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Funky Lockout Blues: Fixing The Jerk

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When I was in my early twenties, I drove a 1981 Chevy Malibu station wagon. I bought it from my parents when I finished high school and drove it until I graduated from college and got my first full-time job. I loved this car, but it was one of the biggest pieces of crap in the galaxy. Every morning when I left my house to go to class, I would sit in the front seat of my car, put the key in the ignition, and pray to Valhalla that it would start. Sometimes it started, and sometimes it didn't. And if it didn't start, I had to combine some fast thinking and a kaleidoscope of foul language while I tried to get it running so I could make it to class on time. This probably happened seven or eight times a month... for six years. That's frustration, jack.

However, that wasn't the only frustrating pickle I ever had to grapple with. There have been others, obviously. And every one of you reading this article can think of your own predicaments from the past or the present where some common irritation keeps popping up. Your junker car, your annoying spouse, your lack of math skills, your toe fungus, whatever. The reason we're talking about this stuff is because there is probably nothing more frustrating for a weightlifter than not being able to complete the jerk after a successful clean. You've put in all the effort to clean the barbell, it's sitting on your shoulders, people have their cameras ready, the judge's finger is twitching on the white light button, and you crush the hopes of everybody in the room because you just can't find a way to stick it over your ears and complete the entire clean and jerk. All that effort in the clean was for nothing and now your mom is embarrassed because you're a lousy, disgusting jerker. For some athletes, this almost seems like an unconquerable nemesis. That's why this article is about jerking, plain and simple.

You need to know that I feel your pain, brothers and sisters. For the first few years of my weightlifting career, I was in this exact same swamp of failure. I had a fifteen

kilo difference between what I could clean and what I could jerk, and I missed more jerks than I made in competition during this time. It was ridiculous. I knew how to perform the jerk, I was strong, my technique was solid, but the weight just wouldn't stay overhead when I was attempting my heaviest lifts. It was enough to make a grown man weep. If there would have been Jerk Prozac available, I would have had it loaded into a Pez dispenser.

This lasted until I was around twenty. And then I learned some things. I made some changes. I fixed a few problems that I had never thought of fixing because I didn't even know they were problems. By the time I was twenty-four, I was a legitimate jerking machine. I don't think I missed three jerks in competition for the next four or five years and I was lifting 30-40 kilos more than I had been in the younger years. So now, believe it or not, I'm going to hand you some of the solutions I discovered on a silver platter. You're about to become a better jerker as you sit where you are. You'd better be ready.

Make sure you're fishing in the right pond

First of all, this article is not going to be a technical analysis of how to perform the jerk. If you want that, then you need to buy Greg Everett's book, ask a coach to teach you, or watch some videos of Wes Barnett. All of those things will explain how to achieve technical magnificence in the jerk. Instead, we're going to look at some practical ideas to improve the jerking prowess of an athlete who already has a solid foundation of knowledge and technique.

One of the easiest steps in the jerking equation is to figure out if you're using the correct style. Are you going to be better at the push jerk, the squat jerk, or the split jerk? Right away, we need to make sure we're

the terminology. Split jerking is the most common jerk technique in weightlifting. This is the easily recognizable form where the athlete punches one foot forward and one foot backwards to lock the bar overhead in a sort of stride position. If you go to a weightlifting meet, the vast majority of the lifters you see will use the split jerk. The squat jerk, on the other hand, is a technique where the athlete punches under the bar by jumping the feet slightly out to the sides and descending into a deep squat. The bottom position of this jerk looks like a clean-grip snatch, and it has been popularized by some world-class lifters. Chinese Olympic Champion Zhan Xugang probably has the greatest squat jerk in history, and studying videos of his technique will give you a solid idea of what it's supposed to look like. Finally, the push jerk is a basically just a shallow version of the squat jerk. The feet are jumped into the squat position when punching under the bar, but the athlete does not descend into a full squat. Most push jerkers catch the weight in a position that looks like a half-squat. Some coaches refer to the push jerk as a "power jerk," which is fine. Greek legend Pyrrhos Dimas is one of the most famous push jerkers in history, although some of his biggest lifts drove him down deep enough into a position that was close to a squat jerk.

There is no rule written in stone that dictates which style of jerk an athlete should use. Whichever style gives the athlete the best results is the correct one for that particular individual. Most weightlifters in the world use the split jerk because it has historically yielded the highest marks. Most (not all) world records in the clean and jerk have been set with split jerks. However, this does not make it the universal rule for everyone. Some athletes are simply more comfortable with push jerking or squat jerking. Pyrrhos Dimas and his Greek teammate Kakhi Kakhiashvili both won three Olympic gold medals using push jerks. Dimas actually converted to the split jerk briefly in 1993 and the change simply did not work for him.

As a coach, my personal preference would be to teach the athlete how to perform the split jerk with the intention of using it exclusively. However, all weightlifters should also be taught how to perform the push jerk and it can be used as a terrific assistance exercise. If time passes by and the athlete has sustained difficulty with split jerking, it would be wise to give the push jerk a try. If the athlete learns the push jerk and quickly exceeds his/her best split jerk results, the coach may want to consider a full-time conversion. Obviously, this will need to be given attention on an individual case-by-case basis. The squat jerk will probably be a little trickier because of the extreme flexibility and strength it requires. The athletes will basically have to be able to perform a narrow grip overhead squat with the same weight as their top cleans. This requires a very special type of athlete with unique leverage.

Caveat! Caveat!

Although the idea of converting a split jerker into a push or squat jerker is always a viable option, a warning that needs to be mentioned is that the coach shouldn't rush to convert the athlete away from split jerks simply because the athlete is having difficulty. There are ways to fix a sloppy jerk without switching styles. As mentioned above, this article is not a tutorial on how to perform a jerk. However, it will examine some common mistakes and how to fix them. Here are a few of them:

Problem: The athlete is trying to jerk the bar with the upper body instead of using the power of the lower body. This is an easy one to spot. The next time an athlete has a bar on the shoulders and is preparing to jerk, take a look at the athlete's hands. If you can see that the athlete is gripping the bar tightly with the hands, it means he/she has already started to prepare for an arm-initiated movement. White knuckles, straining forearms, and purple fingers don't lie. If athletes attempt to jerk the bar overhead using the strength of the upper body, it will be a disaster. The arms and shoulders are simply not strong enough to lift a maximum clean weight over the head to a locked position. The power to complete the jerk has to come from the lower body.

Solution: Tell the athlete to loosen their hands before attempting the jerk. Some great jerkers even have the fingers slightly opened prior to the dip. Loosening the hands forces the athlete to use the legs. When I was getting started in weightlifting, I once heard a coach say that the drive of the legs should generate enough power to elevate the barbell to the level of the forehead, and that the arms shouldn't even be actively used until the bar is passing the scalp and the split has begun. This is an interesting way to describe the movement and just might be the proper verbal cue to give one of your athletes the correct mental perception of the lift.

Problem: The athlete is driving the bar forward when it comes off the shoulders and the lockout is not directly over the head. This could be caused by a variety of culprits. Therefore, multiple solutions are in order.

Solution: The athlete might be letting the elbows sag down during the dip phase. Watch the jerk from the side and see if the elbows are drooping when the athlete dips with the legs. If the elbows are drooping, then the shoulders are rounding forward as well. Both of these will cause the bar to be driven forward, away from the body, during the drive phase. A useful verbal cue for this problem is "big chest on the dip." When

the athlete thinks about spreading the chest and maintaining a strong upright posture during the dip, the elbows are much less likely to sag because the position of the shoulder girdle will force them to stay up.

Solution: The athlete might have tight flexibility in the overhead position. Obviously, stretching is a necessary element to fixing this. However, jerks from behind the neck can be extremely beneficial in this situation. If you are unfamiliar with this exercise, it's exactly what it sounds like. The bar is placed on the back exactly like a back squat, and then the athlete simply performs the jerk. Because the starting position of the barbell is already behind the ears, the athlete has a much better chance of locking it out in the correct position over the head.

Solution: The athlete might be pushing the hips back (instead of straight down) during the dip phase. If the hips start to shift backwards during the dip, the resulting drive will be forward instead of straight up. Telling the athlete to "dip through the heels" is often helpful here. The athlete must mentally imagine the hips dropping straight down between the heels. Likewise, the athlete might also have his/her bodyweight on the front of the foot prior to the dip. This can result in the same forward problem. "Dip through the heels" will obviously communicate to the athlete that the weight should not be on the front of the foot before the jerk is initiated.

Problem: The athlete is having trouble locking out the bar on straight elbows overhead. This is clearly a technical problem and it is also one of the most common rule violations in the sport (pressout). Although there are some technique changes that can be made to fix a poor lockout, it must also be acknowledged that the problem could simply be a structural issue with the athlete's elbows. To state it clearly, some people just have really lousy elbow lockouts. The arms don't completely straighten and the athlete has all kinds of wobbly, bendy issues when the bar is overhead. These people will struggle with the Olympic lifts, period. However, let's make sure we understand that it is still possible to be a successful Olympic lifter even though the elbow lockout is shoddy. It's been done before.

Solution: Poor elbow lockout could be fixed by adjusting the width of the grip. The athlete's hands might need to be widened (or narrowed) to give the straight, snappy lockout we're looking for. This will

obviously need to be considered in conjunction with the most beneficial grip for the clean, since the clean and jerk is a two-part movement. Poor lockout could also be caused by improper timing. If the athlete's feet are landing and planting on the platform too early, the elbows might still be fighting for lockout when the lower body has already fixed itself into position. Telling the athlete to synchronize the feet landing with the elbow lockout can give a proper sense of timing.

Some lifters will struggle with jerks their entire career. Stand behind an athlete sometime and look at their shoulders. You'll usually figure out which ones will be the best jerkers simply by seeing their physical structure. If the athlete has narrow, sloping shoulders, then jerking will be tough. The upper body is going to have to work extremely hard just to support the barbell during the dip phase because the shoulders naturally have a downward contour to them. Then, on the other hand, look at the athletes who have a square, wide look to their shoulders where the span from deltoid to deltoid looks like the top of a box. These will be the best jerkers because the barbell has a natural plateau to rest on while the dip and drive are taking place. Look at it this way; what would happen if you sat a fifty pound block of concrete on top of a cardboard toilet paper roll? The toilet paper roll would get crushed because it's just not a strong enough support base. Now, what if you took that same concrete block and sat it on top of a dictionary? That dictionary would have a much better chance to support the block because of its density and size. Likewise, an athlete with a wider, thicker support base for the barbell will probably have a stronger jerk than an athlete with a narrower, thinner base. This is why increased mass in the upper body often leads to greater results in the jerk.

There is nothing nicer than seeing an athlete absolutely stick a perfect jerk after a tough clean. American legend Jeff Michels was thrilling to watch because many of his best jerks were popped into lockout after tough, grinding, screaming cleans. Some people have a natural knack for it. And then there are the unlucky ones, who go to meets and clean massive weights easily only to have the jerk come crashing down on them like a fighter jet being shot down. Those are the ones who have to put in extra work, end of story. However, as a former pathetic jerker who went to jerk rehab and eventually developed into a jerking assassin, I can tell you that the struggle is worth it when you start getting those down signals. Happy jerking, amigos.

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