

The Bench Press Shirt

By: Louie Simmons

There's always a lot of talk today about the bench shirt. In the beginning everyone welcomed it on the scene. Unfortunately, bench shirts provided only a small increase over one's raw bench record.

That was the 1980s. In the late 1990s, shirts became much stronger. As the shirts got better, the bench records started to move up little by little. Working with Inzer Advance Designs, Kenny Patterson helped refine the denim shirt. They developed the radical cut shirt. The records then started going up and up.

Todd Brock had a 480 bench and was stuck. After wearing an Inzer radical cut shirt, he skyrocketed to 540 in the same weight class.

Then Phil Guarino had the insight to cut the back of the shirt, making it an opened-back version. What an innovation that was. I helped him warm up at the Bash for Cash, one of Kieran Kidder's meets, in Daytona, some years ago. After Phil warmed up, he amazed me with a 661. I knew he had a great idea.

Vanessa Schwenker, a 132 pound woman, had a 260 bench. We went to a bench meet and somehow the back of her shirt tore completely. She didn't have a backup shirt and had to use the torn one. She benched 290, a PR. We felt lucky. When she got back home, she had the shirt sewn back together, but meet after meet she never made more than 260. She eventually retired and it wasn't until a year later that we realized it was the open backed shirt that increased her bench.

Now we know that the openbacked shirts are the best. Just look at the big money meets and see what they're wearing. Looking back I am amazed how Phil mastered that shirt.

Like a fast race car, these shirts are hard to master. I took Todd for a ride in my 1960 corvette, and it made him sick. At the time, the car went 10.70 seconds in the quarter mile with about 475 horsepower. It seemed faster, but not for long. I got bored and added nitrous to the 355 Chevy. It went 9.40 in the quarter mile with 800hp. Again, that seemed slow to me, so I put a 404 motor and soon made an 8.60 pass. My reflexes were matching the car's horsepower, now about 1000. You guessed it, I got bored again. So a 598 on nitrous was added. It went 7.90, 175 m.p.h. So what's the point of all of this? Had I started with a 7.9 car, I would be dead, and Todd would be real sick. My reflexes would not have matched the strength of the car. That same thing happens with lifters. They try shirts much stronger than they are.

Oh yes, and there are people who think the shirt is doing everything. They're wrong. At Westside we have held the all-time best in the bench at 132,198,220,242,275, and 308 at one time or another. Why don't the rest of us put on their shirts and bench the same? We were not strong enough. You've got to have the right size bait for a particular size fish. The same is true for bench shirts.

How do you master a bench shirt? Most lifters don't know how to use one correctly. Dan Cummings visited from Iowa and trained with Becca Swanson. He stayed a week. His best was 600. On max effort day, I saw him work out, and I felt he was closer to a 700 bench. He disagreed with me. The next workout, we worked with him, and in a span of 45 minutes he made 665. Not bad huh?

I did a seminar in Tennessee for my good friends Tony Hutson and Brent Tracy. We worked with eight guys and seven got new PR's. Here's how we did it, using Brent's workouts as an example. Brent's best is 528 at 198. First he warmed up to 315 off his chest. Next, with the 4-board press, he did 365 x 1, 405 x 1, 455 x 1 with no shirt. Then he did a 3-board press with his shirt with 495 x 1. Then he did a 2-board press with 515 x 1. Next he did 530 off his chest and then 545 off his chest for a second PR. I know this sound too good to be true, but it's true. The trick is each time you go to four boards, raise your head and lower the bar as far down your torso as possible. With three boards raise your head and shoulders if necessary in order to touch the board and go even lower down your torso. With two boards, raise your head and start lowering the bar as low as possible by rolling the shoulders up like a sit-up. Each time you go to fewer boards, pull the shirt a little lower off the shoulders. This of course, makes the shirt a bit stronger. As you increase the weight, raise your head and shoulders and keep your eyes on the bar until it touches the chest. This enables you to touch the chest with a lighter weight than thought possible and at the same time lift a lot more weight.

Now that the secret's out, we're all even, right? I just told you how to kick our ass. If you don't do it, its your problem, fool.

At the 2003 Arnold Classic, Fred Boldt (165) warmed up as I just described. He did 405 off his chest, skipped the four boards, put on a shirt, and did 495 on three boards. Then he did 530 on two boards and went on to the stage and did a 540 opener. He did 551 on his second attempt. After Markus Schick made a 567 world record, Fred took 1 kg more and pressed it only to have it turned down for a technicality. Not bad for a 165 who is 5ft 9in tall, benching in front of a crowd of thousands.

I hope this information helps you break your bench record and have a better understanding of how to use legal equipment. (PLUSA Aug 2003)