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## Why'd You Miss?

Maybe you weren't strong enough to make the lift, or maybe something else went wrong. Jeff Barnett offers a non-exhaustive list of reasons why the iron didn't move.

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By Jeff Barnett CrossFit Impulse

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Staff/CrossFit Journal

A missed lift is a wonderful opportunity. It's an opportunity to test your limits, to build character through willingness to fail and to examine what went wrong.

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Many proficient coaches have said that you should plan your lifts carefully such that you never miss. Perhaps their theory is correct when dealing with professional lifters. However, I am a relative novice, and I am in the business of training novices. I generally think that if you haven't failed, then you haven't pushed yourself far enough. There are exceptions, of course, but missing a lift is generally a natural, expected and productive part of strength training. I can't fathom how you'll ever surpass your limits if you never actually know them.

Fully training at your limits, however, is necessarily difficult. You've undoubtedly stared at the bar and bumpers on the floor and wondered why you couldn't nail that load when everything indicated you should have been able to. Perhaps these 10 ideas will help you find the reason and correct it to ensure success on your next attempt.

### **You aren't physically capable**

While the psychological, speed and coordination aspects of strength training can't be ignored, at some point you just aren't strong enough to complete the lift at a given load. The bad news is that this is reality for everyone at some load. The good news is that it probably isn't reality for you at the load you think it is.

### **You didn't work up to the load properly.**

My body doesn't like to jump from 80 to 100 percent of my one-rep max (1RM) between lifts. Every athlete is different, but I know that I am slave to this phenomenon, as are many other athletes. Whether it's mental confidence or true physiological limitation, I work best when I creep upward in 5-10 lb. increments. I do this rather than jumping to a load I am fairly certain I can hit because the shock of not having handled similar loads on my way up may cause me to fail.

For example, even though I know I can hit a 320-lb. back squat right now, I won't skip directly from 275 lb. to 320 lb. If I am trying to hit 320, then I will hit 295 and 310 in between. If you know what load you plan to hit, plan your approach in advance. You don't want to move too quickly, but you also don't want to perform too many lifts above 90 percent of your 1RM.



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*Strength is a key part of moving iron, but technique and mental state are also important in making a lift.*

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**Take the time to walk across the gym to get the correct weights. Don't load a 5-lb. plate on each side of the bar when you really need 2.5-lb. plates.**

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Many successful powerlifters swear by research from Soviet sports scientist A.S. Prilepin. Prilepin studied data from over 1,000 professional weightlifters and determined you shouldn't lift more than 90 percent of your 1RM more than 4-10 times in a workout. He found that exceeding this threshold delayed recovery and did not cause any further strength gains. However, you can be a little loose with the rule because it's for professional lifters who know their true 1RM to a high degree of accuracy. In comparison, you're most likely a novice who is not reaching your body's true potential. It's OK. I am too. Most of us are. Therefore, we can get away with a few more than 4-10, but don't push it too far.

Oh, and take the time to walk across the gym to get the correct weights. Don't load a 5-lb. plate on each side of the bar when you really need 2.5-lb. plates.

### **You didn't religiously check your set-up.**

It happens to everyone. You didn't take the time to ensure that your hands were symmetrically spaced on the bar, or that the bar was low enough on your back or close enough to your shins, or that your hips were at the correct height, or that your shoulders were correctly aligned with the bar, or that your stance was the correct width—and so on. Be like Santa Claus: check it twice. And if you unrack or address the bar and discover something isn't right, don't be impatient and attempt the lift anyway. Re-rack the bar, fix it, and get back to business the right way.

### **You stopped pushing/pulling through the middle.**

This applies to almost any lift involving a barbell and often happens as the load gets heavy after working up through much easier reps. You were able to complete the rep with lighter loads just by exploding at the bottom and letting momentum carry you through the rest of the lift. To complete lifts at your true 1RM, you have to explosively start the bar without quitting or reducing your effort until locked out at the completion of the rep. The same effort you applied for one second you must now apply for three or four seconds. Bands and chains are often used to teach lifters to accelerate the bar and push all the way through a lift.

### **You were too slow getting under the bar.**

Speed is a critical component of the Olympic lifts: the snatch and clean and jerk. As the load increases, you can no longer pull the bar up to your chin, giving you a large window of time to pull yourself under the bar and complete the lift. As the load gets heavier, the bar is pulled lower and lower, and that time window becomes narrower and narrower. You must focus on not only applying maximal effort to the bar but also quickly reversing course and pulling yourself underneath it. You may find a scenario where you can easily complete the lift if you only move quickly enough to get underneath it. You've got precious little time. Be fast—fast extending your hips, fast pulling your torso under the bar, fast planting your feet, fast to receive the bar actively ... fast everywhere.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

*Lindsey Smith missed 130 lb. at the 2009 CrossFit Games before coming back strong and nailing the lift to tie for third place in the max-snatch WOD.*



Staff/CrossFit Journal

***Once the bar goes outside your base of support the lift is usually over. That doesn't necessarily mean you weren't strong enough. It probably means you need to work on your technique.***

### **You weren't willing to get under the bar.**

This also happens to all of us. No matter how tough you think you are, if you aren't the slightest bit apprehensive about throwing a heavy load into the air and then jumping underneath it, then you probably aren't wired correctly. Courage is not the absence of fear but the will to act despite the presence of fear. What's the worst that will happen if you don't catch it? The bar and bumpers will clang to the ground—a missed lift. Big deal. What if the bar hits you? Well, it just doesn't happen that often.

As much as we're wired to not throw a heavy load into the air and then jump underneath it, we're also wired such that once we've committed to throwing that load into the air, we don't just give up on it and let it pummel us without protest. If you fail you'll almost certainly fail to the front or rear, getting out from under the bar. On the one-in-a-million chance that you don't get out from underneath the bar, you'll probably be trying your best to lift the bar, and it won't fall as damagingly as you think. Finally, if it does fall, hit you uninhibited and knock you down, it's probably not the end of the world. You can lie under a bar loaded with bumpers. You will fit. Try it.

I keep using the term "probably" because I don't doubt that injury is possible. That's the nature of strength training. However, I've never seen it happen in this manner. And remember, your strength training is designed to help you avoid injuries. Avoid strength training and your injury might happen at an unpredictable moment in the real world, not in the predictable confines of the gym.

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**You moved too quickly  
and relaxed your core and shoulders.**

This primarily applies to the back, front and overhead squat but can also happen in the deadlift and the Olympic lifts. Keeping everything tight throughout the squat is crucial. This includes your core, shoulders and hamstrings/glutes as you descend. Sometimes in your haste to get through a painful moment more quickly, you may rush the eccentric portion of the squat and try to sink to the bottom quickly by relaxing your core. This does indeed get you to the bottom of the squat quickly, but that's as far as you'll be going.

Now that your core and shoulders are relaxed, several factors are working against you. You no longer have a solid shelf for the bar. The bar may no longer be correctly aligned over the mid-foot. Most disastrously, your relaxed core is not able to transfer the force you are applying with your legs onto the bar. Instead, your core is absorbing all the energy by bending. In the squat, your legs and hips are the motor and your core is the transmission. If your transmission is sloppy, then your motor can produce as much power as you want and you'll still be unable to move.

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**Sometimes you need to listen  
to your body, and sometimes  
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and do what it's told.**

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Take the eccentric portion a little more slowly. Keep your hams and glutes tight. Take advantage of the stretch reflex you get at the bottom by quickly reversing course on those tight hams and glutes, and then transfer it all through a tight core!

Keeping the core tight during deadlift is difficult when your mind is preoccupied with moving a massive load. After setting up I recommend gripping the bar and pushing your butt backwards to pre-load your hams and glutes. This should also cue you to contract the erectors of your lumbar spine. When you give your posterior chain the signal to reverse course and contract, you'll be well prepared to get the bar moving. You should also ensure

you take up all the slack in your arms before you begin, lest you try to rip the bar off the ground with your arms, which won't go very well. This is akin to trying to push a car by getting a long running start and then barreling into the rear bumper at full speed. A more efficient method would be to tightly brace yourself against the car and then begin moving it. This means pulling your arms to full extension against the bar.

Similarly, in the Olympic lifts, speed and acceleration are important, but so is a tight core. You wouldn't try to move a heavy rock with a lever made of rubber, so don't try to move a heavy barbell with a flimsy core.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

***Even the fittest man on Earth misses a lift once in a while, but Mikko Salo has the mental toughness to bounce right back.***

### **You didn't plan on making the lift.**

Maybe you said, "I'll try it and see how it goes." Maybe you felt obligated to try it because you were progressively hitting lifts, but you really didn't want to go any further that day. For these and a million other reasons, sometimes we line up over/under the bar expecting failure, and that expectation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You must begin the lift with every intention and expectation that you will complete it successfully. Doubt your success and your body will yell, "Screw this! All this effort for something I don't believe is possible? I give up!"

Now don't kid yourself. The lift will be difficult. It will take everything you've got. But you've done difficult things before, haven't you? Sure, and you can make this lift—but only if you believe you can. Believe it. It's not just psychobabble bullshit. You really must believe it or you might as well wait until you do.

### **You quit on it.**

Sometimes an athlete looks like he is going to power through a lift with ease, and then he suddenly fails. Why? Simply, he quit. His body started screaming that his levels of effort and discomfort were unsustainable, and the lifter listened. Sometimes you need to listen to your body, and sometimes you need to tell it to piss off and do what it's told. Be willing to endure that discomfort for just a little longer and finish the lift. Don't stop pushing/pulling with everything you've got until your direction of movement starts to reverse and go the wrong way. Then, and only then, do you know it's over.

### **You didn't complete the required range of motion.**

Whether it's getting full depth in a squat, standing up underneath a jerk, extending your hips on a deadlift or simply locking out at the bottom of a pull-up, if you didn't complete the movement by the definition of the movement, then it doesn't count. Sure, you'll be stronger for having done the partial range of motion, but you'll be stronger if you put in that extra 1 percent and ensure that you nail it.

This really matters if you're the type to keep score, as CrossFitters often are. We all have to live by the standards, so if we don't meet them, bad on us, not the standards. And when comparing scores with those outside watchful eyes, be aware that many are more concerned with anonymously posting a big score on the Internet than building their fitness and competing on a level playing field. You'll learn which sources you can trust and which you can't. So don't be discouraged if your numbers seem smaller because you're going well past parallel on squats.

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**Work up smartly, know and believe you can hit your lift, and then unleash hell's fury and don't look back.**

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Staff/CrossFit Journal



*Jason Khalipa takes a moment to refocus after a miss at the 2009 Games. The 2008 champ got it together shortly afterward and later snatched 225 lb.*

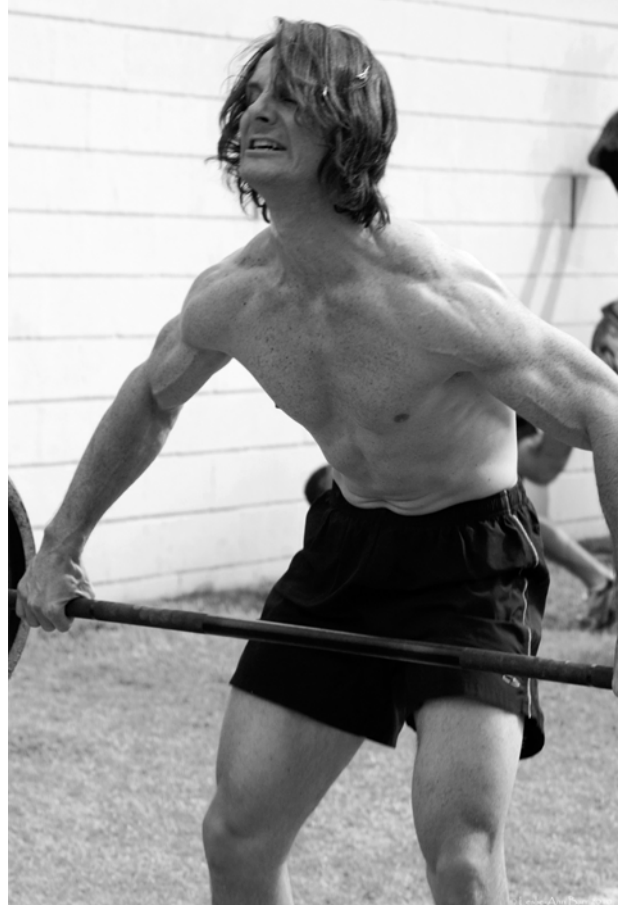
To paraphrase something I read from an experienced CrossFitter, "Unless every rep is scored by a judge on the same day, in the same place, under the same conditions, then it's anybody's guess who would actually win."

### Believe

Athletes miss lifts for innumerable reasons. Often it's a combination of reasons. But it's important to remember that many factors outside raw strength influence your success: speed, coordination and especially your mental game. Dialing in your mental game is the single quickest way to immediately improve your success in a variety of areas. Even the physical factors covered here can often be traced back to lack of confidence, focus or mental preparation.

Work up smartly, know and believe you can hit your lift, and then unleash hell's fury and don't look back. Resolve that you may scream, cry, spit and slobber while your heart feels like it will explode from your chest and send your kidneys out your ass, but you will apply every ounce of energy to the lift and you will not give up until you've reached success.

Say it. Believe it. Do it ... and succeed.



Leslie-Ann Barr

### About the Author

*Jeff Barnett is a mechanical engineer and co-owner of [CrossFit Impulse](#) in Madison, Ala. He served as a United States Marine officer from 2003 to 2007, including combat duty in Fallujah, Iraq. He has been a guest op-ed columnist for the [New York Times](#) in its [Frontlines](#) and [Homefires](#) columns. He placed sixth in the Deep South Sectionals in March and will be competing in the Southeast Regional. When he's not training clients or training himself, you might find him wakeboarding, eating meat off the bone or finishing an MBA at the University of Alabama Huntsville.*