The Split Position: Sport Specificity With a Barbell

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WHEN A STRENGTH AND CONDITIONING program is designed with the intention of improving performance, sport-specific exercises are crucial. Too often coaches and athletes place too much emphasis on exercises that have almost no carryover to the athletic arena. When preparing for the competitive season, if sport-specific exercises are not the focus, athletic performance may not reach its optimum level.

Of the many facets of a conditioning program for sports in general—resistance training, jump training, sprint training, cardiovascular training—the one that has received the most attention recently is resistance training.

The main questions asked of strength and conditioning coaches center on how much weight an athlete can lift (as opposed to, How is his/her jumping or sprinting?), and improvements in the weight room are usually at the top of any coach’s or athlete’s list of off-season training goals.

In the attempt to gain sport specificity, many strength programs have adopted the training principles of Olympic-style weightlifters in hopes of improving speed-strength. These goals are usually reached by using variations of the snatch and the clean and jerk (power snatch, power clean, hang snatch, hang clean, push jerk, snatch pulls, clean pulls, etc.).

Yet there is one position of the competition lifts that is often overlooked, a position that is normally performed when completing the jerk: the split position.

The split-catch position, which many athletes use to receive the barbell in the jerk, can also be used to train athletes in a sport-specific sense. The similarities of this position to many movements in sport are quite notable (front knee bent with heel beneath the knee, rear knee slightly bent with heel off the platform).

Any sport that involves running, jumping, or lunging is perfect for incorporating the split position into a resistance training regimen. Good examples would be football, volleyball, basketball, wrestling, soccer, track and field (sprinters, throwers, jumpers), softball, baseball, and tennis.

■ Procedure

To ensure the most secure split position, the athlete should have nearly equal weight distribution of the feet. Often the front foot in the split bears too much of the combined weight of both the athlete and the barbell. Another common mistake occurs when the weight is being held overhead. It should be held directly above and in line with the shoulders and hips rather than in front of the shoulders and hips.

To benefit from the split position, the athlete must first practice and master more elementary exercises before attempting classical weightlifting exercises with a split (e.g., split jerk, split snatch, split clean).

The split position can be used in strength training by starting
with the split squat. The split squat is similar to the lunge but has less risk of improper position because the feet are stationary throughout the exercise (as opposed to the lunge wherein the athlete steps into the split position).

This exercise can be taught by first using only one's body weight where the split position is attained (Photo 1). The rear knee is bent toward the floor but does not touch the floor; this decreases the angle of both knees (Photo 2). Once the bottom position is reached, the athlete returns to the starting position.

Proper starting position includes the following:

- Front leg: knee bent with heel beneath the knee;
- Rear leg: knee slightly bent with heel off the floor and toe pointed forward;
- Upper torso: upright with back and abdominals fixed;
- Balance: weight distributed as evenly as possible on front and back feet.

Once each leg has had a chance to be the front leg and the squat is accomplished with ease (hands on hips or behind the head), the athlete can progress to squatting with dumbbells held at the sides or with a barbell behind the neck on the shoulders. Once the athlete is comfortable split squatting with dumbbells or barbells, the next task is to move quickly into the split position.

Accomplishing this feat requires an exercise that combines the proper split position and speed of movement. Such an exercise is the speed split. The speed split is performed by holding dumbbells at the sides and assuming the split position, which is identical to the dumbbell split squat.

Once the position is secure, the athlete begins by quickly shrugging the shoulders. At the top of the shrug, the feet leave the floor as the front and back legs switch position to end in a proper split with the feet opposite their starting position. Every repetition ends in a perfect split position with the dumbbells at the sides.

The key to this exercise is speed. There is very little time to switch feet, and in order for the front and back legs to reach their desired positions, they must move quickly. An explosive shrugging of the shoulders is critical, as this raises the center of gravity and gives the feet time to switch positions.

This shrug is also useful when athletes will later be learning the snatch and clean movements wherein the violent shrugging of the shoulders is crucial in the second pull phase.

This preliminary split exercise is good not only for improving split
position speed but also for achieving the lateral balance that is so crucial. Because the dumbbells continually pull the athlete from side to side, he or she must always hold proper thoracic position during the exercise. This development of the trunk stabilizer muscles is important in the next level of the split position as well as in the production of force in sports.

Once proper position and speed of the split are achieved, the athlete is ready to assume this position with a barbell overhead. The exercises that fall into this category include the split jerk and the split snatch.

The split jerk is used most often in the second half of the competition clean and jerk lift. It is beneficial for any sport that requires explosion or verticality since the athlete drives the weight off the front of the shoulders with the hips and legs prior to receiving the barbell overhead with the legs in the split position as described earlier (Photo 3).

The split jerk may also be performed with the barbell resting behind the neck rather than in front of the head. This method ensures proper positioning of the barbell in relation to being in line with the shoulders and hips once the barbell is overhead.

The second of these overhead split positions is the split snatch whereby, in one motion, the barbell is raised from the floor and received at arm’s length overhead with the legs in a similar split position. This split position differs from that of the split jerk in that the athlete must receive the barbell in a lower position.

According to Ajan and Baroga (Weightlifting: Fitness for All Sports, 1988, Budapest: Medicina Publ. House), the successful split snatcher catches the barbell in a very deep split position with the thigh of the front leg touching the calf (Photo 4).

In competition, this method of receiving the barbell in the snatch is not as popular as catching in a deep squat because the barbell must be pulled higher in relation to the platform. Furthermore, there is a variance in the second pull phase because the feet have to travel a greater distance after the pull in order to receive the barbell. But if the goal is to improve speed strength, receiving in the split position can be very sport-specific.

The split snatch is one of the most athletic exercises anyone will ever undertake with a barbell.

The athleticism of a good split snatcher is impressive, for three reasons. First, the angle of the leg joints change at an incredible rate; for example, the knee joint moves forward in the split from flexion to extension and back to flexion very
quickly. Second, anyone who can hold an extreme load overhead with hands snatch-grip wide and legs in a split position demonstrates extraordinary trunk stability. Third, a good split snatcher has exceptional shoulder and hip flexibility.

The more popular power snatch—receiving the barbell overhead with the feet shoulder-width apart and the legs in a semi-squat position—although used more often by strength trained athletes, is a less athletic type of snatching compared to the split snatch.

The power snatch is not a bad mode of snatching when one is learning how to snatch, but eventually the split snatch should be considered because it involves a more athletic movement in the hips. Catching in the split position adds flexion and extension in the hips at the same time, and the more diverse the movements of the joints, the more sport-specific the exercise.

It is clear that the split position can play an important role in a sport-specific resistance training program, and while one purpose of this article is to explain the benefits of the split position (beginners using the split squat and experienced lifters using the split snatch), another point also deserves mention.

Two principles of strength and conditioning should always be kept in mind when prescribing exercises: the principle of specificity and the principle of variability. The former should lead strength and conditioning professionals to be as sport-specific as possible when designing a training regimen, while the latter ensures that workouts are fresh because they incorporate different exercises and varying intensities in the athlete’s routine.

Too often the principle of specificity is overlooked when less sport-specific strength exercises become the focus of a program.

One must always appreciate the principle of variability because in order to respond positively to a strength and conditioning program, the athlete needs a multitude of stimuli. If athletes get too accustomed to a program, they become physically and psychologically bored. Introducing the split position into their routine could be beneficial.

Another way to add variety to a tiresome routine is to incorporate the split clean into a workout in place of the usual power clean. This exercise involves catching the weight on the shoulders with the legs and feet in the split position similar to the split snatch (Photo 5) as opposed to the semi-squat position.

These few adjustments to exercises in a workout can go far to develop sport-specific strength whether the goal is speed strength (split snatch) or general sport-specific strength (split squat). The split position can be added to a training regimen so that athletes in all types of sports can achieve sport-specific strength with a barbell. ▲

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