

## Overcoming Plateaus Part 2: The Bench Press

By: Louie Simmons

Everyone likes to bench press, but no one likes to get stuck. Not making progress is no fun and sometimes grounds for retirement. Only the strong at heart will continue. But should anyone ever stall out? The answer is no. The problem is if you do the same training, you will get the same results.

There are basically four reasons for falling or succeeding: physiological, psychological, technical, and exercise selection.

Let's talk about psychological. Don't have deadbeats hanging around you. Stay in a positive mental state. If your training partner can't hang, no matter what their age, give them the hook. You must be competitive, even while training. But you also must want your training partner to succeed, so you will be pushed even more.

On maximum effort day go until only the top man is left. On dynamic day try to hurt your training partner with short rest periods. To win, you have to put yourself through hell. Have training partners that want to kick your ass all the time (during the workout). Trash talk is always present at Westside. A new lifter at the gym wanted to load my plates for me during one of his first workouts. I asked him if he respected me. He said he did. I said, "If you respect me while we train, Ill boot you out of here." He got the idea. When I was young, I didn't want to lose to an old man. Now that I'm an old man, I don't like to lose to young men. I cop an attitude, and that attitude kept only five men on the TOP 100 list kicking my ass (and I know where they live).

I will sum up the psychological aspect of training with the words of Dr. Mel Siff and Dr. Yuri Verkhoshansky, authors of Supertraining. A high degree of performance depends on motivation, to gain certain goals, aggression, concentration, focus, the ability to tolerate pain and cope with anxiety or stress, developing a winning attitude, and raising the ability to manage distractions and to relax.

What about the physiological aspects? This encompasses several aspects of training, such as the development of starting, accelerating, absolute, and special strength. These are primarily developed with barbell training. The correct loading on the dynamic day as well as the maximum effort day is essential.

The physiological aspects also include the development of muscle hypertrophy. This can be accomplished with dumbbells, sled work, and the proper use of special exercises such as chins, rows, triceps extensions, and delt raises. Exercises that raise work capacity or general physical preparedness

(GPP) are also essential, especially for drug-free lifters. Men such as Bill Gillespie and Sean Culnan are perfect examples.

To address the technical aspects of benching, we must determine what is proper bench press form. It has always been thought that you should push the bar back over the face. However, it makes little sense to do so. When a bar moves toward the face, many bad things occur. The delts are placed under great stress, especially the rotators, and no one wants that. Also, the lats are no longer involved in the lift when the bar moves toward the face. The bar should be lowered with the lats, not the arms. Without strong lat involvement, there is little chance that the bar will be placed on the chest correctly. It may land too high or too low. If it is too low, the delts are involved too much. If the bar lands too high, the triceps are involved too much. Strong lats will ensure the bar is placed in the correct position, that is, with the forearms vertical. In this position, an equal amount of delt, pec, and triceps are used in pressing. If you don't place the bar in the correct position, delt and pec injuries are more likely to occur.

The path of the bar in the concentric phase (raising) should be a straight line. This requires the correct use of muscles. When the Clemson University coaching staff wanted to know which are the most important muscle groups for benching, George Halbert told them triceps are first, lats second, upper back third, and delts last. George holds the world record in the 220's at 657, a world record of 688 in the 242s and a 683 at 227, the heaviest triple bodyweight bench of all time (457 pounds over bodyweight!).

The delts are almost always overworked, and the triceps are underworked. You see a lot of delt and pec injuries but not a lot of triceps injuries. This tells me that most lifters don't train their triceps to the max. When the triceps, upper back, and lats are the strongest muscle groups, the bar will travel in a straight line, making the distance to lockout much shorter. Also, it does not require the arms to rotate outward, which causes injuries to the pecs and rotators.

Exercise selection is crucial. On dynamic day, after doing your 8-10 sets of 3 reps at 60% of a shirtless max, train the triceps first. It is quite common for our guys to do 14-18 sets of triceps extensions. They are done mostly with a straight bar. One frequently used exercise is J.M. presses, for 3-5 reps, working up as heavy as possible. Always try for a new PR. The same applies to straight bar extensions to the chin, forehead, or throat. Heavy dumbbell extensions are also used, 6-10 reps for 6-10 sets. Use short rests between sets, 30 seconds or less. For the bar work 90 seconds is advised.

For advanced lifters, such as Phil Guarino, superset light pushdowns or light dumbbells in between bar extensions or J.M. presses. This will greatly increase your GPP and thus your bench press. Phil used this method for 1 year and pushed up his bench from 525 to 633 at 242 and recently made a 661 at 253 bodyweight.

Also for the triceps try using Flex bands while benching off five 2 x 6's. This takes the delts and chest almost completely out of the movement, leaving only the triceps to do the work.

Lats are next. Rows of all kinds are done as well as lat pulldowns with a wide variety of bars. We don't do many chins, but they are a good way to work the lats also. We do a lot of upper body sled work. This is my personal favorite. We also do a lot of static lat work with the Flex bands by hooking one band around one of the uprights of the power rack and holding the ends of the band so the lats are contracted for a long period of time, about 2-4 minutes. When you become fatigued at one position, change the position by slightly bending or straightening the arms and continue to hold the tension. Remember, when bench pressing, the lats are held statically. The delts rotate and the arms bend, but the lats stay contracted.

The sled and bands work perfectly for the upper back as well. Inverted flies, dumbbell power cleans, and lat pulls to the face can also be done. Choke a set of Flex bands to the top of the power rack, one on each side. Place a bar in the loops. Lie down as if to bench and pull the bar to the chest or belly using various grips. This simulates the action of the lats while benching. Tuck the elbows in tight.

It is also important to have strong forearms. I have never seen a strong bencher who doesn't have large, powerful forearms. The tighter your grip, the easier it is to activate the triceps.

To use the biceps fully when benching, imagine you are stretching the bar apart. The first muscle to flex while pushing a bar concentrically will be the biceps. This technique of pushing the bar apart is very important and requires that one do external rotator work. This can be done with rubber bands. Older lifters may remember the chest expanders that Bob Hoffman sold. When these were popular, there seemed to be many fewer shoulder injuries. Could it be that all of that external rotating prevented rotator injuries, which we see so many of today?

Let's look back. If your bench press is not progressing, it could be poor form, which could be a result of a lagging muscle group or not knowing how to bench correctly. Don't merely take someone else's advice on how to bench, but think for a minute and review what was discussed here.

On speed day, speed is what we are after: starting and accelerating as well as reversal strength. Train with 60% of a no-shirt max. This will utilize power production maximally. Do 8-10 sets of 3 reps.

On the maximum effort day you must max out on one core exercise, and don't be afraid to miss. Do a final warm-up with 90%, then try a PR or two. This workout should occur 3 days after speed day.

On both days push up your special exercises such as triceps extensions, delt raises, lat work, and forearm work. After the core lift pick three or four exercises, and never work out longer than 60 minutes. Do your triceps first and forearms last.

If possible, do a second workout later in the day. This workout should be 20-30 minutes long and should consist of extensions, raises, lat work, and curls. No bar pressing should be done.

Does this work? At Westside we hold 3 out of the 12 all-time world records in the bench: 657 at 220 (George), 688 at 242 (George), and 728 at 275 (Kenny Patterson), the last having the greatest bench co-efficient of all time. Eighteen of our lifters bench more than 550 pounds, and two of these are over 40 years old and are 198's (Jeff Adams and Jerry Schwenker). Seven men bench more than 600 at Westside. Bill Gillespie, strength coach for the Washington Huskies, has gone from 480 to 628 in about 5 years and has passed every drug test he was given. This should be proof that this system works for anyone, not just those at Westside.