

Starting Strength

The Split Snatch and Clean

by
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When I was in high school, I sent away for two of George Jowett's courses. One was about dynamic tension, which could be done without weights, and the other was a complete bodybuilding routine that needed weights. Like just about every other teenager on the planet, I wanted to get bigger and stronger, primarily so that I could perform better in sports. Since the cost of the set of weights needed to do the various exercises in the course was \$30, which was out of the question, I tried the dynamic tension movements. They in fact worked to some extent, but I knew that if I was really wanting to get bigger and stronger I needed weights.

To ask my parents for such a sum was ludicrous in 1955, when twenty dollars was the total weekly budget for a family of five, so I tried to improvise with my father's bulldozer parts. This turned into a fiasco. I couldn't come up with a way to lock the used parts on the axle bar and they would slip every time I attempted to lift the weights. End of experiment.

However, a few years later, after I joined the Air Force and finally had time to train, I used those exercises from Jowett's course and set up a program that began working well for me. I did the basics: back squat, bench press, upright rows, overhead presses, and a rough form of jerk and cleans. During this time, I hit a growth spurt and for a month straight, gained a pound a day. I also grew two inches in height.

At Great Lakes Naval Training Center, West Palm Beach AFB, and at a radar site in Iceland, I trained diligently on a standard set. My goal was still the same – to improve my strength in order to be a better athlete. And it was working nicely. My skills in the two sports I was playing, softball and basketball, were much improved.

However, I felt I needed some different exercises to aid my cause. When a fellow airman informed me that he was returning stateside for a furlough from Iceland, I asked him to pick me up some muscle magazines. He brought me three *Strength & Health* and a Weider bodybuilding mag. What caught my attention were the photos of weightlifters doing presses, snatches, and clean and jerks. I was already pressing, jerking, and cleaning. It was the snatches that fascinated me and I set out to learn how to do that involved lift.

There were two ways to snatch: using a split style and the squat style. I tried both and decided I liked the split better. I felt more in control of the bar with that style, and while it was certainly more difficult to learn this high-skill lift on my own than it would have been if I had someone to coach me, I was able to learn the necessary skills to do a legal lift with a decent amount of weight. And in the process of having to think about and practice the various movements, I concentrated on what I was doing to a much greater extent than I would have if someone had been instructing me.

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All I had to go on were the photos in *S&H*. I would study shots of John Grimek, Steve Stanko, Joe Pitman, Norbert Schemansky, Frank Spellman, John Davis, and the best of all, Stan Stanczyk. There were also action pictures of Shams of Egypt, Namdjoy of Iran, and Palinski of Poland hitting deep bottom positions in the split snatch. I would check out their body mechanics as they pulled the bar off the floor, through the middle, and at the very top. Yet there would always seem to be a gap in the photos and I had to discover where the bar went next through experimentation. I calculated how far to move my front and rear foot so I could be completely stretched out in the bottom, but still be in a solid, stable stance. This meant a lot of trial and error, but I believe learning in this manner is very lasting because each tidbit of information is precious, and I stored every bit of progress I achieved.

I also wanted to do clean and jerks since the most weight could be elevated overhead in that manner. The split clean came rather easy after I had spent a great deal of time on the split snatch, but I knew the squat clean was the style for me. I didn't have to pull the bar nearly as high and I could move into the squat faster than I could split. It makes sense that this would also be the case for the snatch, but it wasn't. From the very beginning, the split style fit me better so I stuck with it.

While perusing the dog-eared pages of *S&H* for more clues on form for the various competitive lifts, I learned a great deal about the snatch. Up until the teenage sensation from Akron, Ohio, and the American College of Modern Weightlifting came along and started snatching using the squat style, all the competitive weightlifters in the world did the split. The coach of the weightlifting club, Larry Barnholth, is generally credited with inventing this form of snatching, but it was actually Pete George who came up with the idea and perfected it.

Dave Sheppard and Tommy Kono cashed in on the squat snatch and became international stars like Pete. But many of the old-timers stayed with the split: Norb Schemansky and Stan Stanczyk being the most notable. Stan was nicknamed "The Flash," and with some digging, I learned why. At three Olympic Games, a series of tests were used to determine which athletes had the faster speed of movement. They tested swimmers and runners coming off the blocks, throwers going across the ring, sprinters in full stride, and weightlifters doing the three lifts. In 1936, it was determined that Ibrahim Shams of Egypt displayed the fastest movement of any athlete in the Games when he snatched. It was said of him that he was so quick, he could switch off a light and be in his bed before it got dark.

By 1948, the title of the world's quickest athlete went to Stan Stanczyk, and he repeated the feat in 1952, thus obtaining the well-deserved handle, "Flash." I met Stan, but never got to see him action except on film, and he was amazing. However, I did get to see two others who had to rank close to Stan in foot speed, Norb Schemansky and Louis Riecke. I lifted in meets with both of them and made sure I watched their snatches closely. Ski was fast, yet he relied on his great strength more than he did his foot speed. Riecke was just the opposite. His great success in snatching, 325 as a 181er, was mostly due to his foot speed. It was a joy to watch him snatch. The phrase "poetry in motion," is greatly overused, but it applies to him doing a split snatch.

I was at a meet in Houston, standing in the Y's Physical Director's office watching the proceedings on the platform through a window. I was there specifically so I could watch Riecke snatch. I wanted to see how much the bar dropped from where it was pulled until he had it locked out. I used the bottom sill of the window as my guide. At the finish of his pull, he moved faster than my eye could follow and the bar did not drop so much as an inch. He was *that* fast.

This is one of the main reasons why I encourage any athlete who wants to enhance his foot speed to start doing split snatches. But the lift provides much, much more than this. Performing a split snatch with a substantial amount of weight also improves coordination, timing, balance, and, of

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course, functional strength. Even when someone has no intention of entering an Olympic meet, this exercise is a valuable one to any aspiring athlete in nearly every sport.

Foot speed may not be much of a factor in golf, for instance, but the strength gained in the legs, hips, back, shoulders, and arms certainly are. Those who follow that sport will recognize the name of Frank Stranahan, one of the top amateur golfers in the world. He was also a dedicated weightlifter, often entering meets and placing in contests in his home state of Ohio. Whenever he was in the Dallas area, he would train with us at the Downtown Y. He not only snatched perfectly, he handled more weight than most of the lifting team. This, during an era when any form of weight training was considered taboo in those high-skill sports like golf. He told us on more than one occasion that squats and split snatches were the keys to his success on the links, and of the two, the snatches were the most useful.

Rev. Bob Richards, the Olympic Champion in the pole vault in '52 and '56 plus a bronze in '48, was also a rebel to what most considered standard practice for that event. He did the Olympic lifts and lots of split snatches. My point being: learning how to perform the split snatch can help you improve your performance in any sport, and form doesn't have to be absolutely perfect in order for you to reap the benefits.

And you do not need a coach to teach you this lift. I know this because I taught myself, as did nearly every lifter I trained and competed with. It can be done if the will to do so is there. If I could do it, so can you. I am certainly not a prodigy, not by a long shot. Every gain I made was through sweat and determination. Trying a different method, failing, regrouping, and trying something else until I found what worked, and then drilling until my technique improved. It didn't come overnight, and for that I was thankful. I liked the idea that doing clean and jerks and snatches was extremely difficult. It meant that if I spent the necessary time improving my form and getting stronger, I would be able to do something that very few others could.

There aren't many lifting coaches and even fewer strength coaches who teach the split snatch. For one reason, they don't know how to do the lift. For another, they believe the squat snatch is the superior version of the exercise, primarily because the bar doesn't have to be pulled as high in the squat style and the lifter can go lower in the squat than he can in the split.

For the most part, these arguments are true, yet not in every case. Riecke didn't have to pull his snatches higher when he split because he was so damn fast. In my own case, I did have to pull a fraction higher, but I could hit a lower position in the bottom of the split than I could in the squat. This had more to do with the way my body was assembled than flexibility. So there are some athletes who are better suited to splitting. Another factor for me was confidence; if my pull was strong, I felt sure I would snatch well. On the other hand, I could have a powerful pull and still not have the assurance that I would make the numbers I was after when I used the squat style. And as every athlete knows all too well, confidence can be 90% of the battle. So while my top-end lifts for the two styles was almost identical, 305 for the split and 300 for the squat, my confidence level for the split style was twice what it was for the squat style.

Before you can do a split snatch with any semblance of decent form, you must have ample flexibility in your shoulders and hips, and know how to pull the bar upward in the correct line and use the proper sequence in the pull. Adequate flexibility for your shoulders can be achieved rather easily. Hold a rolled up towel or broomstick over your head with a wide grip and rotate one or the other back over your head with your elbows locked. Ease it back, hold for a moment, then relax. Now, do it again and again until you feel your shoulders loosen and gain a greater range of motion. You must be

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able to hold the bar over your head with your arms locked while in a deep split. If your shoulders are too tight, the bar will be fixed too far out front and either it will fall to the floor or cause you to run forward to save your balance.

This stretching of the shoulders needs to be done prior to every snatch workout, during the session, and more later on in the evening. The only time this poses a problem is when someone has been doing far too many flat benches and his shoulders are extremely tight. However, with patience and lots of stretching the shoulders will eventually loosen. It's a good idea to stop benching while gaining this needed flexibility and then only do that exercise once every two weeks.

The hips can be stretched simply by doing deep lunges. After you feel comfortable doing these, hold a broomstick or light bar overhead and step into a deep split. How deep? Your knee should be extended out over your toe and your trailing leg should almost be touching the floor with your leg as straight as possible. This bottom position will improve just by doing the snatches, but make sure you're good and loose before doing your first set of full snatches.

As for the snatch pull, it must be extremely close to your body from start to finish and the sequence has to be in this order: arms straight until the traps are contracted, then they bend forcefully as you extend high on your toes.

Start out by doing power snatches. The grip you use depends to a large extent on your shoulder width. Youngsters and most females can take a much narrower grip than older, larger athletes. There is a score on most Olympic bars six inches from the collars. Wrap your ring finger around that score. This fits the majority of athletes, but always remember that individuals differ in lots of ways, so find the one that fits you best.

Speaking of grips, this is a good time to learn how to hook grip because when you start handling demanding poundages, you're going to need it. To employ the hook grip, wrap your index and middle finger around the bar and lock your thumb in place. But doesn't that hurt? Yes it does. But believe it or not, you'll get used to it after a short while. One thing you can do to ease the discomfort is to wrap 1/2" strips of trainer's tape around the first joint of your thumb. Just give it two turns around your thumb. More will make the tape bunch up when you're lifting and that only makes things worse.

So you're taped, stretched out, and have warmed up with a few sets of power snatches. Now you're ready to do the Drill for the split snatch. This is a slight modification of the idea that I picked up from long-time coach of the Lost Battalion Weightlifting Club, Morris Weissbrot. It's a three-part sequence. Part one: power snatch the weight and step into a deep split. Part two: hang snatch the weight and go right into the bottom position. Part three: pull the weight from the floor and go to the deep bottom. Do these back-to-back in quick fashion.

Start off with just a broomstick or an empty Olympic bar until you figure out what you're trying to accomplish, and then gradually add weight so that you have to pull harder and move faster. The question often arises: which foot should I move forward? The answer is simple: whichever one feels the most comfortable. It's like being right or left handed, so go with the one that feels natural.

Now I want to go through a split snatch step-by-step. Your feet should be at shoulder width with toes pointed forward. This is an important form point. Should your toes be pointed outward, they will have to swing inward before being slammed into the floor. This takes time, and time is of essence in a snatch. Also, when they start out pointing outward – or inward for that matter – they have a tendency to swing out or in while splitting, and this causes them to land in a less-than-solid position.

The key to snatching any amount of weight in the split style depends on a strong pull, but just as importantly on foot speed and foot placement in the bottom position, When you finish your

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pull and go into the split, your front foot will only move the length of your shoe while your rear foot will travel quite a distance, as far back as it needs to go so that you end up stretched out in a full split. Picture a deep lunge while holding the bar directly over your head with your arms locked, and you'll have a split snatch.

The biggest problem all beginners have is with foot placement. What I have them do is draw marks on the floor or platform with chalk, indicating where their front and back feet should land. After they do a rep, they can check to see how close they came to hitting those marks and make the necessary adjustments. A mistake most beginners make is they allow their trailing foot to turn sideways so that the inner or outer part of the heel is touching the floor. This is not a solid position. What you need to do is be up on your toe. This helps you maintain balance and control.

This form point is one of the most difficult to do correctly. Your feet must travel straight forward and backward and land in a direct line from where they started. The tendency is to swing one foot or the other, usually the rear one, a bit inward so that your feet land on the same line. This will cause you to stagger to the side and in most cases, lose that attempt. This means you have to practice foot placement until you hit your marks even with your eyes closed.

Also, if you *slam* your lead foot into the floor, you will move faster and establish a more solid base than if you tippy-toe into the move.

Now, the pull. If you've been doing power cleans, you're a step ahead. The line and sequence is really the same for split snatches, only the pull is longer. Not much longer, however, because if you can pull the weight chest high, you should be able to get under it and lock it out with ease.

The bar comes off the floor like a deadlift. If you rush the start, in most cases the bar will run away from your shins and this will have an adverse affect on the rest of the pull. It must stay extremely close to your body from start to finish. When the bar reaches mid-thigh, drive your hips forward aggressively with your arms still perfectly straight. Next, contract your traps instantly followed by bending your arms and climbing high on your toes. It's critical that your elbows turn up and out, and not back. Once they turn backward, you no longer have control of the upward thrust of the bar and have to depend on momentum. You might get away with this form mistake with light poundages, but not with heavy weights. Elbows go up and out with the bar still tucked in close to your body.

When this sequence is done cleanly, the combination of the contraction of the traps, arms, and calves will make the bar jump. That's when you move under the weight like a shot. This is the movement that gave "Flash" Stanczyk his nickname. If your line and sequence of pull is right and you move like a blur under the bar, you will be able to lock it out without any difficulty. As you drive into the bottom position, don't just think about catching the weight and holding it overhead. Rather, push up against the bar as you lock it out and continue to exert pressure against it as you recover.

If you attack the lock-out, you will be able to save a great many lifts where the bar has gone too far forward or backward. But when you're passive in the bottom of the split, those lifts will be lost.

Recovery with the warm-up weight is easy; you can just push off with your lead foot and stand up. But when the poundages get demanding, you will need to recover in stages. When you're buried in the deep bottom with a max attempt, slide your rear foot up just a bit, then move your lead foot back a few inches, rear foot, lead foot, and so on until you have control of the weight. All the while you must be exerting extreme pressure up against the bar to keep it fixed directly over the back of your head.

Stand up, lower the bar back to the floor in a controlled manner, reset and do the next rep. Do not let the bar crash to the floor, unless you're using bumper plates, then make sure you keep your back straight as it goes down. Remember, you can injure your back by rounding it when you lower a weight just as easily as you can by rounding it on the way up.

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While getting acquainted with the split snatch, stand up after each rep and make sure everything is as it should be, then proceed with the next rep. Do triples. This is a high-skill movement and you want to focus intently on every rep and not rush through them.

Once you learn the technique for the split snatch, you'll be able to do split cleans very readily. The main differences are the grip, the rack position, and length of pull. Of course, you know how to grip the bar and rack the weight since they're the same as for the power clean. It basically is the same movement as a power clean except you don't have to pull the bar quite as high because you're going to split under it. A lot of lifters used to split clean for their presses. Others who did the split style usually were forced to use this form of the clean due to some physical problem. And some were exceptional athletes, able to go almost as low in the split as the best split snatches. The best I ever saw was Baszanowski of Poland, many times World and Olympic Champion. He would go so deep in the split clean that his trailing leg would be mere inches from the floor. He was lightning fast and could make corrections like no other I ever witnessed. When he hit the bottom of a split clean, the bar would always swing to his left side, the same as his trailing leg. He was so solid that he would slowly bring the bar back into the proper line and stand up. Oddly enough, he used the squat style for his snatches.

Give the split a try on both the snatches and cleans, if for no other reason than they will strengthen some new muscles and attachments. They will most certainly increase your foot speed even if you only use moderate weights, and that is an attribute every athlete cherishes.

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