to perform. If the athlete does not know how to contract the rhomboids to stabilize the scapulae, the arms cannot be placed in a position to press the weight overhead.

Four sets of 3 to 5 reps will work well, especially if performed before snatching. This exercise is not a Sots press. Sots presses are performed from in front of the neck with a clean-width grip and serve an entirely different set of functions.

Know When to Move On

Well, there you have them: my five favorite drill exercises for beginners learning the technique of the snatch and clean and jerk.

In the art of coaching, one of the truly important skills is knowing when not to use an exercise. If these exercises perform the functions they're supposed to, they may have to be de-emphasized in the continuing development of the athlete. Figuring out the degree of de-emphasis is one of the important tasks of the coach.



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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.