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## Want to Be Good at Oly?

Two-time Olympian Chad Vaughn details four areas of focus he believes will help you add weight to your snatch and clean and jerk.

By Chad Vaughn

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Most athletes dive into the Olympic lifts without considering what really allows someone to lift the heaviest loads and move efficiently through high-rep workouts.

I have four keys to lifting the heaviest weights and moving well in the snatch and clean and jerk. I believe they should be used as primary points of evaluation that will need to be built upon.

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To start, ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I need mobility work or am I at least somewhat comfortable in all the extreme positions for these movements?
2. Do I “rip” from the floor?
3. Do I hurry to set up or get into positions?
4. Is my mind overwhelmed or my thoughts scrambled from trying to accomplish too many things at once?
5. Do I need to calm down?

### 1. Receiving Positions

When talking about the receiving position, I often use the term “rock bottom.” What I mean is the depth you would reach if you performed a full-range-of-motion squat. Many—maybe most—are confused about where this is, especially given the misconceptions about squatting deep.

A full range-of-motion squat is not quads reaching parallel or the hip crease below the knee. In Olympic lifting, this is like someone performing a push-up without touching the chest to the floor. Yet, while that example is understood as not meeting full range of motion, things are less clear when dealing with the bottom of the squat as it relates to Oly lifting.

When it comes to the standard that dictates the hip crease should be below the knee, I believe many coaches and athletes have taken the phrase too literally—as in the squat has to be that specific spot: no higher, no lower. I would argue this is simply the minimum acceptable depth for a squat. It doesn’t mean you shouldn’t or can’t go lower.

In fact, I remember my lead CrossFit Level 1 instructor in 2010 telling me, “You have the best air squat I’ve ever seen.” I was, of course, at rock bottom, as any weightlifter would be. He didn’t tell me I shouldn’t go below a certain position. I understand the difficulty in teaching a rock-bottom squat to large numbers of people as most can’t get there with



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

***While holding the position in Frame 1, this athlete was asked to squat lower. The resulting position (Frame 2) will be much more useful in snatching very heavy loads.***

good form in the beginning. But if people want to prepare for their heaviest and most efficient snatch and clean, they should move in the direction of full range of motion on all squats.

So how do you know how low is low enough? Almost daily, I hear, "Am I low enough?" Nearly 100 percent of the time, the answer is, "No." If you are low enough, you'll know because you can't go any further. Another popular question: "So you want me to go that low all the time?" The answer for me is always, "Yes."

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A regularly occurring statement: "OK, but you'll have to tell me when to stop going down." As I immediately agree, I wish I could bet someone \$1 million that I'll have to say "lower" at least five times.

If you need visualization, watch toddlers. You'll likely catch them hanging out in this "too low" position. They could do it all day, usually with the feet in a perfect squatting stance. This is a natural position in which all humans were meant to be. It's not bad for the knees or a position you should avoid. It's the opposite. The human body is capable of this range of motion regularly.

Unfortunately, some people lack flexibility either because of their athletic backgrounds or past experiences. Understand that if you've been doing partial-range-of-motion squats for years or many reps, your body has likely adapted to that range. Still, we can get you moving through your full range of motion on all your squats—you'll simply be working flexibility on every rep.

And while there are all these fancy stretches and mobility drills out there, the fact is mobility should be in every

movement. That is not to say you shouldn't stretch, but if you're spending more time on mobility than actually working out, you need to check your range of motion and hold yourself to better standards while lifting.

Why do you think elite weightlifters are known as the second most flexible athletes in the Olympics behind gymnasts? Weightlifters often are asked what they do for mobility; many do nothing. That doesn't mean we shouldn't or couldn't benefit from improved mobility in specific areas, but we squat, snatch, and clean and jerk in a way that's necessary for us to lift the most weight—it's mobility with a barbell.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

**Chad Vaughn demonstrates a rock-bottom overhead squat with 285 lb.**



Mike Warhentin/CrossFit Journal

*A good Romanian deadlift is characterized by vertical shins and shoulders in front of the bar. The lats are engaged to keep the bar close to the body.*

## 2. The Romanian Deadlift

The most important position of the snatch and clean is the transition point when the bar is right above the knees. This is where the lifter goes from lifting the bar with the legs and holding the position with the back to putting speed and power into the bar as he stands with his posterior chain. I'm looking for vertical shins, the bar close to the body and the shoulders in front of the bar. One way to strengthen and reinforce this position is via the Romanian deadlift (RDL): from a standing position, lower the bar to that point right above the knees and then go back up. Go lower for extra strength and flexibility work.

In my world, an RDL is defined as a form of the deadlift in which the body is bent at the hips while the knees are only slightly bent, requiring more back and hamstrings to move the weight down and up.

Some athletes will first need more flexibility in the hamstrings to be able to even push the knees back enough

while leaned over the bar with the back locked in and the shoulders in front of the bar. Keep in mind we don't need "just enough" flexibility to create that specific position but rather excess. If you can create this position but it is 100 percent forced—meaning you can't go any further and it's uncomfortable—that's great. That "forcing" is going to work flexibility. But, be aware that as hard as it is for many to learn to create this position from the top down, the body will hesitate even more, or likely not go there at all, from the floor as you lift the bar up to perform the full lift. In this case—and in the case of those who might not even be able to get vertical—RDLs are even higher on the priority list.

We use the RDL for position and movement strength, but not just in the hamstrings and the rest of the posterior chain. Get into bottom position of the RDL and relax your lats so your arms are hanging straight under the shoulders; the shoulders should be in front of the knees. How far from

your body is the bar? Maybe a foot or more. We have to push the bar back to keep it as close to the body as possible in the strongest “lever” position. With heavier weight, the bar will, of course, want to drift away. And even though you will only be moving through this specific point briefly as you perform the whole lift, we need as much insurance as possible. This is so critical that you should be able to get into this position and hold more than 100 percent of your snatch or clean with either grip while keeping the bar pushed against the body for at least five seconds.

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Be aware this number must be met without cheating the position. This means that if the knees are pushed too far forward (the shins are not vertical) or the shoulders are behind, directly over or just not in front of the bar enough, keeping the bar close becomes much easier. But remember this indicates the bar is no longer in the correct path and your body is no longer in the position of best leverage and activation.

Also, if you are back on your heels too much and have created a backward angle with the shins, you are actually bringing the shoulders back over the bar instead of in front of the bar. This is only OK in an RDL in which you are going past the knees or to the floor, as it will activate the hamstrings/posterior chain differently. But again, you are now out of that best path and position.

What I recommend when doing an RDL for ideal positioning and technique strength is to just focus on the range of motion from standing down to that transition point (bar above knee). Get to that point, hold three to five seconds, and then come back up while maintaining the perfect body position established at that lowest point.

### **3. Slow Down ... Then Speed Up**

A big part of coaching is cueing. Some of the best coaches have the best cues and can throw them out at the right time. To me, a good cue is one that can fix more than one thing—maybe even five or more—without specifically telling the athlete to change any of those things individually. I find “slow down” is the best cue when it comes to fixing the most faults at once—if you can actually get the athlete to do so. The concept is that the slower the athlete moves, the more likely he is to maintain tension, position, bar proximity and overall quality of movement. Speed often leads to errors.

It’s confusing because these lifts are supposed to be fast—but not at all points. I am talking about control for the snatch and clean from the floor up to the transition points above the knee. For the jerk, control is from the standing position to where you change directions at the bottom of the dip. This control is especially important for the beginner as consistency is an issue, and slowing down improves the learning process. It’s also a great way to help build strength in better movement patterns.

Realize speed alone is not what makes the lift within these ranges of motion. Tension, position and bar proximity are far more important first. You have the potential to move faster and to produce far more power from better and more-activated positions. This principle can be seen in athletes who can lift more from the hang than from the floor, which typically means they’re missing the ideal transition point coming from the floor—something far more likely as they go faster.

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If all their positions and movements are good but they’re still lifting more from the hang, either their timing or rhythm is off. What I mean by rhythm is the speed of the bar at any given point in the pull as related to the movement as a whole. If you are ripping the bar from the



***The Olympic lifts are fast, but control from the floor to the knees will allow you to be in the best position for vicious extension upon reaching the power position.***

floor with your arms—even with all else being correct, and especially with your heaviest weights—you will most likely have deceleration on the bar at full extension.

If the bar is not slowing down with some of your heaviest lifts, this tells me you're stronger and more powerful than the weights you are lifting. In other words: you're not lifting as much as you could be. As hard as it is to believe, we accelerate the bar more with a shorter range of motion with our heaviest weights.

What I am looking for when I lift and when I coach is the building of speed, starting with more control from the floor and then really turning it on at some point above the knee. What I see most is a focus on going fast from the floor. When I can get an athlete to slow down from the floor, I usually see a rhythm of slow plus slow. Instead, what I want is slow plus fast plus faster. For most beginners, I emphasize excessively slow plus fast. What this looks like is about three seconds from the floor up to above the knee or mid-thigh and then flooring the gas pedal. This is for learning purposes. We can speed up or modify the rhythm later when the athlete is moving consistently.

In strength and technique work, slowing down means taking your time to set up, get into position and follow the progressions. Better positions will improve the learning process, help you accelerate the bar when it is most needed and even conserve energy in low-weight, high-rep workouts.

#### **4. Simplify Your Focus**

There are times when I can almost see someone's head spinning before snatching, cleaning or jerking. The lifter is reviewing every concept and position or things he doesn't want to do during the lift. Maybe the athlete has specific triggers—usually one-word focal points—which is good. But it's easy to have too many.

How many things are actually going on during the entire snatch? Let's say you have 10 or even just five of those thoughts haunting your mind. That's overwhelming. If I sense those wheels turning too much, I usually stop the athlete to narrow the focus before he grabs the bar.

I find myself on occasion doing this when I'm practicing muscle-ups. To me, a muscle-up is as complex as a snatch. But because I have the ability to focus through a snatch, the muscle-up is just a reminder to me of what it feels like to be scrambled or to try to perfect too many components at once. I have to stop myself, erase my thoughts and then bring back only the few that are most important at that time.

This simplifying is necessary, especially when performing your heaviest lifts or low-weight/high-rep efforts. The time for more thinking is with lighter weights in smaller sets, and thinking is even more appropriate with partial movements that allow for a more narrow focus.

Choose no more than three concepts you can simplify into one word or thought. Fill your head with those concepts and work to execute each one. This will allow you to perform the movement to the best of your ability.

So what's most important? It all comes down to the basics and the things people miss the most. These things often are the same for beginners as they are for advanced athletes, just to different extents. When it comes down to it, you have to be tight on the floor or locked in at your standing set-up position for the jerk, you have to create the best transition point that you can, and you have to reach full, aggressive extension.

Notice that none of those points has anything to do with what should be considered the "reaction portion" of the lift. The reaction must be automatic; if your awareness is in the reaction portion, you will most likely miss something and waste energy. If you are trying to control the reaction, you will inevitably hinder or slow it. If at all possible, focus only on what you can and should control.

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There are some cases, though, where an emphasis on the reaction side of the lift might be necessary; for example, if the feet move excessively with a jump forward, back or out. But the rule still applies: no more than three focal points. Also keep in mind drilling to fix this problem would need to be done with lighter weights, partial movements and perhaps flexibility or strength training, which often gets to the very root of the problem.



Staff/CrossFit Journal

*Good coaches develop clear cues that fix problems and help athletes improve movement.*

A few cues on this part of the lift can aid in what's happening at or before power exertion, meaning they can be used with heavier weights and within full movements as one of your three cues. Examples would be "aggressive feet" and "meet the bar higher." For most, these cues will lead to more extension and speed/aggressiveness through extension.

As for the actual words, they will be customized for each athlete or for the fault that requires the most attention. For me, depending on how my mind is working on any given day, I might just fill my head with "tight" (from the floor) and "aggressive" (at extension). If I'm struggling with something, I might need to add that third focal point and be more specific with my cues. For a beginner I might say, "Slow, close, long": slow from the floor, keep the bar close, and exaggerate the opening of the chest or the extension for a longer period of time.

Also make sure cues and triggers are not scrambled. They have to be in order; this keeps your awareness with the bar, where it should be.

Another concept I use for myself and as a coach on occasion is to think nothing. In many cases this works well, but only for one or a few reps. It's also a little dangerous as this means you have no "mental shield." If your head is filled with two or three things, all your energy is going into accomplishing those things. On the other hand, if there is nothing in your head, a negative thought or outside distraction can slip in and lead you astray.

It's a process in itself to find the focal points that work best for you, and keep in mind that they will change as you change. But the more mobile you become and the more automatic your positions become, the simpler your focus can be.

### Long-Term Investment

A comment that seems to haunt my world: "Hey, coach. I hit a PR, but I'm glad you didn't see it!" Maybe the athlete power cleaned it because the body hesitated to go to that unfamiliar depth, or maybe he or she pressed out or chased a snatch forward due to a bad lockout. I'm not impressed or happy for you. Sorry.

This is a process—a long process for many. Evaluate yourself and take it step by step, even if it means you have to go backward. This is about future potential, not immediate weight improvements.

On the other hand, I'm a proud and happy coach when an athlete tells me he or she is getting deeper, feeling more comfortable with the bar in the front rack or overhead, or finding proper positions feel natural rather than forced.



Mike Warkentin/CrossFit Journal

### About the Author

*Chad Vaughn is a two-time Olympian, a seven-time national champion and an American record holder in the sport of Olympic weightlifting. He was introduced to CrossFit in 2008 and began working within the community in early 2010. Chad is part owner of CrossFit CenTex in Belton, Texas, where he holds weekly weightlifting classes while doing occasional seminars throughout the U.S. Chad has a natural, matured understanding of how the body best moves and is highly motivated to help anyone find his or her perfect snatch and heftiest clean and jerk.*