

Starting Strength

The Split Snatch

by

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Serious strength athletes are always on the lookout for exercises that will help them to become better all-around performers in their chosen sports. They will try just about anything to improve their coordination, timing, foot quickness, agility, and balance. One-legged squats, hopping up on boxes, running through mazes of chains placed on the floor. The more gadgets and gimmicks involved the better.

This is not a new concept. Strength athletes have been seeking lifts to help them get stronger and faster for centuries, and barbells and dumbbells have always been part of that quest. Unless one has a historical interest in the sport of strength, he will not know that before the International Weightlifting Federation condensed the number of lifts to be contested to just three, there were dozens of exercises tested in strength competitions. The British Weight-lifter's Association, for example, listed 38 different lifts that could be done to set a new record. At the 1924 Olympics in Paris, the lifts were the one-hand snatch, one-hand jerk, press, snatch, and clean and jerk. But at the next Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928, the classic three lifts – the clean and press, snatch, and clean and jerk – were contested for the first time. However, snatching and cleaning from the hang position was permitted (by 1932 the hang was disallowed). This remained the format until 1972 when the press was dropped from official competition.

From the very beginning up to the present, the two-hands snatch has been an integral part of the sport. It is a very athletic movement, requiring not only great strength to handle big numbers, but an extremely high degree of foot speed, timing, coordination, agility, balance and a large dose of courage. Which makes it the perfect exercise for those wanting to improve those attributes. And in my opinion, the split style is more beneficial to strength athletes than the squat style due to the fact that the athlete has to move his feet a longer distance in the split snatch. That entails greater quickness and overall coordination.

It should also be noted that up until the mid-forties, every competitive lifter used the split style. There were no squat snatchers. Seems odd, but it's true. The squat snatch was invented by a teenage phenom out of Ohio, Pete George. Just as Dick Fosbury revolutionized the high jump with his unorthodox "Fosbury Flop" at the '68 Games in Mexico City, Pete George changed the way lifters would snatch in the future.

With Pete's amazing success in the sport followed by another sensation, Dave Sheppard, using the squat-style snatch, nearly everyone starting out in the sport of Olympic lifting adopted the squat style. But there were still some excellent splitters breaking records on the national and international levels; Stan Stanczyk, Norb Schemansky, and Louis Riecke were all world record holders in the snatch.

The Split Snatch

I got to see Ski and Riecke lift quite often, although I never had the pleasure of seeing Stanczyk compete. It's hard for me to believe that any athlete could move faster than Ski or Riecke, but it seems that Stanczyk could do just that. At the '48 Olympics, a group of scientists tested all the athletes to find out who had the fastest foot movement. This included sprinters coming out of the blocks, shot putters going across the ring, wrestlers, swimmers, the whole lot. Stan Stanczyk was declared the winner for his foot movements in the split snatch. At the next Olympiad in '52 he again won that title, and from then on was known as "Flash" Stanczyk.

I was stationed in Iceland when I had a friend bring me some copies of *Strength & Health* magazine when he went to the States on leave. I had been training with weights for over a year, setting up my own programs with no help from anyone or any publications. The photos of the Olympic lifters doing the three lifts captivated me. I really had no intent of actually competing. My goal was to get bigger and stronger so I could be a better softball and basketball player since they were the two sports I was playing at that time.

That's how I learned about Stanczyk's remarkable foot speed. I wanted more foot speed, what athlete doesn't? So I did my best to emulate what I saw in the photos of the lifters snatching. And clean and jerking and pressing as well, because I liked the idea of building strength that could be directly applied to all kinds of sports. I would study the bottom position of the great Russian champion Lopatin, snatching 293 lbs, as a 148-pounder. It didn't seem possible. Nor did Rudy Plukfelder, the Russian light heavyweight, snatching 314. And the amazing photo of the bantamweight Namdjou of Iran. He was in a deep split firmly locking out 210 lbs. with the bar almost touching his head.

So I went to work trying to learn how to snatch. At first, I also did some squat snatches, learning from photos of Tommy Kono, Pete George, Dave Sheppard, plus any other lifter using that style. However, I quickly decided that I could do better using the split than the squat. This might have been because I only had a standard exercise bar to train on – no revolving sleeves – and it's easier to turn the weights over at the top in the split than it is in the squat style snatch.

Plus, there was something about the split style that fit me much better in the snatch than the squat style. I felt as if I had more control of the bar from start to finish. If I pulled the bar strongly enough, I knew I could make the lift. This wasn't always the case in the squat snatch however. So I decided to concentrate on the split and leave the squat alone. I was doing squat cleans and the two different styles seemed to complement one another.

Since I only had photos to guide me, I would experiment and see what worked and what didn't. I learned that when I pulled the bar very close to my body, I was able to split under the weight easier. I found out that when I extended high on my toes before moving my feet I could move faster. From the photos, I understood that my torso had to be perfectly erect when I locked out the weight overhead. Should I lean forward, the bar would be too far out front to lockout. If, for some reason, I ended my pull laying back a bit, the bar would crash down behind me.

Perhaps the hardest part of the split snatch for me to learn was the position of my feet when I went into a split. This took some diligent study of the photos in the magazines, but I finally figured it out. Before I left Iceland, I was a proficient split snatcher.

This may sound as if I am suggesting that I have some sort of special physical skills. Believe me, I do not. At the very best, I'm average. What I did have was determination to learn this lift and a large dose of tenacity. I learned how to split snatch by thinking through the various phases of the lift and doing a lot of practicing.

And I was not in the least bit unusual in this regard. All the lifters I trained and competed with in Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, throughout the Midwest, and finally at York, had a similar story to tell.

The Split Snatch

I would guess that 95% of them taught themselves how to do the Olympic lifts. Only a small fraction had any help in learning the lifts, and in many cases this was just another lifter with more experience. The number of coaches who really knew that they were doing could be counted on one hand.

My point is that if I could teach myself how to do a complicated movement like the full split snatch and full clean and jerk, then so can you. It's simply a matter of how badly you want to do it. I've told athletes this and they reply, "But I don't have any bumper plates," or, "There isn't a lifting platform where I train." But mostly, "I don't have anybody to show me what to do."

These are excuses. If you sincerely want to learn how to do a split snatch, you will. Now there are instructional DVDs and videos, clinics conducted by national level lifters, plus a good many books with excellent instructions. But keep in mind that in my day, lifters taught themselves. I learned on a standard exercise bar lifting on a concrete floor in an empty room in a barracks with only photos to guide me. Bob Bednarski learned how to do the Olympic lifts in a gym in a garage. Tommy Suggs had a shed in which to train. Bill March started his lifting career in a gym inside a flower shop. Schemansky, Patera, Dube, Pickett were all self-taught. As were John Davis, Stan Stanczyk, Tommy Kono, Chuck Vinci, Ike Berger, and Tony Garcy.

After I got fully involved in the sport, I was surprised to learn that some rather famous athletes also included the split snatch in their training routines. The one that really stands out, even to this day, was Frank Stranahan. He was a professional golfer and did very well for himself in that sport. Whenever he was in the Dallas area for a tournament, he would train with the Olympic lifters at the Downtown YMCA. Bear in mind that this was in the fifties and lifting weights was considered taboo for most sports, and most certainly for the sport of golf. The common view was that it would make the athlete "muscle-bound," and that would spell disaster on the links.

Frank split snatched. Not only did he possess excellent technique, he also handled some heavy weights. The snatch was not a token exercise for him. It was definitely a primary movement. He once told me that he thought the split snatch was the most beneficial exercise in his entire weight program – he also did presses, clean and jerks, front and back squats, and he loved to deadlift. Frank was a good enough Olympic lifter to place in regional contests but he was making way too much money on the pro circuit to be tempted to work harder on the three lifts.

Another famous athlete from that era who enjoyed doing the quick lifts, and preferred the split style of snatch, was the legendary Rev. Bob Richards. Besides winning two Olympic gold medals in his specialty, the pole vault, in '52 and '56 he also won the National A.A.U. Decathlon and the all-around championship, denoting the ultimate in athleticism.

I mention these two great champions to point out that the split snatch can be a most valuable asset for you even if you never bother entering an Olympic meet. The athletic qualities you need to do a split snatch carry over to any sport. Instead of jumping up on boxes, do some heavy split snatches. That will improve your leaping ability much faster. Rather than dancing through a pattern of chains to enhance foot speed and agility, snatch bodyweight or more. And all the while, you're getting stronger.

Most strength coaches I know are always searching for some new machine or gimmick to help their athletes improve their foot speed, balance, coordination, and timing. Look no further than the split snatch. My advice to strength coaches in this regard is:

- 1) Learn how to do this lift. It doesn't have to be perfect, just so the mechanics are correct.
- 2) Start your athletes on them right away. Again, form doesn't have to be that of an Olympic competitor. As long as the movement is done right, the athlete will derive the benefits. Naturally, the better the form, the better the overall results, but even when the form is rough, the athlete is going to get stronger, and over time he will improve his technique.

The Split Snatch

I'm going to assume that you buy into my argument and want to take a shot at learning how to split snatch. The first step is to make sure you have at least adequate flexibility in your shoulders and hips. If you've been doing power snatches, overhead squats, and lunges, then you're a step ahead. Even when you have been doing these exercises, you will still need to spend time making your hips and shoulder girdle more flexible.

Holding a stick overhead with the wide, snatch grip, step into a deep lunge. Your front knee needs to be out over your foot, your upper body upright, and your rear leg as straight as possible with the knee almost touching the floor. Keeping that trailing leg straight is the hardest part for most in the beginning, but over time with many, many repetitions, flexibility will improve. Your rear foot needs to be up on its toes and not turned to one side or the other.

At the start of the snatch, which I will go over in greater detail later, your feet will be shoulder width. When you place them in position for the deep split, they should also be at shoulder width. Step into the deep lunge with the stick held overhead and your arms fully locked out. Stay there for 5-6 seconds, then recover and do it again. And again, until you find the ideal placement for your feet with your torso very upright. Learn from the get-go not to merely hold the stick overhead. Extend your arms and shoulders up into it. This will be necessary when you start doing the movement with a weighted barbell.

If you've never tried any snatches or have never done any power snatches or overhead squats, you will need to use a bit of trial and error to find out where to grip the bar for the lift. For most athletes, this method works: on Olympic bars, there is a score right at eight inches in from the collars. Wrap your ring finger around that score. Then go into the deep split and see how that grip feels. You may want to move it out or in a bit. The stick and later, the bar, should be fixed so that it's directly over the back of your head.

After you do a few reps and feel comfortable in the deep split, do this. Stand upright and hold the stick right at your nipples. Extend high on your toes, flip the stick up over your head and in that same instant, drive into the deep bottom position. This is known as "shadow" lifting and is an excellent way to perfect technique on any lift. Next, do the same movement with an empty Olympic bar, paying very close attention to the many form points.

Next, do full split snatches from the floor. The bar has to start very close to your body and stay close all the way to the finish of the pull. The bar should be tucked in tightly to your shins at the start, brush your belly button through the middle and be close to your chest at the finish of the pull. While a split snatcher has more fore and aft control than a squatter, if the bar is pulled too far out in front a great deal of the final pull will be lost, and it also makes it much more difficult to drive under the weight and lock it out.

One of the hardest things to learn in the split snatch is that you must be fully extended at the finish of the pull. If you're still leaning forward, even slightly, you will not have any pop at the top and you'll also end up leaning forward when you hit the bottom. Your body should be erect and high on your toes before making the explosive move to the bottom. The extra thrust provided by your calves will elevate the bar a few inches, and those inches are often the difference between success and failure. In addition, you can move to the bottom faster when you're on your toes than you can from a flat-footed stance. Some lifters like to look up at the top of their pulls, contending that it helps them to extend better.

Extension is everything in snatching, and is more important in the split style because the bar has to be pulled higher in that form of the lift. In other words, if you don't pull the bar high enough,

The Split Snatch

you're not going to be able to move under it no matter how fast you are. But even when the pull is strong enough, if foot movement and placement are not right, that lift will be lost as well.

At the start, your feet should be at shoulder width with your toes pointed straight ahead. Don't let them turn out at all. This works for the squat snatch, but not for the split. After you've pulled the bar as high as you can, go into the split. Your front foot will only move forward about twelve inches, roughly the length of your shoe. In contrast, your rear foot will travel as far back as necessary for you to go into a deep split with the knee of your trailing leg almost touching the floor. Keep in mind that the lift will be disqualified if the knee does come in contact with the platform in a contest.

Both of your feet must travel in a straight line, forward and backward. If either foot swings in or out you're not going to end up with a solid bottom. Generally, the tendency is to swing one or both feet inward so that they end up on almost the same line. Since it's extremely difficult to control a weight overhead in this position, you will end up staggering sideways and usually have to dump the weight. Hitting exactly the same correct bottom every time can only be accomplished with lots of practice. It's helpful to use some chalk and mark the floor where you want your front foot to land. After each rep, check to see how close you came to hitting that mark. Once you have that down pat, do the same thing for your rear foot. This is harder to check on, but it can be done when you're using just a stick, or empty bar.

Eventually, you'll be able to tell when you hit the split perfectly. When everything has been done right, you're as solid as a rock in the bottom and are able to sit there for several seconds if need be. When you drive into that deep bottom, slam your lead foot into the floor. Make some noise. This will help you to move faster and establish a more solid base. Timing is critical in the split snatch. You must wait till the last moment before making the move with your feet and both feet must hit the floor at exactly the same time. If they don't, the bottom will be unstable and you will not be able to lock the bar out properly.

Which foot should move forward? The one that feels more natural. I've known a few lifters who could move their right and left foot forward with equal skill, but they were rare animals. Bill March was one of them. He even used to alternate doing a squat snatch with a split during a contest. He did this to irritate Hoffman if he was announcing. And he was just about as adept at splitting as he was squatting.

Another key point: as you drive into the split, don't just think about catching and holding the bar overhead. Instead, drive your arms forcefully up into the bar and try to stretch it apart. This is a more positive approach and will enable you to lock your elbows and have greater control of the bar overhead. When you are holding the bar firmly, you can alter its position a bit. However, if your arms are passive and the bar is slightly out of line, you will not be able to readjust it to save the lift.

The main reasons most lifters cite for the use of squat style instead of the split is that the split requires that the bar be pulled higher, and a lifter can go lower in the squat than the split. The first assertion is true. The second isn't. In some cases, the athlete can go lower in the split than he can in the squat. I was one of those, as were Ski and Riecke. It has to do with how we're put together more than anything else.

But the split style does necessitate a longer pull. This I didn't mind, because when my pull was strong I had complete confidence in my ability to get under the bar and lock it out. I never developed that same confidence in the squat style, although I did nearly the same on the squat, 305, and the split, 310. The big difference for me was I could count on making three split snatches, but was fortunate to do one or two in the squat.

The Split Snatch

Since the pull is longer in the split style, you have to concentrate on this phase of the lift. Keep in mind that it isn't always how high you pull the bar, but how explosive you are at the top. I've watched many lifters pull the bar plenty high, but it was moving so slowly at the finish that they didn't have adequate time to get into a solid bottom. You must make the bar jump at the top so that you have ample time to get under it and lock it out. Grip the bar, tuck it in so that it's touching your shins, flatten your back, set your hips, look up and make sure your frontal deltoids are out ahead of the bar. Push down with your feet and ease the bar off the floor. Don't jerk it upward. This will cause your back to round and your elbows to bend. Both are form mistakes. With elbows locked, guide the bar up your body. As it passes mid-thigh, jam your hips forward and follow through with a dynamic trap shrug. Only then will you bend your arms and give the bar a final nudge upward and at the same time climb high on your toes. Make sure your elbows turn up and out and not back.

When you learn that sequence – hips, traps, arms – the bar will leap upward and that's when you go into the split. Think of the upward moving bar as a whipping motion - under control at the start, picking up speed through the middle, and becoming no more than a blur at the top. A powerful pull with a pop at the finish will allow you to move into the split with ease.

Once you've secured the weight overhead you need to recover correctly. When light weights are being used, you can push off with your lead foot and stand up. However, when the weights get demanding, you must recover in stages. Push down hard with your lead foot, but don't move it until you've edged your trailing foot up a bit. Then slide your front foot back a little more, then your back foot again. On the really heavy poundages, you may have to take several baby steps before you're able to recover. Just be sure not to pull that front foot back too far too fast or you'll end up dumping the bar forward. While you're moving your feet, you must continue to push up against the bar overhead so that you maintain control of it.

The split snatch is definitely a high-skill lift, so give it priority during the week and also in the workout. A good way to prepare yourself for the split snatch is to do power snatches, then go into a deep split to stretch out your hips and shoulders. You can then do a few full split snatches from the hang to further get the feel of the movement. Triples are the order of the day for snatches with occasional doubles and singles. Should you decide to do them twice a week, use moderate weights for that second session and drill on form.

The split snatch is one of those exercises that's rather easy to learn yet hard to master. But to derive benefits from doing them, all you have to do is learn how to do them correctly. They're one of the best exercises in weight training for athletes. They not only make you considerably stronger, but they enhance a great many other attributes that can be used in any sport. Even if you do not plan to ever enter an Olympic meet, give the split snatch a try. Doing a full split snatch smoothly is one of the most gratifying experiences in all of strength training.

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