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Ditching the Donkey Kick

Hall-of-fame Oly coach Bob Takano addresses Oly form errors common to the CrossFit community.

By Bob Takano

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For the last two years, I've been an instructor/coach in the CrossFit Olympic Lifting Seminar program under the management of Coach Mike Burgener. Those experiences plus the several USA Weightlifting Sports Performance Coach certifications I've conducted at several different CrossFit boxes have provided me with the chance to observe CrossFitters and their approach to the Olympic lifts. Furthermore, I've been coaching my own weightlifting programs within two other CrossFit boxes.

1 of 7



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Before the CrossFit Games, Annie Thorisdottir worked with Coach Mike Burgener to sort out her Oly lifts, so she was prepared when a heavy snatch showed up.

All this has provided me with a perspective on the phenomenon of Crossfitters' involvement and struggles with the O-lifts. What I've encountered is a panorama of situations, and the fact that *CrossFit Journal* editor Mike Warkentin asked me to write this article is an indication that there are others who are aware of this situation.

Let me begin by saying the problems that commonly arise occur less frequently in those boxes where the owner/coach and coaching staff have taken the trouble to learn the lifts under the tutelage of an experienced weightlifting coach. In this way, they learn the importance of spotting technical errors and the strategies to correct them. They appreciate good technique and are vigilant about spotting and correcting errors in performance. Just as relevant is the fact that they've internalized the kinesthetics and can describe the "feeling" of the various aspects of the lifts to their clients.

For example, I've done quite a bit of coaching with James Lee, the owner of Team CrossFit in Woodland Hills, Calif., and he has developed very good technique. Consequently, his clients have been taught that same technique and exhibit far fewer technical errors than their counterparts at many other boxes.

I'm going to break this discussion up into two large categories: technical errors and training errors. I'll run through the problems I've seen and then hopefully offer some exercises that might remediate each problem.

Technical Errors

The primary reason to develop optimal technique is that it is the most efficient way to perform the snatch or the clean and jerk. Secondly, optimal technique enables the lifter to derive the most benefit in terms of the development of explosive force and to create a balanced development of the body for athletic endeavors. Ultimately, this will lead to the ability to lift more weight with less expenditure of energy.

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A large jump is often evidence of incomplete extension at the top of the pull.

Now because many CrossFit WODs are calculated by the number of reps performed or the amount of time taken to perform them, efficient technique is going to save energy on each rep, enabling one or two more reps to be performed during the course of the session. Each rep will also be performed with greater speed, so time is saved as well. Both of these reasons should be enough to convince Crossfitters to hone technique so that it is most efficient.

Another factor that is often overlooked is that optimal technique minimizes the chance of injury. When the technique is well executed, the muscles involved are

in balance and do not create imbalanced forces around joints. This stabilizes joints and puts them in less jeopardy.

Those individuals who minimize the importance of technique have historically been those who lack the ability to coach proper technique or the motor learning skills to perform the lifts with solid technique. There is no question, however, that the best outcomes will be achieved through the mastering of good technique.

The Donkey Kick or “Crossfit Jump”

I didn’t come up with these terms but rather heard them used by individuals within the CrossFit community. Because the movement is prevalent enough to get a name, it must be somewhat common.

This phenomenon occurs when athletes lift their feet off the ground prematurely in order to increase the volume of the sound of their feet striking the floor. Somebody once figured out that the volume of the sound was an appropriate indicator that a good lift was being performed.

It reminds me of a group of fitness buffs I read about a few years ago. They were into aerobic fitness and reasoned that the slower their heart rates, the more “fit” they must be. They regularly compared heart rates to see which ones were lower. After a while, some of them began to take beta blockers in order to lower their heart rates. They were caught up in trying to achieve the symptom, rather than what it represented.

The donkey kick works the same way. Someone figured out that the volume of the sound of the feet was the symptom to be achieved. It really means that you don’t complete the triple extension and subsequently aren’t making full use of the legs to perform the pull. Any competent weightlifting coach knows this.

The exercise I use to correct this is to have the lifter start with the snatch or clean in the hang position and the legs fully extended, with the heels off the floor and the balance on the balls of the feet. The only pull that can be employed is by pulling upward with the arms, as in an upright row. The athlete must then skim the feet quickly from full extension to the squatting or receiving stance and go under the bar very quickly. Light weights and low reps per set should be employed.

The Premature Arm Pull

This is a fairly common phenomenon among guys who want to “gorilla” the weight, although some girls do it too. I think this error really comes from an excessive focus on what the arms are doing while forgetting the legs, hips and perhaps the entire rest of the body.

One thing that is infrequently taught—but is applicable here—is to forcibly contract the triceps during the early and middle phases of the pull. I advocate this and teach it through extensions (pulls without bending the arms). In this way, most of the work is done with the legs and hips, while the function of the arms is merely to remain tight and straight. Furthermore I emphasize not bending the arms until the hips have fully extended and the traps contracted.

The Premature Trap Contraction

I think that this is related to the previous problem, with many of the same motor neurons working synergistically. It is, after all, difficult for many athletes to bend the arms in a pull without shrugging the shoulders.

My coaching cue for this problem is one I picked up from Jean Holloway. She always emphasized a “long neck.” If the athlete thinks about keeping the neck long until the hips have fully extended, the premature shrugging can be practiced away. This cue, combined with the aforementioned extensions, can go a long way toward remedying premature involvement of the traps and arms.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

An early arm pull can rob you of precious power in the snatch or clean.

Excessively Rapid Pull Off the Floor

This is a common error both within and without the CrossFit community. My personal observation is that many people see the speed at the top of the pull and can't comprehend that the speed changes. While the concept of generating as much speed immediately off the floor is a valid one, what is ignored is that most people don't have the ability to maintain proper position for the later acceleration if the first pull causes a bending of the back and a mis-positioning of the hips.

Dozens of biomechanical studies of the greatest weightlifters performing the heaviest lifts in history have confirmed that the body must pass through the power position in order to generate the most explosive pull possible. An attempt to initiate a rapid pull off the floor will cause the body to assume positions that will make the attainment of the power position impossible.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Tommy Hackenbruck on his way to the pockets position, where he'll unleash all his power on the bar.

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The best solution I've found is to have athletes practice a controlled pull while feeling the pressure on the feet move in the correct pathway. This is best achieved by performing halting deadlifts with two-to-three-second halts at the point below the knees and at the power position. The reps should be from 2 to 4 per set at 85 percent and above. Four sets should be appropriate to "rehearse" the proper first pull.

Improper Rack

Proper racking of the bar on the shoulders in front of the neck can be performed if the athlete can comprehend the concept of supporting the bar on the deltoids. A great many athletes with a background of bench pressing are comfortable trying to rack a bar by placing it across the chest with the elbows held low.

In a proper rack, the deltoids are moved forward as when the athlete attempts to touch both elbows together in front.

The second error that commonly occurs when attempting to rack is gripping the bar tightly. The athlete needs to be coached to open up the hands, rest the bar on the fingers and keep the elbows at a 45-degree angle or higher.

Re-positioning the hands so that the grip is more comfortable is another adjustment that can be made. Other than moving the deltoids forward, relaxing the grip and adjusting the grip, the athlete with a racking problem needs to do a considerable amount of front squatting in order to become comfortable with the position.

Tight Shoulders

Many times what passes for tight shoulders when performing the snatch is actually a weakness of the middle spine that keeps the torso from holding a position that will allow the arms to support the weight. Otherwise it really could be a case of tight shoulders. Occasionally it could be a problem with tight hip flexors that inhibit the maintenance of a sufficiently erect torso to support the weight.

The best exercise to work on this problem is to perform snatch-grip presses from behind the neck while sitting in a squat. This will force the athlete to stimulate the musculature that maintains an erect torso while forcing the shoulders through the range of motion necessary to support a snatch.

Tight shoulders can also present a problem in the jerk. This can be remediated by performing behind-the-neck presses from a split position. One can begin with a wide grip and over time narrow the grip until a sufficient jerk width is achieved. Both of these pressing movements can be performed for 3-4 repetitions per set for 4-5 sets.

Tight Ankles

Limited range of motion at the ankles can make the overhead squat awkward and unstable and the squat clean almost impossible. If a good pair of lifting shoes don't remediate the problem, then barbell ankle stretches where the athlete performs a static stretch with a weight across the knees in a squatting position will help greatly.



Bob Takano

This static stretch should be performed at the end of workouts to increase ankle mobility. The heels should remain on the floor.

Training Design Errors

Some of the problems with employing Olympic lifts in CrossFit WODs arise from program design. The placement within the WOD and the dosages can become problematic.

Too Many Reps Per Set

The Olympic lifts have evolved as movements of explosive power, and when performed at less than optimal speed, they lose their effectiveness. If the number of reps performed in a single set exceeds a certain number (it varies by individual), they lose their explosive nature, and certain muscles begin to take over tasks for which they are not trained. This can result in an injury or a loss of the qualities for which the movement was included to enhance.

My suggestion would be to limit the number of repetitions to the point where speed deteriorates and to use the snatch and/or clean and jerk as an exercise to fatigue the body before embarking on another exercise.

If the purpose of CrossFit training is to prepare the body for a variety of physical stressors, then the Olympic lifts need to be employed for the function for which they are most appropriate—the development of speed and power.

Training When Fatigued

If the Olympic lifts are performed when the body is in a fatigued state, they will only cause more fatigue. This may be desirable for some, but if the purpose of CrossFit training is to prepare the body for a variety of physical stressors, then the Olympic lifts need to be employed for the function for which they are most appropriate—the development of speed and power. They should not be employed as simply agents of fatigue.

Improper Sequence

Olympic lifts best serve their function as developers of speed and power when they can be performed effectively. Performing full clean and jerks immediately after running a long distance would be counterproductive. Performing jerks or snatches immediately after handstand push-ups to failure could be just plain dangerous.

Coaches should be cognizant of the sequence of exercises in a workout in order to gain the most benefit of what each exercise has to offer in terms of training a variety of qualities.

This may require a change in perspective in which the workout—rather than the individual exercise—is viewed as the functional unit of training.

Conclusion

The errors acknowledged in this article are the ones that I've found to be most consistent with CrossFitters. It's hoped that the solutions offered are helpful in remediating them.

Training should be directed at the final product of the training: the general fitness of the individual. Placing the athlete in a position where unnecessary injury is a possibility, or employing exercises improperly, might have some appeal to those coaching to expect the unexpected. Using the proper exercise for the explicit purpose for which it is being employed, however, is the best way to prepare the body for a variety of conditions.

It is my hope that all of the remediations presented herein will be incorporated by coaches to solve the various errors as they present themselves for the betterment of their athletes.



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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 coach in the CrossFit Oly Seminar program. Website: www.takanoathletics.com.*