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12 Tips for Coaching O-Lifts in the CrossFit Box

Hall-of-fame Oly coach Bob Takano has nearly four decades of coaching experience. He offers some advice for CrossFitters who will be teaching the quick lifts to their athletes.

By Bob Takano

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Having spent years in the sport of weightlifting, I've recently become involved in the Crossfit Oly experience by coaching Olympic lifting at Team CrossFit and by assisting with several Oly Certs with coaches Mike Burgener, Stephane Rochet and Josh Everett. These certs have been especially enjoyable because of the great attitude Crossfitters bring to them and because, as we do more and more of them, the participants appear to have done a good deal of the homework beforehand.

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I've written this article to offer some guidelines and tips to CrossFitters who are now Oly certified and are returning to their home boxes to begin the task of teaching the Oly lifts to their clients. Some of these points may seem very general, but if you pursue them, I'm sure you will find that they will help you develop as a coach.

1. Practice the lifts yourself until they become a sequence of feelings you can describe to your clients.

Many of the students who leave a CrossFit Oly Cert are doing a good job of performing the movements, but if they don't work on them, they may forget the pattern or not cement it into their motor patterns in such a way that they can describe them to someone else. Even weightlifters who have been performing the lifts for years continue to discover new insights into feeling and describing these movements.

2. Develop some descriptions of the feelings.

You may not feel comfortable just parroting the cues that Coach B or the other coaches employ to teach the lifts. Go ahead and describe the feelings to yourself and then develop them into cues your athletes will understand. Remember: the shorter the cue, the better it will be assimilated. I still encounter relatively new coaches who have come up with novel and effective cues.

3. Your primary goal is to teach correct technique.

Within the Crossfit environment, your goal is to teach correct technique so your athletes will gain the greatest benefit from performing the movements without incurring unnecessary injuries. This may require a little different mindset from what many trainers are traditionally used to, but it needs to be done. You may want to watch some coaches teaching gymnastics or diving or some other technique-dependent activity to get some idea of the mindset required.

4. Group your athletes into small numbers by ability level.

The reason Coach B ensures there is one coach for every seven participants in a CrossFit Oly Cert is that it is too difficult to accurately observe and coach much more than seven people at a time. You might group them by raw beginner, intermediate and advanced. In this way, the members of a group will share common problems that need common solutions. A beginner group may actually need to just do standing presses, back squats, front squats and good mornings before they can even begin to learn the lifts. An intermediate group should be composed of athletes with reasonable motor-learning ability and no major range-of-motion problems. An advanced group should be made up of experienced athletes with good motor-learning ability and who need very little work to refine their technique.



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Sound technique is critical to learning the Olympic lifts, and it's easier to learn correctly early on than to go back and correct bad habits later.



Great technique should be reinforced with constant practice and refinement.

5. It's easier to learn good technique from the start than to correct errors later on.

Try to stop bad habits from developing as soon as you encounter them. The correction of bad habits is almost another entire universe that can require case-by-case solutions. You're better off teaching your athletes correctly the first time through.

6. The nervous system fatigues quickly, especially for beginners.

Because of this, technical training should take place at the beginning of workouts and should stop as soon as coordination or timing errors appear to be increasing. Most beginners probably should not be working on technique for more than 20 minutes to a half hour.

7. Always be encouraging in your coaching cues.

Athletes learn much better if you give them advice as to what to do. Avoid telling them not to do things. "Extend your hips!" is a much better cue than, "Don't keep your hips bent!"

8. Technique is better learned with frequent reinforcement.

When I set out to coach an athlete to become a serious weightlifter, we spend most of the first few weeks working on technique on a daily basis, with the only strengthening exercises being those required to bring weak areas into balance with the stronger areas of the body. These athletes develop the very best technique, and this training/learning model is the basis for that technical development.

9. Solve one technical problem at a time.

An athlete with a number of technical errors during the first week can have many of them solved immediately. Take care of the easiest ones first, such as grip and foot spacing. You want to get your athlete to the point where he or she has no more than one or two problems—the one or two most difficult ones that you will spend the most effort upon. When you get to this point, you can then begin concerning yourself with increasing the strength and athleticism of the athlete.

10. Correct flexibility problems before attempting to coach the Olympic lifts.

Some individuals are not ready to begin Oly lifts due to a lack of range of motion at the shoulders, hips and ankles, or a lack of torso strength or leg strength. Standing presses, flat-footed squats with a straight back and straight-legged, wide-stance good mornings will best remediate these issues before technique training can begin.

11. One athletic skill should precede learning the Olympic lifts: jumping.

The most important skill an athlete should bring to training is the ability to perform a technically sound vertical jump, preferably out of a full squat.

12. Holding a rack position for the clean should be learned before attempting to perform the squat clean.

The improvement of a rack position for the clean depends on the specific impeding problem. Many people can't get their shoulders forward to rest the bar on the deltoids. Others take the wrong grip width. Both of these can be experimented with. Figuring out how to front-squat properly will do much to teach the proper rack position. There are a few people who cannot ever rack for a variety of reasons.

I hope these twelve tips are helpful for the aspiring coach.



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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. For the past year he has been coaching in the Crossfit Oly Cert program. Website: www.takanoathletics.com.*