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The Quick Lifts: Start Here

Bill Starr offers up a program designed to help athletes begin training the basics of the Olympic lifts.

By Bill Starr

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I've written articles for the *CrossFit Journal* on how to snatch, clean and jerk. By following the advice in those presentations, any athlete who is interested in the Olympic lifts can learn how to do them. I realize many athletes are tentative in trying these high-skill, explosive movements on their own, but they can still be done quite successfully.

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Bill Starr was forced to learn the quick lifts without access to great coaching. Luckily, aspiring Olympic weightlifters have far more resources available now.

While you're trying to learn the fundamentals of the Olympic lifts ... find out where other lifters train. Contact them and ask when they train. No need to ask if you are welcome.

That's exactly how everyone who wanted to participate in the sport of Olympic weightlifting learned how to do the contested lifts when I got bitten by the iron bug. In the '50s, there were no videos, clinics, books or even articles available for beginners wanting to do the quick lifts. On occasion, *Lifting News* or *Strength & Health* carried an article dealing with some aspect of technique on the press, snatch, and clean and jerk, but they were always aimed at the more experienced strength athletes and not rank beginners.

In addition, the number of capable coaches in the country could be counted on one hand, minus the thumb, and if an athlete didn't live close to one of these rare animals, he was out of luck. So aspiring strongmen had to teach themselves how to perform the lifts.

Train With the Best

In my case, I learned how to press, snatch, and clean and jerk by studying photos in *Strength & Health* and attempting to emulate what I saw on the pages. As could be expected, progress came slowly, but in many ways it worked out better in the long run because I had to figure out every small aspect of not only the technique on the lifts, but also how to assemble a program to help me get stronger at the same time. When you're told how to do something, it has much less impact than when you've learned it on your own. And you certainly remember it much longer. With no one to tell me whether I was doing a movement right or wrong, I learned from my mistakes, and it just so happens that mistakes are more readily recalled than successes.

The fact that gains came slowly was also a point in my favor. The small increases allowed all the groups in my body to improve at a more natural pace. Nothing moved too far ahead of another, so I did not encounter a lot of weak links along the way.

I cut my teeth on the Olympic lifts while I was in the Air Force, stationed in Iceland. As soon as I got back to the U.S. and began training at the Wichita Falls, Texas, YMCA, I went to the first meet I could find. This helped me immensely. Not only did I begin to understand the many variances involved in actually being a part of a contest, but I also tested my training program. I also closely observed the more experienced lifters during their warm-ups and on the platform. I would stand off to the side of the platform and study the more proficient lifters' moves, from the way they handled the chalk to how they would mentally set themselves prior to stepping up to the bar. How they set

their hips, their head positions, how they placed their feet, where they gripped the bar—every tiny detail became etched in my mind, and I carried this information back to the Y weight room and practiced what I had seen. Often, I would pretend I was that accomplished lifter. In that manner, my form began to improve. It was not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but it became good enough for me to win a few medals, which was my primary goal at that stage of my lifting career.

My situation wasn't unique. On the contrary, it was the norm for that point in time. Every lifter I met had a similar story, with the exception of Bob Bednarski, who was fortunate enough to have a coach, Joe Mills, when he first started, and Bobby Hise had his father, one of the very best in the country. The rest of us were on our own, and from that group came national, world and Olympic champions, proving that if a person is serious about excelling in this sport, he can do so through lots of hard work.

Whenever possible, I trained with a group of Olympic weightlifters. Chicago was great for that because there were so many YMCAs in that city, and all had weight rooms. Irving Park was especially enjoyable for me, a mere neophyte, because national champions Fred Schultz and Clyce Emrich trained there. When I lived in Indiana, I would drive to a town where some lifter trained and take a workout in his facility. When I arrived in York in the mid-'60s, I didn't have to go looking for a gym with other lifters any longer because the best in the country trained at the Ridge Avenue Gym.

My point: while you're trying to learn the fundamentals of the Olympic lifts and how to adjust your program to fit your special needs, find out where other lifters train. Contact them and ask when they train. No need to ask if you are welcome. Any fellow Olympic lifter, regardless of level of proficiency, is always met with open arms at an Olympic training facility. It may require a long drive, but it will be worth it. Many of those who showed up on Saturdays at the York Gym traveled over two hours, yet they didn't mind the journey because they always left in high spirits from having a great session in the super-charged atmosphere.



If you're looking to learn the Olympic lifts, Bill Starr recommends seeking out other lifters and training with them.

Also, take advantage of the many instructional videos and clinics out there. IronMind Enterprises has a long list of excellent videos of the best Olympic weightlifters in the world going through their paces in the training halls prior to the world championships. These are very instructional because you get to see perfect technique, and they are also inspiring and highly motivational. Check them out.

Use any resource available to aid your cause. Keep this in mind: Olympic weightlifting is an individual sport. Even if you have the luxury of a good coach, when you step out on that platform, you're on your own. That's one of the aspects of the sport I appreciated the most. When I failed, I had no one to blame but myself and, conversely, when I did well, I knew it was due to my own efforts and not a result of someone else's exertion. So whether you achieve any degree of success in Olympic lifting is strictly a matter of how badly you want it.

Preparing to Lift

I know that even when someone is anxious to try these complicated lifts, he's not sure how to go about assembling a program built around them. I receive lots of letters from those just getting their feet wet in the sport, and their questions bring back memories. Whatever they're asking me about, I was asking myself the same questions during my formative years. Where should the quick lifts be placed in the program? How often should the lifts be done each week? Should I concentrate on form more than strength? Or vice versa? How many exercises should be in a daily routine? Should I limit out or stay light and try to increase my workload? How many days a week should I train? And so on and so forth. When you're strictly on your own, it often feels like learning how to swim just by jumping in a pond.

In the beginning, but two goals exist: improving technique and getting stronger overall.



Snatch-grip shrugs (bottom) are one of the exercises Bill Starr includes in a beginner's Olympic-lifting program. Straps (not pictured) are also recommended.

Omar Torres/Omar Torres Photography



In a clean or front squat, keeping the elbows high is essential. If the elbows point down, they usually indicate exactly where the barbell will land.

I am presenting two programs aimed at those wanting to give the Olympic lifts a shot. The first is a three-days-a-week routine for those who are unable to train more often. The second covers four days a week in the event the athlete has more time. The underlying theme for both is simplicity: basic exercises done over and over so as to enhance technique and expand the workload. There are no specific movements for some part of an exercise. Not yet. That will come later. In the beginning, but two goals exist: improving technique and getting stronger overall. Whichever program you choose, in order to get results you must work to your fullest at every session and, most importantly, never miss a workout. If, for whatever reason, you have to skip a planned session, make it up the next day or sometime during that week. Nothing is as critical to success in the early stages as consistency.

I want to briefly review the main points about the snatch and clean and jerk. If you can do an overhead squat and power snatch, you can do full snatches. If you're able to rack a bar correctly across your frontal deltoids when doing a power clean and can do a front squat, then you have the flexibility to do full cleans. The ability to hold the bar overhead during a full squat reveals that you can do jerks without any trouble.

Shoulder flexibility is absolutely essential to the Olympic lifts, so time must be spent ensuring that this attribute is sustained or, better yet, improved. To stretch out the shoulders for snatches and jerks, hold a broomstick or rolled-up towel over your head. Lock your elbows and rotate the broomstick back over your head as far as possible. Don't merely hold the broomstick; try and pull it apart. When that range of motion increases, shorten your grip and repeat the process. Do this prior to every workout (even if snatches or jerks aren't on your program), again during the workout, and more at night. Once you've achieved the flexibility you're seeking, don't take it for granted. Stay on top of the discipline and you'll be a step ahead.

The wrists and elbows encounter a great deal of stress on power cleans, full cleans, and jerks, so they must be given attention as well. Plus, the shoulders too have to be loosened to accommodate the new requirements being placed upon them. When I hear of someone hurting his wrist or elbow or shoulder while doing something as basic as a power clean, I know for certain that he did not take sufficient time to stretch out those joints. Those who do not want to be bothered with the stretching movements end up paying the price for their laziness.

To prepare the shoulders, elbows and joints for the act of racking a bar across the front of the shoulder girdle, do this: fix a bar at shoulder height inside a power rack. Lock it in place so that it cannot move. If this isn't possible or you don't have a power rack available, load a bar up with a few hundred more pounds than you can possibly move. Start by using one arm at a time. Grip the bar firmly and, while keeping your torso perfectly erect, elevate your elbow upward as high as you can, then hold it there for a five-six count. Do the same for your other arm. Do a couple of sets until you start to feel the joints relaxing a bit. Now grip the bar with both hands and elevate both your elbows at the same time. Stretch them upward as high as you can stand it and hold for a five-six count. This latter stretch is much more effective when a training partner applies pressure to your elbows. He will be able to elevate them higher than you can by yourself. Do as many sets as you need to do so that you can fix the bar across your frontal deltoids comfortably.

You can loosen your wrists simply by flexing them down and back using your other hand. However, I believe it's beneficial to tape your wrists even when you think they are strong enough and quite flexible. They take a great amount of punishment during jerks, front squats and heavy cleans—even more so when an attempt is missed—so an ounce of prevention pays off for those small joints. When one gets dinged, it takes a very long time to bring it back to full strength. Wrap the wrists with trainer's tape before any session where you plan to snatch, clean or jerk to stay on the safe side. You need to tape them tightly enough to give support and stability to the joint, but not so snugly that the tape impedes circulation to your hands. A good way to do this is to flex your fingers as you're laying on the tape. In the event that the tape is too tight or not tight enough, remove it and start over.

In order to do these suggested programs, you will need pulling straps, a lifting belt and bumper plates. Straps are available from a number of distributors, but the best can be made from seat belts. Cut them out of the back seats of old cars, then throw them in a washing machine a dozen or more times until they're nice and soft. These you need for the high pulls and shrugs. The belt can be an inexpensive model found in any sporting goods store. Contrary to what many assume, a belt will not save you from being injured if you do something really stupid. What it does do is keep your lower back warm during the execution of an exercise

such as the squat and provides you with feedback as well, such as telling you that you're leaning too far forward on the front squat or too far backward on the overhead presses.

Although you can certainly do all the exercises in the programs I'm presenting using metal plates, life is much easier when rubber bumper plates are used for the Olympic lifts. Missed attempts are inevitable, and the bumps do a lot less damage to the bar and platform than metal plates. They are not cheap but will last a lifetime unless they're abused. I'm using a set that was discarded 20 years ago, and the plates serve me well by protecting the floor of my apartment.

Before touching a bar at each session, you need to do some warm-ups: one exercise for your abs and one for your lower body to get the core groups ready for the upcoming stress that will be placed upon them. Crunches, sit-ups and leg raises fill the bill for the abs, while back hyperextensions or reverse back hypers work nicely for the lumbar—only one very high-rep set and you're ready to hit the weights.



Omar Torres/Omar Torres Photography

Taping the wrists is a good idea for snatches, cleans and jerks. An ounce of prevention is a good idea with hundreds of pounds on the bar.

Bill Starr's Oly Programs

First, the three-days-a-week routine. It's broken down into A and B weeks, which are done on alternate weeks. Do the exercises in the order they are listed.

Week A

Monday

Power cleans and front squats
Clean and jerks
Clean high pulls
Back squats
Dips

Wednesday

Front squats
Good mornings
Steep inclines
Chins
Calf raises

Friday

Power snatches and overhead squats
Full snatches
Overhead presses
Back squats
Shrugs with snatch grip

Week B

Monday

Power snatches and overhead squats
Full snatches
Snatch high pulls
Back squats
Dips

Wednesday

Same as Wednesday Week A

Friday

Power cleans and front squats
Full cleans
Jerks from the rack
Back squats
Shrugs with a clean grip



Omar Torres/Omar Torres Photography

Rack jerks give an athlete a chance to focus on the jerk without having to go through the struggle of a heavy clean first.



High pulls will teach you to get aggressive with heavy weight. Straps (not pictured) are recommended.

The changes in the two programs are minor. The primary difference is that the cleans and snatches switch places every other week so that one gets the priority spot twice a month. This helps to keep the two lifts in balance. However, should you find that one of those lifts is lagging far behind the other, keep the weaker one on Mondays until it improves.

I'll go through the various exercises in detail and add in sets and reps. The first exercise on Monday and Friday is merely a warm-up for the next one on the list. Power-clean a light weight 5 times, and after each clean front-squat it and finish off with 1 jerk. Power-snatch a weight, then follow that with an overhead squat for 5 reps. Three sets for both of these movements will suffice.

**But if you do not work
the good mornings diligently
from the beginning,
catching up is a bitch.**

I've had some athletes who preferred doing the Drill instead of the exercises I just described. For those who have read [Learning How to Do Full Cleans](#) and [Learning How to Do Full Snatches](#), they know the Drill for the snatch consists of a power snatch followed by an overhead squat, a hang snatch going into a deep bottom position, and finally a full squat snatch. For the clean, the sequence is power clean plus front squat, hang clean and full clean. The Drill works just as well as the exercises in the program, so it's a matter of preference.

Move right into the full cleans and jerks. Do 3 consecutive cleans, then jerk the weight twice. Go as heavy as you can just so long as you maintain good form. When technique begins to break down, you need to either stop for the day or lower the poundages. Hammering away using sloppy form is counterproductive. If your form is way off, move right into the high pulls. Six sets of 3 will provide you with plenty of work on the clean with 2 jerks on each set. Three sets of 3 for the high pulls. On your final set of high pulls (for both the cleans and snatches), try to use 50 more pounds than you handled in the full movement. The reason behind doing the high pulls is to overload those muscles involved in snatching and cleaning, but in order for this to happen, your form has to be perfect. High pulls are really no more than deadlifts followed by shrugs, but if the transition from one to the other is not blended smoothly, the bar will not jump at the finish. Use straps for high pulls.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

Good mornings are a key part of a beginner's Oly program.

Back squats need to be done with the bar set high on your traps and not low on the back as many powerlifters prefer. You can't lean at all on the back squats if you want the power gained to be utilized in the clean and snatch. On Monday, do 5 sets of 5 and work to max. On Friday, use this formula: 3 sets of 5, then 2 sets of 3. The final set on Friday should be 5 or 10 lb. heavier than your final set of 5 on Monday. The next Monday will find you using the same weight from your last set of 3 on Friday, but you'll do 5 reps with it. In that manner, the numbers will steadily climb upward on your back squat.

For dips, do 4 sets of as many as you can do. When you're able to do all 4 sets for 20, start adding weight and cut your reps back to 8s, 5s and 3s done on consecutive weeks.

Do 6 sets of 3 on the front squats and take them to limit every week. Good mornings are done every week because the lower back is the cornerstone of strength. Your goal is to handle 50 percent of what you're back squatting for 10 reps in the good morning. If you obtain this ratio early on, keeping it is rather easy. But if you do not work the good mornings diligently from the beginning, catching up is a bitch. Alternate the sets and reps every other week using these two formulas: 4 sets of 10 and 5 sets of 8. Use a bit more for the 8s. While the variance is small, it makes a difference in the two workouts. I'm not sure why, but it does.

Do inclines on as steep an angle as you can manage. I know some incline benches do not afford much flexibility in this matter, so do the best you can. The higher angle will hit many more groups that are part of the Olympic lifts than a lower one. The frontal deltoids, higher portion of the chest and triceps get lots of work on these. Alternate these two set and rep sequences every other week: 5 sets of 5 and 3 sets of 5 plus 3 sets of 3. Try to move the numbers up every week, and when you feel that you can handle it, add in a back-off set of 8 or 10. Super-set chins and calf raises—3 sets of as many as you can do on the chins, and 3 sets of 30 for the calves.

After the warm-ups of power snatches and overhead squats, or the Drill, do 6 sets of 3 on the full snatches. When this exercise falls on Monday, you'll come in behind the full movement with snatch-grip high pulls, but on Fridays, you skip high pulls because you'll be doing shrugs instead. Use straps on the high pulls and shrugs. Load up the bar for shrugs and pull every set just as high as you can. Think in terms of shrugging over 500 lb. with the clean grip and over 400 using the wider grip.

Overhead presses also need to be worked hard and heavy. Here's a routine that will help you increase your presses: 3 sets of 5 as warm-ups, then 3-6 sets of 3 with a work weight. Start out with 3 work sets and slowly add another as you feel you're able to handle the load.

Jerks off the rack can be done for form or pushed to limit. This depends largely on how you feel on Friday. This advice also applies to the cleans and snatches. If you're having a good day, run the numbers up. If a tad sluggish, cut back on the weight and drill on technique.

Because you don't have a coach to keep an eye on how you're performing on any given day, you have to do this yourself. Pay attention to how your session is going. Some days, you may feel strong but have the coordination of a cow on ice skates. When that occurs, use light weight on the high-skill stuff and work harder on the more static exercises.

What follows is a program for anyone who can train four days a week. It's more productive simply because the athlete gets to do one of the quick lifts another day during the week. Again, two programs are alternated every other week.

Week A

Monday

Power cleans and front squats
Clean and jerks
Clean high pulls
Back squats
Dips

Tuesday

Power snatches and overhead squats
Full snatches
Snatch high pulls
Overhead presses

Wednesday

Front squats
Good mornings
Inclines
Chins
Calf raises

Friday

Power cleans and front squats
Full cleans
Jerks from rack
Back squats
Clean-grip shrugs

Week B

Monday

Power snatches and overhead squats
Full snatches
Snatch high pulls
Back squats
Dips

Tuesday

Power cleans and front squats
Clean and jerks
Clean high pulls
Overhead presses

Wednesday

Same as Wednesday Week A

Friday

Power snatches and overhead squats
Full snatches
Jerks from rack
Back squats
Snatch-grip shrugs

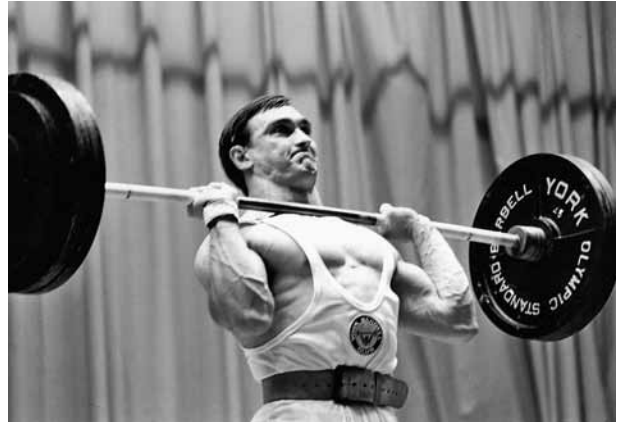
As you can see, the main difference between the two weeks is that one of the Olympic movements gets worked twice one week and once the next. As I mentioned before, when one of the lifts lags way behind the other, keep it on the Monday workout until it pulls up to par.

These routines are for those just starting out on the Olympic lifts. After five or six months, these will need to be upgraded so that you are handling a greater volume of work during the week, but these will serve you well in the beginning. If you diligently apply yourself to the task, you will get considerably stronger and greatly improve your form on all the high-skill lifts. While I believe in the importance of mastering technique, it needs to be kept in mind that Olympic lifting is very much a sport of strength. They don't, as yet, give style points. The strongest athlete will come out on top, even when his form is not perfect. So lean on the strength exercises: front and back squats, good mornings, overhead presses, inclines, high pulls, and shrugs. You'll find that as your strength increases, your form gets better. That's because technique is dependent on strength. The reason why most use sloppy form with a max attempt is because the muscles and attachments responsible for making a snatch, clean or jerk possible are not quite strong enough.

**Some days, you may
feel strong but have the
coordination of a cow on ice
skates. When that occurs, use
light weight on the high-skill
stuff and work harder on the
more static exercises.**

Lifts ... (continued)

And once you have at least decent technique, enter a contest, regardless of how much you're lifting. You'll learn more in two hours at a meet than you will in two months of training. Don't be afraid of failing. You're going to miss attempts. That's just a part of the sport. It's not an easy sport to master, but once you do there's no better feeling in the world. Everyone who has ever decided to become an Olympic weightlifter has failed at one time or another. Those who eventually overcame their difficulties and elevated themselves to the pinnacle of the sport are those who dusted themselves off and got right back on the platform. If they can do it, so can you.



Jody Forster



Omar Torres/Omar Torres Photography

About the Author

*Bill Starr coached at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the 1970 World Olympic Weightlifting Championship in Columbus, Ohio, and the 1975 World Powerlifting Championships in Birmingham, England. He was selected as head coach of the 1969 team that competed in the Tournament of Americas in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, where the United States won the team title, making him the first active lifter to be head coach of an international Olympic weightlifting team. Starr is the author of the books **The Strongest Shall Survive: Strength Training for Football** and **Defying Gravity**, which can be found at [The Aasgaard Company Bookstore](#).*

