THE SQUAT HAS BEEN AN EXERCISE of choice for many strength and conditioning professionals throughout the years. As college coaches become more successful on the field and attribute some of the success to the squatting exercises used, it is only natural that high school coaches begin using the squat in their own strength and conditioning programs.

At our clinic we run a strength and conditioning program that makes use of the squat and Olympic-style lifts. We call this program the Athletic Advantage. When the program was first developed, we employed the services of Ethan Reeves, head strength coach at Ohio University.

Since the Athletic Advantage's inception we have used our instruction method exclusively and have achieved tremendous success. I firmly believe we have developed an ideal model for teaching young athletes the proper way to perform squat exercises.

First, the Key Terms

Before beginning instruction, it might be helpful to get a few terms clarified so that everyone will know what's going on in terms of doing the exercises. We try to keep these terms simple and concise so our athletes know exactly what we mean during the instruction.

- The Rack Position: This refers to the position of the shoulders and arms when doing a front squat, or catching the weight during a clean. We want to make sure the elbows are carried high (see Photo 1).
- Free-Standing Squats: These are the basis of our program. The athlete stands with shoulders flexed to 90° with arms extended and hands overlapped. He or she then does a squat motion as shown in Photos 2 and 3.

Photo 1  Rack position.

- Proper Foot Width: For squatting, the feet must be about shoulder-width apart (Photo 4).
Method

Free-Standing Squat

During the free-standing squat (Photos 2 and 3) we try to get the athlete accustomed to the squatting motion. The athlete assumes an erect position with feet shoulder-width apart and toes pointed slightly out. As already noted, shoulders are flexed to 90° with hands overlapped.

From here we have the athlete work on spreading the chest and locking/arching the low back while standing. We then have the athlete descend by “sticking his/her glutes to the rear” while descending. We tell the athlete to pretend he/she is slowly trying to sit onto a bench. The hips should lower between the heels. We have the athlete go down as far as possible.

As the athlete gets used to the exercise, he/she will be able to go deeper. The knees should move in a plane that is dictated by the longitudinal axis of the feet (Photo 5). We want the athlete to get to the point where his/her hamstrings are at least parallel to the floor or deeper. We also pay attention to the athlete’s rate of descent. We tell the athlete it should take twice as long to get into the bottom position as it will take to rise with the weight.

During this time we also instruct the athlete about proper breathing technique (breathe in during the descent and breath out during the ascent). We also keep an eye out for athletes who may be leaning too far forward with the upper body during the squat. Remember, the upper body should be fairly upright throughout any squatting motion.

Front Squat

Once the athlete becomes proficient at the free-standing squat, we progress him or her to front squats (Photos 6 and 7). We feel it
is better have the athlete progress into front squats because he or she must balance him/herself in a way very similar to the way we have him/her perform free-standing squats.

The athlete should assume the same standing position as before, but this time holding a stripped-down bar in the racked position. We then have the athlete descend as far as possible using the same technique as mastered in the free-standing squat.

We make sure to emphasize that the athlete keep the elbows pointed up, which forces the weight to be carried on the anterior deltoids and clavicles and takes stress off the wrists. When the athlete does keep the elbows up and inside, he/she will find that it’s easier to keep the back upright during the front squat’s descent and ascent.

We also constantly watch the athlete’s back to make sure he or she is not loading the spine improperly. Weight is only added as the athlete masters the technique and it appears he or she can stand an increase in working intensity.

**Back Squat**

After the front squat is mastered, we move on to the back squat (Photos 8 and 9). We keep the lower body mechanics the same as with the free-standing and front squats. The athlete assumes the same starting position, but this time carries the weight across the back of the shoulders.

Special care must be taken to make sure the athlete carries the bar below the 7th cervical vertebra (the big bump on the back of the neck) and on the trapezius (that big meaty muscle on the upper back). This process will be facilitated with the athlete’s shoulders thrown back (“showing off the chest”).
The descent is the same as for free-standing and front squats. The upper body should remain fairly upright. We don’t want our athletes doing powerlifting squats with a lot of upper body lean and the bar carried very low on the shoulders. Also, care should be taken to make sure the athlete is breathing properly. As with the front squat, we start our athletes with an empty bar and progress them as technique and workout intensity dictate.

**Outcome**

With this method of instruction in our Athletic Advantage program, we have trained over 130 athletes, 75% of whom were female. Not one athlete has lost training time because of a back or knee injury. We can only credit this remarkable fact to the athletes’ proper lifting technique and proper training progression. We start our athletes with just a bar and progressively add weight as their technique and strength improve.

Try this method in your program. I think you’ll find your athletes will quickly learn how to do squatting movements more safely. This in turn will help them truly excel in their chosen sports.

---

Greg Frounfelter is a certified athletic trainer and CSCS for Siouxland Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine Clinic in Sioux City, IA. He has a degree in exercise science and is still active in USA Powerlifting.