

# THE MYTH OF OLYMPIC WEIGHTLIFTING FOR ATHLETES

Of all of the weight training modalities, nothing compares to the art of olympic weightlifting. The snatch and the clean and jerk lull with their fluidity, grace, and majesty. As Mark Rippetoe said, “The snatch is gymnastics with a barbell.”

I don't disagree. I love the sport. I watch it during the Olympics, not to mention at random times on YouTube. But this is the confusing part. You see, I love the **sport** whereas others love the **method**. Loving the method neglects the competitive aspect of the sport. It spells t-r-o-u-b-l-e when you're training an athlete.

## A LITTLE HISTORY

Back in the days of physical culture, there were no training limits. Powerlifters did the olympic lifts. Olympic weightlifters did the powerlifts. Bodybuilders experimented with everything. Even gymnastics were sprinkled into the mix.

Although these glory days were refreshing for the three barbell sports, they were disappointing for the athletes that thought heavy things made them slow and bulky. Over time, pioneers like Bill Starr showed the world what weight training could do for an athlete.

When athletes caught on, they looked to the experienced physical culturists. Since they didn't limit themselves, athletes didn't either.

But athletic preparation has changed since then. There is an industry for it. It's studied. It's profitable. It's more important now than it has ever been. Athletes can't blindly follow the physical culturists of today's world because sub-optimal results could affect their career, which means millions of dollars are on the line.

Despite the realization of its importance, few people share identical ideas about athletic preparation. One of the biggest debates, however, is centered on the olympic lifts and whether or not they are beneficial from an athletic standpoint.

You want some clarity, I understand. That's why most of you are reading this, so I'll get right to it. Instead of creating my own argument, I'm going to break down the most common proposed benefits.

## **#1) THEY MAKE YOU EXPLOSIVE**

Perhaps the most sought after result that the olympic lifts can bring is explosiveness or – even more general – moving a heavy weight fast.

This benefit was driven from the 1964 Olympic Games, where researchers *supposedly* found olympic weightlifters to jump the highest and run the fasted 25 yard dash of any athlete. Eye catching stuff.

Results like this leads to athletes sprinkling olympic lifts into their program once or twice a week in hopes of seeing the same performance benefits. But doing this fails to consider the totality of training. It's validating an end product by unknowns.

World class olympic weightlifters train the lifts multiple times per day, with the only goal of improving their total in the snatch and clean and jerk. Their explosiveness is a byproduct of training frequently with maximal force and power. But an athlete from another sport *can't* replicate this schedule because of the technical demands of *their own* sport. The moment an athlete gets thrown on a true olympic weightlifting regimen, they become an olympic weightlifter and not an athlete of a different sport.

It's like an olympic weightlifter doing two ten minute dribbling sessions per week in hopes of handling the ball like an NBA point guard. It doesn't work that way because basketball players practice those skills daily. Doing them in a program here and there won't get you comparable results.

Start thinking of strength, power, and explosiveness as skills. The more frequently they are practiced, the better you become at them. Javelin throwers are explosive. Football players are explosive. High jumpers are explosive. But when do you see olympic weightlifters play football to get more explosive? It doesn't happen because each sport has specific demands that fail to carry over.

I don't doubt that the olympic lifts make you explosive. But so does jumping, running, and medicine ball tosses – three things that allow the body to move in a more natural way that are less stressful on the body.

## **#2) IT HELPS FORCE PRODUCTION**

This is similar to #1, but I'm going to address a specific argument, and that is that the highest force production ever recorded during sports is during the second pull of the snatch. Again, pretty convincing stuff.

But you have to consider technical proficiency. These measurements are taken from *olympic* level weightlifters. Their technique and neuromuscular efficiency is maximized. They are operating near 100% of their capabilities. Whereas Joe Average that can only clean 50% of his deadlift is working way under his genetic potential. The load he is moving is considerably low and so is the rate at which he is moving it.

The only way to improve the above is to treat olympic weightlifting as a **sport** and not as a **method**. But once you do that you become an olympic weightlifter. It's impossible for a wide receiver to devote the time and energy necessary to become a master olympic weightlifter. Besides, there's no need to. He gets paid to catch the ball and run routes, not snatch or clean. In other words, he gets paid to be a football player and not an olympic weightlifter.

### #3) IT TRAINS TRIPLE EXTENSION

Triple extension is when the ankle, knee, and hip joint extend simultaneously and is a characteristic of most explosive movements like jumping and sprinting.



Another supposed benefit of the olympic lifts is that they are the only thing in the weight room that can train triple extension.

But this doesn't hold up because most high class olympic weightlifters don't hit triple extension the way it is envisioned. The bar gets most of its acceleration from the legs and hips. When it is time for the gastrocs to give a little push, it has traveled high enough for the lifter to catch it. Most olympic weightlifters stop their ankles short of extension, and those that don't only hit extension to reposition the feet. Not to give the bar an extra push.



## #4) THEY ARE SPORT SPECIFIC

There is nothing sport specific about the olympic lifts. Picking a balanced barbell off of the ground from shin height, squatting underneath of it, and hoisting it in the air doesn't happen in many sports.

From a speed of movement standpoint, they are done faster than more classical lifts. But this doesn't make them more specific because it only addresses the "speed" aspect of movement. Really, consider anything you do with a barbell in your hands fairly **non-specific** to anything not involving a barbell. When you think about it, it makes sense. A basketball is specific to basketball. A football – football. A soccer ball – soccer. A barbell – barbell sports.

The olympic lifts are predetermined movement patterns that happen in a closed environment. Most team sporting movements are the opposite.

A basketball point guard needs to dribble well, pass well, and shoot well all while *reacting to an ever changing atmosphere*. Those are his **sport specific demands**. What can the olympic lifts do to improve them? Yeah, maybe they'll help him jump higher. But that's all. It's not going to make him a better basketball player. It will only enhance his general physical abilities, not sport specific needs. There are a lot of people in the world that can jump high and clean 315 pounds that will never play in the NBA.

If olympic weightlifting affected the sport specific aspect of basketball/baseball/soccer/football/etc., then basketball/baseball/soccer/football/etc. would affect the sport specific aspect of olympic weightlifting. Basketball, then, could make you a better olympic weightlifter.

### OTHER ISSUES

Even though I touched on four big myths, I'm not finished. There are a few more issues that have to be discussed that deal with the **execution** of the lifts.

First, is the use of the power versions. Keeping the Mexico study in mind and what I mentioned in #1, *you have to consider the totality of training*. The full squat and catch is a big part of an olympic lifter's training. So big, in fact, that it could be the **main** reason why olympic weightlifters are so damn explosive.

Depth jumps and other shock training methods are known to increase explosiveness because the muscles quickly shift from a relaxed state to a contracted state. When an olympic lifter catches the barbell, his body is totally relaxed to help him descend faster. Realistically, he has to fall *faster* than a 500+ pound barbell. But as soon as the bar is caught, the muscles rapidly turn back on. It's like a depth jump on steroids. The power version of the lifts doesn't incorporate this.

Second, is form issues. I'm not talking about the wrist problems that unskilled lifters get, but rather the use of the hips to finish the pull. I posted a [YouTube video](#) that explains this more, but most athletes can't get their hips to power the lifts. This is because athletes **can't** become as technically proficient as true olympic weightlifters. They have their own technicalities to worry about.

If you watched [the video](#), a characteristic of using your hips is powering through extension – nearly looking like an air hump. Below is a still taken from a YouTube video. There's not much wrong with this clean from a safety standpoint, but his finished position reveals two things: he doesn't have triple extension and he leaves his hips short.



This is how most people will look because of the double knee bend that happens during the lift. Their knees shoot forward and they are told to think “up.” It places a tremendous amount of stress on the knees, quads, and gastrocs. Yet the hips are larger and more powerful – one of the reasons why the pro's use them effectively. They practice enough to know how to use the hips. Who wants to rely on the tiny gastrocs to lift hundreds of pounds?

Compare the picture above to Taner Sagir (below). Remember that Sagir is doing the squat version, which automatically alters his form. The power version doesn't prepare for this kind of hip extension.



Fourth, is the use of the hang versions. Now I don't know this for sure, but people say the only reason the hang version crept into athletic preparation was because coaches couldn't teach the full version. But doing the hang version for heavy singles reflects the second and third point above. Nearly everyone uses too much lower back and not enough hips, and the reactive drop and catch is neglected. The picture below is a still taken from a YouTube video of a hang clean (squat version). Again, note his finished position. The hips never come through.



### **CONCLUSION**

The truth is that the olympic lifts aren't special. If the issues I mention above can be sorted out, they can be an effective tool. If not, however, they are best left alone.

I want to leave you with one last thought, and it is a quote from The Thinker at Elite Fitness Systems.

“For example: as long as the players are trained via the specialized means, you'll never be able to tell the difference, from a performance standpoint, if their primary leg extensor exercise is a front squat, back squat, belt squat, leg press, split squat, lunge, or whatever.”

Perhaps it's best to pick exercises that get the job done with the least potential for error. And as you can see from above, the olympic lift's margin for error could be the highest of them all. It's your choice –