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# THE CrossFit JOURNAL

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## The Snatch Is a Bitch

Champion weightlifter Donny Shankle addresses the true character of the world's fastest lift.

By Donny Shankle

January 2013

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The snatch is one of two exercises in the sport of weightlifting. It involves lifting a barbell from the floor up and over your head in one motion.

The word “snatch” means “to quickly seize something,” and weightlifters spend years refining their technique to optimize their strength on the exercise. This enables them to move the bar as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Many hours are spent in the gym practicing the snatch and trying to get as close to perfection as possible. Because the movement is so quick, there is little room for error. The slightest mistake will cause you to miss the lift, especially once you are lifting near maximum effort.

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1 of 6



Every weightlifter eventually develops a style unique to his or her body type, strength proficiency and skill competence. Yet, despite all the necessary physical tools a weightlifter needs in order to snatch well, the exercise becomes very much a mental test once the weight becomes heavy. As the name “snatch” implies, you must move as quickly as possible during the exercise. Any hesitation during the lift will almost always cause you to miss.

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**After you are introduced to the snatch and become familiar with her as an exercise, you eventually see the dark side of the bitch’s character.**

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Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

***Sometimes you beat the bar, and sometimes the bar beats you.***

Whenever you are trying to do something well, repetition results in understanding. For instance, every one of us practiced behind the wheel of a car before we studied the DMV booklet for our test. The repetition of opening the door, sitting behind the wheel, closing the door, starting the ignition, feeling the engine rev up, etc. is what relaxed us. We all feel a bit of anxiety whenever we drive a new car, and this is normal because it is not our car. We do not know this car. This looks new, the door closing sounds new, and the engine feels different. It is only driving in it a few times that causes us to be comfortable. The snatch is the same way, and you must commit a great amount of your time to become stronger at anything.

Time devoted to hard work in the gym lifting weights expands your comfort level with the exercise. Your muscles become stronger and more flexible. The positions you need to be in to snatch well begin to make sense to you. Most importantly, you develop the coordination requisite as a beginner to eventually break free of naive appreciation. After you are introduced to the snatch and become familiar with her as an exercise, you eventually see the dark side of the bitch’s character.



***Once you have the physical tools for the snatch, the mental battles begin.***

Of the two exercises in weightlifting (the other being the clean and jerk), the snatch responds at first with decent results. This is due to the lift being an awkward movement. Your grip on the bar during a snatch is much wider than shoulder width, so the muscles and joints are not used to holding things over your head like this. One of the fundamental concepts behind improvement in weightlifting is adaptation, and it does not take long for anyone who starts snatching to gradually build this type of specific overhead strength by way of adaptation. Either your muscles become stronger or you inevitably drop the bar on your head or upper back—which, I can confidently tell you from experience, does not feel good.

A weightlifter's arm lockout is important during a snatch: the straighter the arms the better. Does this mean not everyone will be good at the snatch? Absolutely. Not everyone is willing to put in the hard work essential to snatching well, and of those who are willing, not all of them will be able to lock out their arms completely.

A good arm lockout is not all you must have. The golden rule in weightlifting is being able to hold your back straight. So, if you have lived your life practicing poor posture, you will not be good enough at the snatch (or weightlifting for that matter) to be competitive.

Good lockout and holding a straight back are the two physical traits that are a must to snatch well. A few other physical traits that help are being able to get your hips low, having flexible wrists and ankles, and being light on your feet.

Now some physical limitations can be overcome with consistent training, and this is important because physical limits are not as difficult to overcome as mental limits. Besides, overcoming physical limitations is part of the journey in becoming a great weightlifter. You may not have all the tools necessary to reach perfection, but you know what? Perfection in this sport is never attainable.

Where is the fun in that? If you were flawless at the snatch you wouldn't be able to live moments like the one below.



## A Game of Inches

Michael pulled the straps of his singlet up and over his shoulders as he waited for his turn to lift. He was ready to go five minutes ago but the guy in front of him missed his opening attempt and had to follow himself again. Michael's coach came over and gave him a firm slap on his upper back.

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**All he kept thinking as he covered his hands in chalk was not to hit his dick on the bar like he did at his last competition.**

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"Get out there and move, Mike!"

"Am I up?"

"Yes, the clock has started."

It was Michael's opening attempt in the snatch. Both he and his coach had agreed earlier in the week his opener would be 135 kilos, just shy of 300 lb. This was Mike's fourth competition, and all he kept thinking as he covered his hands in chalk was not to hit his dick on the bar like he did at his last competition. That's why he had the faintest grimace of a smile on his face as he approached the bar. The audience probably thought he just exuded confidence and was about to attack the bar like a bull running down a matador. Little did they realize Mike's legs were shaking and for some reason he had trouble taking in a full breath.

Earlier, while on his knees in the bathroom beside a toilet, he had promised to God to quit smoking if He helped him go six for six.

The audience came to quiet once Mike grabbed the bar. The clock just reached 30 seconds and the halfway buzzer went off. Mike liked to let the clock run down halfway because the buzzer going off as he pulled the bar distracted him. His coach stood by the opening of the entrance to the platform and shouted one last time.

"Keep your chest up!"



***The exact moment where you really get to know the snatch.***

Michael positioned the first eyelets of his shoes directly under the bar and dropped his hips low. The moment he felt his body weight on his heels and saw the judge in front of him as he raised his head, he pulled as hard as he could. As the bar travelled past his knees, he fought hard to keep his chest up and over the bar. For a split second, he remembered all the hang work below the knee his coach had made him do to fix this problem.

He slid the bar up his singlet so close that you could hear it drag along his legs. The weight felt light. It felt so light that it took Michael by surprise, and he brought his hips to the bar too soon, which shifted him onto his toes. As he went under the bar, it was way too far out in front and he ended up missing.

The judges each raised a red flag to signal a failed attempt. He never understood this practice for misses like that.

"Ya, it's a miss, you fuckheads. I think that should be plainly obvious," Mike said under his breath as he walked off the platform.

His coach told him the same thing he always does. On this occasion, it just went in one ear and out the other because Mike was infuriated with himself. He had worked himself up so much he completely forgot the weight always feels lighter on competition day. Three months of training to make this opening attempt easily so he could actually try for a competition-total personal record just went right out the window in less than a second.

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The two-minute clock that had started after his miss was now down to a minute. Without waiting any longer, Mike got up from the chair he was sitting in and walked back to the chalk box. He dusted his hands, pulled the straps over his shoulders close to his neck and tucked down his dick.



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

***The most explosive of all movements, the snatch is also  
the most unforgiving.***

This time he wasn't thinking about anything and murdered what was on the bar for his second attempt. The judges gave him three white lights as the audience gasped.

"Fucking snatch," he thought to himself as he walked off the platform this time.

**Hatred, Courage—and Desire**

This situation is all too familiar with weightlifters at some point in their career. No matter how hard they train or how hard they apply what they have learned, sometimes that damn lift is so uncooperative.

You train to stay on your heels off the floor, and somehow get pulled to your toes. You train to keep the bar close to your body during the pull, and somehow it gets away from you. You train to get under the bar as fast as possible after you reach the finish of your pull, and for some reason it feels like you're moving so slowly you could recite the goddamn preamble to the Constitution. The lift on occasion can feel like a quagmire of zombies pulling you down while they gnaw on your face.

To this day, I hate that lift, and any weightlifter who tells me it is his favorite of the two I want to slap in the face and ask, "What kind of psychotic nitwit are you?"

The snatch is the most explosive movement in all of sport. When done successfully at a heavy weight, it is a beautiful thing to behold—but that doesn't take away from it being a pain-in-the-ass exercise. It is the lift weightlifters look forward to being over so they can move on to the clean and jerk, which is less tricky.

Now don't get me wrong: this vehemence I have for the lift does not take away from my understanding or appreciation for the snatch's intricacy. Weightlifters who are good at the lift are very great athletes who have undoubtedly worked hard, and the image of a weightlifter at the bottom of a snatch is an esteemed distinction found only in our sport. Not everyone can do it, most people are not willing to go there (I don't blame them), and those who are good at it have just put in the time.

You have to move during a snatch with a type of speed that is difficult to put into words. The exercise lasts but for a split second, and if you let the bar get away from you for any number of those milliseconds, it is an almost guaranteed miss.

There is a courage factor that accompanies weightlifting, which the greatest of weightlifters overcome. This courage is clearly visible in the snatch during the time between the bar's rising and the bar's falling. In that time frame, the weightlifter must not hesitate and must move his feet as quickly as possible. Any lapse in your confidence or break in your concentration will cause you to pause in your movement, leading you to flop.

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**Weightlifting is an unforgiving sport that tests your willpower against a cold piece of steel, and the snatch loves to probe at your uncertainty.**

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Let us get one thing straight: for those who are thinking of training the snatch heavy, be as decisive as a general yelling orders to his troops. Move once, like you mean it, and get to the point—the point being get your ass as low to the ground as possible. In the process of things to come, be prepared to drop the bar on yourself hundreds of times, develop aches in places you didn't know existed, and go through countless rolls of tape to keep the flesh on your thumbs from ripping off. Weightlifting is an unforgiving sport that tests your willpower against a cold piece of steel, and the snatch loves to probe at your uncertainty.

For this reason, weightlifters who are great at the snatch tend to be egotistical paragons who can flip the switch from passivity to hostility at breakneck speed. They ought to be able to do this considering they have spent years nearly breaking their necks.

The snatch may look awkward and dangerous, but it isn't. It is no more dangerous than doing somersaults on a four-inch beam, and no more awkward than cramming yourself into a bobsled with three other guys ass to nuts.

What gets you great at the snatch is your confidence. A coach can tell you a thousand times to do this or that, but, if you still do not grasp the gravity of moving with conviction, then all your reps in gym are for nothing.

One of the best pieces of wisdom I ever received that has stuck with me to this day comes from my time in the service: Move from A to B with a sense of purpose. That resonates with me as a weightlifter today just as much as it did yesterday when I was not. Don't dilly-dawdle when it comes to the snatch for the same reasons they teach you not to dilly-dawdle during combat. You may end up going home in a body bag. OK, maybe your penalty will not be that severe, but you can rest assured that if you do not move the way the name "snatch" implies, you are not uncovering how much you can really lift.

As much as I abhor the snatch, when it is done right at the right time, it feels great. Making all your snatches in competition quite often gives you a great lead going into the clean and jerk. Take each lift one at a time and trust in the training you have put in.

The snatch will beat you up if you let it and cause you a world more frustration than its cousin the clean. Don't let it get the best of you, though. A personal-record snatch is waiting for you right around the corner.

How fast will you move to get it?



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 in 2016.*