**IKFF Functional Movement Article—“Nice Rack”**

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Sorry to get some of you excited by the title of this article, but I am going to talk about the Jerk (the kettlebell version) so get your minds out of the gutter. Perhaps it’s the physical therapist in me, or the fact that I have been a personal trainer for a while, or maybe it’s just that I’m kind of a geek, but when I go to a kettlebell competition, I’m not necessarily thinking about what great numbers someone is putting up, or how long they are lasting; I am thinking “they are not activating their glutes/hamstrings/spinal erectors in the proper sequence”, “what tight hip flexors they have”, or their posterior scapular stabilizers are out of balance with the anterior shoulder musculature! OK, I’m kind of full of something, because I do get excited by the big numbers and if they last the full 10 minutes. But the stuff I mentioned prior does play a big role in the performance of the competition lifts, especially with the Jerk. Whether performing the Jerk for competition, general fitness, or for use by a trainer/therapist to evaluate their client, it is a great exercise. The problem with the Jerk is most people address their inabilities to perform it well by just doing more of them. Unfortunately, this will often just reinforce a bad habit and/or cause injury and frustration.

Here are some of the common problems I see during the Jerk (assuming there are no injuries present which cause improper technique, and assuming they have actually learned proper technique):

1) **Weak ankles—**This is the connection between the ground and your body. A “disconnect” here will mess up the whole lift. Resistance bands work well for this. Remember—the ankle moves in multiple directions, calf raises alone won’t cut it! Use the band to apply resistance while you pull your ankle/foot towards you (dorsiflexion), turning your foot/ankle inwards (inversion/supination), and turning your foot/ankle out (eversion/pronation). Also training barefoot, and doing various balance exercises helps. One other point to consider is flat footedness. Many people have this condition to varying degrees. Some can be helped with the above exercises, others require using orthotics (shoe inserts). Often times, just sticking the right insert in your shoe can make a huge difference.

2) **Poor knee alignment—**Mutliple culprits going on here. Tightness in the adductors (inner thigh) and hamstrings (back of thigh), along with weakness all around the thigh, generally cause the knee to buckle inwards during squatting movements. This causes a lack of power during the pressing phase, as well as the catch during the Jerk. Various massage tools, including foam rollers, sticks, and balls; as well as getting a professional massage work well in the tight areas. Stretching is important in these areas as well, but understand that while the typical “slow and hold” stretches do provide benefit, it is also important to perform dynamic and ballistic stretching (faster and shorter duration) as this is more similar to the movement being performed. Take time to isolatedly strengthen quads, hamstrings, and adductors—this does not mean to just do more Jerks.

3) **Tight and weak hips—**Tightness in the hip flexors (front of the hips), and weakness in the gluteals (butt muscles) are the common theme. Stretch the hip flexors in the front of the hip, and strengthen the gluteals—not just the Gluteus Maximus, but also the Gluteus Medius and Minimus (on the outside of the butt).

4) **Inadequate core stabilization/alignment—**Granted, the rack position is a very hard place to consider restful for a lot of us. Searching for hip bones to rest on, wishing our bellies were bigger, and how the hell does this belt help? But besides all that, the rack position places a ton of stress on your spine if not done correctly (and sometimes even if it is correct). Your spine is not supposed to be hyperextended for long periods while holding heavy loads. Yes you can condition yourself for it (and actually have to), but learning proper spine alignment and abdominal bracing will help avoid injuries. I’m not a big fan of pelvic tilts, but doing them correctly can greatly help find a position of comfort and stability in the spine during the Jerk. Also take time to strengthen all around the spine abdominals, spinal erectors, obliques, etc.

5) **Tight anterior shoulders/Weak posterior shoulders—**This is especially true for men due to the fact that we spent our formative years of working out by bench pressing and doing curls every day, and therefore our chest and shoulders are so tight in the front, and our backs are so rounded, that many of us end up looking like Quasimodo before we decide that maybe stretching is a good idea. At the same time, just like the rest of our back side that we cannot see in the mirror, we ignore our posterior shoulder muscles. This includes rotator cuff, rear deltoids, and all the scapular muscles. Correcting this imbalance can have a profound effect, not only on our kettlebell lifts, but also in our general shoulder function and pain levels.

6) **Weak hands/wrists/forearms—**If you believe that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, here is that weak link. If you cannot maintain strength and endurance from the forearms down, even with a lift like the Jerk (which is less demanding on this area than the Snatch or Long Cycle), your numbers will probably not be where you want them. Remember that there are different kinds of strength for this area, and it is important to train them all—just squeezing a sporting good store gripper a lot will not do that much for you.

7) **Tight neck—**Kettlebell lifting is a sport about learning body efficiency. Any muscles that are overactive will take away from the ability of other muscles to perform. This is often the case in the neck. During the Jerk, the upper trapezius is very active. However, learning when to activate these muscles and when to relax them is crucially important. If possible, look at yourself in the mirror during your Jerk—are your shoulders shrugged up towards your ears the whole time? If so, work on stretching the muscles out and see how you feel.

8) **Lack of proper training methods—**Many types of fitness are at play during the kettlebell lifts, including strength, endurance (cardiovascular and muscular), flexibility, power/explosiveness, speed, and balance. Very few people excel at all of these areas, and in fact, training one area can often take away from another. However, you need to identify what areas come naturally for you, and what areas need more work. If you just want to show up and compete for the heck of it, just to have fun and see how you do, then ignore what I am saying. But if you want to seriously compete, you need to know your strengths and weaknesses. I have seen many people who have no idea what it is like to perform for 10 minutes straight, or don’t have the basic strength to lift the weight, or lack an ounce of speed or explosiveness even when it is obviously needed in their case. Again, training all these areas does not mean to just do more Jerks, Snatches, or Long Cycles. It also does not mean to blindly follow someone else’s program, because while it may have been successful for them, it does not necessarily mean it will be for you.

Obviously this just gives you a guide as to where to start to identify some issues you may have. Paying attention to your own body, and seeking out the advice of a qualified trainer/coach (preferably someone with some kettlebell experience) will help avoid frustration, injury, and wasting time. Good luck, and may the force be with you.

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