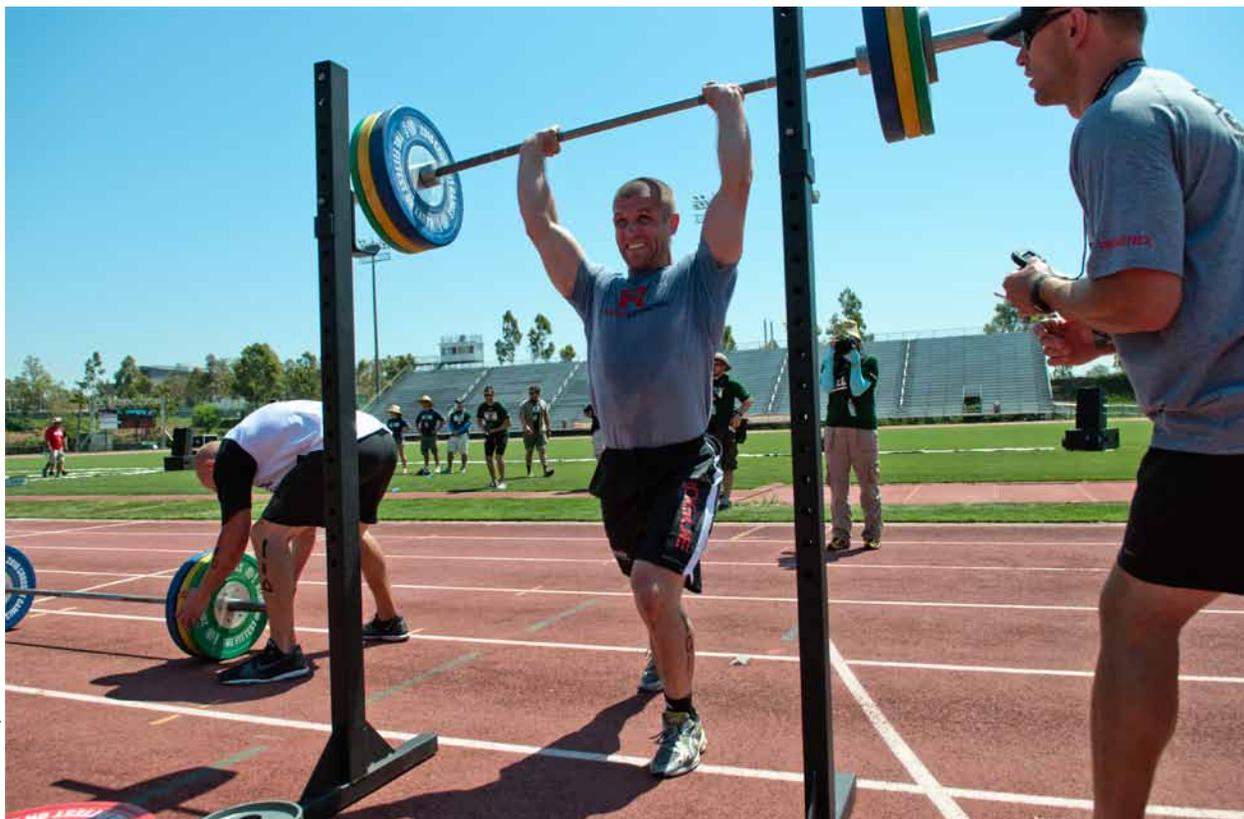

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Coaching Correct Technique in the Split Jerk

You just cleaned a huge weight—but can you get it overhead?
Hall-of-fame Oly coach Bob Takano explains how to correct errors in your jerk.

By Bob Takano

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Thomas Campitelli/CrossFit

In the CrossFit community (and in the weightlifting nation at large), most of the effort is being put into learning proper technique in the pull—and justifiably so. Correct pulling technique is absolutely necessary for the performance of the snatch and clean.

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Within an Oly Cert, we focus first on the snatch, and then the clean. The split jerk is the last movement taught, and although many athletes learn it easily, others are especially frustrated trying to jerk a weight that is easily cleaned. This is especially unfortunate because weightlifting meets are won with successful jerks.

There are several problems that plague many athletes who find it difficult to master the split jerk. Some athletes have only one of these problems, whereas the unfortunate ones may have difficulty with two or more. In this article I intend to explore these problems and their causes, as well as their remedies. The squat jerk will not be covered as so few have the ability to perform it properly.



Courtesy of Bob Takano

The starting position for the jerk balance. The lead foot should be about 30 centimeters in front of the back foot.

Problem 1: Limited range of motion at the shoulders

When jerking the bar with a slightly wider than shoulder-width grip, it may be difficult for many athletes to hold the bar directly overhead because of imbalanced development at the shoulder girdle or because of short clavicles coupled with excessive deltoid development. This is largely a stretching issue, and a couple of shoulder stretches will help greatly.

1. **Prone shoulder stretch**—The athlete takes a shoulder-width grip on a wooden dowel and then assumes a prone position on an exercise bench with the arms holding the dowel extending beyond the head. The elbows are fully extended. A partner lifts the dowel so that the extended arms are at parallel or above parallel to the floor. The athlete should ensure that the torso remains in contact with the surface of the bench. The stretch is held for 30 seconds or longer at a time.
2. **Supine shoulder stretch**—The athlete takes a shoulder-width grip on a light exercise bar and lies supine on an exercise bench. The athlete makes sure to keep the lower back, shoulders and head in contact with the bench and—while keeping the elbows extended—lowers the bar backwards and down beyond the head until it can lower no further. The stretch is held for 30 seconds or longer at a time.

Both of these stretches should be employed until the athlete gains enough range of motion to press a weight overhead and hold it with the bar, ears, shoulders, hips and ankles in vertical alignment and with no shaking or quivering.

Problem 2: The athlete lacks the torso strength to transfer force from the legs to the bar

Remediation must take place to strengthen the torso musculature to keep it rigid as it transfers the force of the extending legs and hips to the bar. Two exercises are absolutely vital, while a third is certainly helpful.

1. **Military Press**—I included the word “military” here to emphasize the need for an erect posture while performing this movement. The shoulders must be pulled forward to form a platform on which to rest the bar before the pressing begins. The upper arms

must form an angle of approximately 45 degrees or slightly less with the torso before pressing commences. This may prove difficult for longtime bench pressers. The torso should remain erect throughout the movement as the bar is pressed overhead to a locked position and held briefly.

- 2. Front squat**—The front squat may not appear to have a direct relationship to the jerk, but it certainly does. The front squat may well be a torso exercise if the legs are much stronger than the torso. The front squat should be practiced until the torso can remain erect (no forward flexion of the spine while a neutral curve is maintained) throughout the performance of the exercise.
- 3. Jerk supports**—A heavily loaded bar should be placed in a power rack at a height a few centimeters short of the full height of a supported jerk. The lifter should stand beneath the bar, take a shoulder-width grip and bend the knees until the elbows are fully extended. The movement of the exercise is to straighten the knees.

It might serve the athlete with jerk problems well to work diligently on these exercises before beginning to learn the jerk proper.

Problem 3:
The ratio of humerus length to forearm length requires the athlete to support the weight at the shoulders with the humerus well beyond 45 degrees from the torso.

The athlete cannot use the arms effectively in driving the bar overhead. All of the drive must come through the torso. In addition, this athlete will either require the use of jerk blocks or spotters to do repetition movements from the front of the neck. Furthermore it may serve the athlete well to move the hands sideways during the course of the jerk to shorten the distance the bar has to be driven overhead. The following exercises will help in overcoming or minimizing the problem.

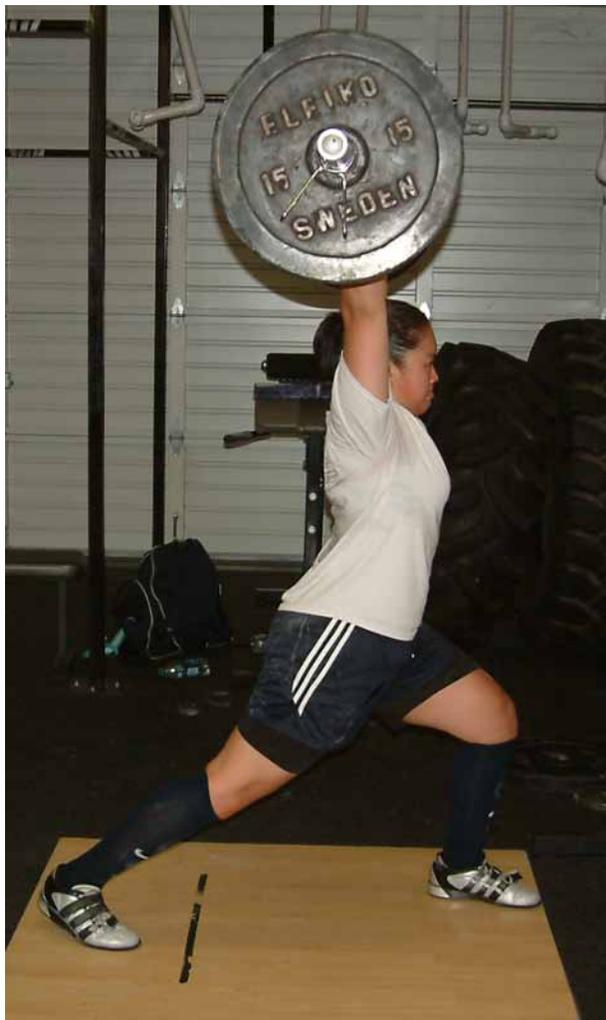
- 1. Push press**—This is an excellent exercise to teach the athlete to employ leg drive. If insufficient leg drive is not applied, the weight will not go high enough to use the arms.

- 2. Jerk drive**—In this movement, heavy weights are driven rapidly to the height of the forehead or higher. The athlete with the aforementioned condition needs to use this movement to get used to getting all the vertical drive out of the extension of the legs and hips with no assistance from the arms. Jerk blocks are very helpful with this movement.
- 3. Jerk balance**—This movement, though helpful to all athletes learning the jerk, is especially helpful to those with the aforementioned condition. The lifter takes the bar from the rack with the weight resting on the deltoids, ready to jerk. The athlete then assumes a stance in which the lead foot of the jerk is approximately 30 centimeters or more in front of the rear foot. This is the starting position. The athlete then bends the knees slightly, drives the weight overhead and the front foot steps forward into the standard jerk stance while the arms lock



Courtesy of Bob Takano

The dip stage of the jerk balance. From here, the athlete drives the bar overhead and finishes by moving the feet further apart.



Courtesy of Bob Takano

In the finish, the hands move from a clean width to a snatch width, reducing the height that the bar must be driven.

overhead. Simultaneously, the hands move out to a snatch width, and this has the effect of minimizing the height to which the bar must be driven. Some athletes may need to perform this movement with the bar behind the neck during the learning phase.

An Approach to Dealing With the Problem Jerker

An effort should be made to make sure the athlete knows where to position the various parts of the body at the end of the movement before attempting to perform the movement, whether it be a snatch or a clean or a jerk.

The first step is to make sure that the shoulders of the athlete are loose enough to support a weight overhead. Apply the stretching exercises to make sure that the

range of motion is appropriate. Then teach the athlete to perform overhead lunges. The athlete holds a weight overhead with a shoulder-width grip and stands with the feet in line. The athlete then steps forward into a full, deep lunge with the lead leg and then recovers to the original position.

The second step is to make sure the torso is strong enough by performing presses and front squats, with jerk supports thrown in for additional work if necessary.

If both of these steps are not necessary, the jerk can then be taught by first employing the power jerk. In this movement, the athlete holds the weight at the shoulders in front of the neck and dips (bends the knees) and drives the weight overhead with leg drive, then re-bends the knees to drop under the bar and lock the elbows forcibly. This teaches the athlete the dynamic of thrusting upward and then immediately dropping down to catch the weight.

Once the power jerk is mastered, the transition can be made to the split jerk by employing the jerk balance. The jerk balance differs from the power jerk only in the footwork—both the starting stance and the finishing stance.

After the athlete becomes familiar and comfortable with the jerk balance, the progression to the full split jerk can then take place.

At this point, the athlete should have assimilated the concept of driving the weight primarily with the legs, as well as how to move the feet to land in a stable split position. A good athlete should have no problem combining the movements learned in the power jerk and the jerk balance to perform a creditable split jerk.

Two Other Considerations in Coaching the Jerk

The first consideration is to learn to recover properly. It should be a two-step affair. The lead foot should come back to the midpoint, and then the rear foot should move forward to line up with the lead foot. This will ensure that the bar is only moving vertically and not horizontally.

The second consideration is how to reposition the hands or re-grip the bar upon arising from the clean. Once the weight is past the sticking point of the clean recovery from the deep position, the athlete can drive up rapidly, giving the bar a temporary unsupported phase during which the hands can be repositioned either in grip width or finger alignment.

Thomas Campitelli/CrossFit



D.J. Wickham used a solid jerk to get 325 lb. overhead and win Event 2b of the CrossFit Games.

Train the Jerk to Win

Once an athlete has learned how to perform the jerk, the jerk and its assistance movements should be incorporated into the training program. Each day's training should have one or more exercises to develop jerking prowess. The load of training dedicated to jerking will depend on the jerking ability of the athlete.

Separating the clean from the jerk may take place more consistently during the preparation phase for a competition. As the competition gets closer, the clean and jerk must be performed more frequently.

Employ the information and prescriptions in this article to improve your athletes' jerking skills and give them some priority as competition approaches.

Remember: weightlifting meets are won by proficient jerkers.



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.



Courtesy of Marta Takano