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Fix the Feet

Bob Takano reviews foot placement when receiving the power snatch or power clean.

By Bob Takano

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One very common problem that occurs in so many weight rooms is the excessively wide placement of the feet in the receiving position for the power snatch or power clean. This is clearly improper for a number of reasons, and yet it is a common mistake many coaches apparently don't know how to prevent.

This article is an attempt to explore the causes of this tendency and the ways to prevent it. Hopefully, this will lead to a lot less of this ugly practice.

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In this footwork drill, the athlete starts with the feet in the pulling position and then quickly skips them to the correct landing position: her squatting stance. She can check the position by going down into a full squat.

Defining Ugly Lifting

As in so many athletic endeavors, the placement of the hips is absolutely critical in determining the success of a particular maneuver. In order to successfully perform a power snatch or power clean, the hips must be lowered as the weight comes to rest on the shoulders or at arms' length overhead. The problem of how to lower the hips can be solved in one of two ways. The preferred manner is to bend the knees, while the less preferable is to move the feet far to the sides. Both will lower the hips, but the first has a much greater range available.

The best way to make sure that the new lifter is not getting into ugly habits is to teach movement properly from the start.

My personal observation of the situation through more than 40 years of coaching is that role modeling has a great deal to do with which pathway is selected. Most of the athletes learning the power clean for the first time will lower the hips by bending the knees if that is how they've

observed people around them as they grew up. They have a history of squatting down to lower the hips and see that as a perfectly good solution to effect a satisfactory power clean.

Those growing up without squatting role models will attempt forward flexion of the hips and spine and/or a wide stance—or all three. Very ugly.

The best way to make sure that the new lifter is not getting into ugly habits is to teach movement properly from the start. I'll deal with correcting bad habits later.

By the way, some people might suggest not moving the feet at all. It's not a bad idea, but let's be clear about one thing: the feet have to move in order to facilitate the speed of the drop under the bar. The feet should start by being positioned directly below the hips and then skim sideways rapidly to a squatting stance.

Footwork Drill

This is the footwork drill that I teach to beginners: stand with hands on hips, knees unlocked and the feet placed at hip width. On cue, the feet skim rapidly sideways to an optimal squatting width while the athlete simultaneously descends into a quarter-squat position. To make sure the squatting width is proper, have the athlete then descend into a full squat. If the squat is properly performed, the feet are at the proper width.

Snatch on Toes

To incorporate this movement into the receiving motion, I recommend the snatch on toes performed only with an empty bar. The athlete starts with the bar hanging at arms' length, the body erect, and the heels elevated off the floor so the athlete is supported only on the balls of the feet and the toes. From this position, the athlete can only shrug and arm pull and drop rapidly into the catch position while skimming the feet to the proper width and receiving the bar at arms' length overhead. This variant can also be performed for the power clean.

Power Snatch and Overhead Squat

Once the previous movement is assimilated as a motor pattern, the athlete can then go on to performing a power snatch and dropping into an overhead squat without pause. If the feet were moved to the proper width, this transition should be smooth. Power cleans and front squats can also be coupled in this manner.

At this point I feel it necessary to restate my approach to teaching weightlifting motor skills. If I ask an athlete to perform 5 sets of 3 repetitions of, say, power cleans, I will keep track of how many are performed appropriately and then stop the athlete from doing any more.

I'd probably opt to use pulling blocks and place them so that the feet could not move any further apart than a width that is appropriate for squatting.

For instance, I might tell the athlete in question that he did 9 good power cleans out of 15, and then end the session. I will not ask him to do X more reps because the nervous system is not as fresh and the chance that further reps will be performed any better is considerably less. After all, this is a sports movement, and sports require that perfection takes place on demand. No do-overs.

I expect that at the next session the athlete will attempt to perform more than 9 good power cleans out of 15.



To drill landing position, athletes can perform power snatches immediately followed by overhead squats.

Fixing the Broken Ones

Believe me, I've thought about this problem for years and have yet to come up with a foolproof solution. I even remember discussing it with my coach, Bob Hise, back in the 1960s, and the best we could come up with was "hobbles" to limit the distance the feet could travel, but we quickly dismissed the idea because of the obvious peril.

If I had to come up with a solution, I'd probably opt to use pulling blocks and place them so that the feet could not move any further apart than a width that is appropriate for squatting. I'd set the height of the blocks to support the bar slightly higher than the power position, so the weights employed would not be very heavy. I would then prescribe 5 or 6 sets of triples of either power snatches or power cleans—whichever is the problem lift. Perhaps some bruising of the lateral malleolus (the prominence on the outer side of the ankle) will bring about an avoidance reaction.

Whenever fixing a problem is a part of the training, that remediation should take place on a daily basis until it is fixed. It should be performed at the beginning of a session when the nervous system is fresh, and the weights employed should be light enough that the lift can be performed appropriately.

Technique Coaching in General

If you are coaching the technique of the Olympic lifts, you must become a technique coach.

First off, you must know what all the relevant body parts are doing at each point in the movement. You must know how to explain them to different types of motor learners, and you must know which exercises will remediate which technique difficulties. You need to understand the concept of neural fatigue. Once you understand what you need to know, you will have to start coaching and learn from your mistakes. Watch an experienced coach and borrow whatever tactics you are comfortable employing.

I'll conclude with a story some of you might find helpful. One of the CrossFit athletes in my gym is a former dancer, and she remarked to me that she was having some difficulty mastering the Olympic lifts because some of the cues didn't quite make sense to her. I told her, "I know you're a dancer and you're used to learning complex dance routines by watching and imitating. You don't need to listen to cues. Just watch a good weightlifter and imitate what you see."

That made sense to her.

Not all athletes learn the same way or at the same rate.

Help cleanse the world of ugly lifting!



Bob Takano

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 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. For the past year he has been coaching in the CrossFit Olympic Lifting Trainer course. Website: www.takanoathletics.com.*