

So You Want a Bigger Bench Press?

by Scott Shetler

"So, how much ya' bench dude?" Unfortunately this is the question heard most in the gym when a guy's proverbial "manhood" is being challenged. A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, the bench press became the mark of a man. The problem is every time I have ever been in a commercial gym I have not seen anything that resembles a correct bench press. Bad set ups, horrible technique, bouncing the bar off the chest are all major problems. This article will hopefully clear up some technique issues and give you a better understanding on how to perform and train the bench press.

There are many great training programs out there and the one that has helped me considerably is the workout popularized by the Westside Barbell Club, ran by Louie Simmons in Columbus, Ohio. Westside is one of the strongest gyms in the world and at the time of this writing they have multiple 600 and 700 pound benchers as well as one over 800. Please keep in mind this article is not in any way intended to represent Louie Simmons or the Westside Barbell Club, but rather how I put together my workouts based on the great info I have learned from the videos, articles and seminars of Louie's I have seen, read and attended. Granted many of you reading this don't want to be a competitive powerlifter, but for those of you looking for a way to put a few pounds on your bench press, improve your technique and just plain get stronger you will learn a lot from their methods.

Basically there are three methods to increase muscle tension. In "Science and Practice of Strength Training" Dr. Vladimir Zatsiorsky defines them as the maximum effort method, the dynamic effort method and the repeated effort method. In the maximum effort method typically you will work up to a 1-rep maximum or a 3-rep maximum in a lift. Typically weights will be at or above 90% of your 1-rep maximum. The idea here is to expose your nervous system to heavy weights. In the dynamic effort method you will use a sub-maximal weight, typically 30-70% of your 1-rep maximum in a specific lift, and the goal of dynamic effort training is to move the weight as fast as possible. For instance, if your bench press is 300 lbs. you would train with a weight around 150 lb. but you would try to apply 300lbs. of force to the bar. This is how you become fast and develop power which is extremely important when lifting heavier weights. In the repeated effort method you would lift a sub-maximal weight until you could no longer perform repetitions in good form. Typically a repeated effort exercise might be performing 3 sets of 10-15 repetitions. This method works by creating a greater time under tension for the muscles being trained and is a great way to build muscle mass, if that is the goal.

The method of training that Louie Simmons and the Westside Barbell Club have popularized utilizes all three of these methods in a weekly cycle. Typically the bench press is trained twice. One maximum effort day in which a maximum effort bench press exercise is performed for a 1-rep maximum or a 3-rep maximum and one dynamic effort day in which the bench press is performed for 6-8 sets of 3 reps with around 50-60% of your 1-rep maximum. Supplementary and accessory work is typically performed on each day using the repeated effort method.

Maximum Effort Training

Do you want to bench more? Simple, bench more! One day a week you need to devote to training variations of the bench press. Notice I said VARIATIONS and not the bench press. What are some variations? Incline bench, incline close grip bench, close grip flat bench, bench press with various boards of different heights stacked on your chest, floor press and pin press. On this training day you are going to work up to either a 5-rep max, 3-rep max or 1-rep max in one of the above lifts. Rotate each exercise every 2 to 3 workouts. After the main lift do some heavy back work, then shoulders, light triceps and if you are the ultra-vain type finish with the biceps. The key to this training day is the rotation of max effort exercises every 2 or 3 weeks. You can only make progress in a lift for about 3 weeks then you will plateau. By changing to a new max effort lift, you can continue to make progress almost year round. The important thing about the max effort day is getting between 3 and 10 lifts over 90% of the max that day. Here is a sample workout for a 300lb bencher:

Max Effort Workout (Wednesday):

1. Floor Press:

5x45

3x95

3x115

3x135

3x155

3x185

1x205

1x225

1x245

Miss - 265

3-5x1x225 (about 91% of 245)

2. Chin Ups: 5x5xBW

3. Face Pull: 3x15x90

4. BB Triceps Extension: 3x10x70



Scott performing a max effort bench press exercise - the reverse band press.

Dynamic Effort Training

It's all about the speed! 2-3 days after the Max Effort workout you will need to perform a dynamic effort (or speed bench) workout. The goal of this workout is to execute perfect form in the bench press and move the bar fast. We use the guideline of performing 8 sets of 3 reps with somewhere between 50 and 60% of your bench press 1 rep max. Please notice I said bench press 1RM, NOT the 1RM from your max effort workout 2 or 3 days before. The only time you should change your dynamic day % is when you increase your bench press max.

On the dynamic day you will warm up to the weight you are using, then perform 8 sets of 3 reps with your training weight. After this you will move on to heavy lockout work for the triceps, heavy back work (if you did pull ups on the max effort day, do a row or other horizontal pulling variation on this day) then heavy work for the shoulders. Here is a sample workout for a 300lb bencher:

Dynamic Effort Day (Saturday):

1. Bench Press:

1x5x45
1x3x95
1x3x115
8x3x135

2. Pin-Press (4" Lockout):

1x3x185
1x3x225
1x3x275

3. BB Military Press: 3x5x135

4. Seated Row: 5x10x110



Scott performing a dynamic bench press workout with chains attached to the bar to accommodate the resistance.

Bench Press Technique

Now that you understand how to set up a good training program, we can talk about the correct way to perform the bench press when you test your max. The bar must be lowered under control to the upper abdomen/lower chest area, pause for 1-2 seconds then blasted off the chest to a complete and even lockout. Bouncing the bar off of the chest IS NOT A REAL PRESS! If you

cannot pause the bar on your chest it is not a good lift. It is important to stay tight throughout the lift, driving the feet into the ground, tucking the elbows on the way down, flaring the elbows at the lockout and "pulling" the bar apart during the duration of the lift. Remember, the bench press is not just an upper body lift, it is a full-body lift!



Scott setting up
for a bench press
attempt at the 2005
WNPf GA State
Powerlifting Championship!

Scott is a certified personal trainer with over 7 years of experience. He is certified through the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA) and is a professional member of the NSCA as well. Scott is the owner of Extreme Conditioning & Fitness Personal Training & Sports Conditioning and Atlanta Iron Sports - Powerlifting and Kettlebell-Sport Gym in Atlanta, GA. He trains people from all walks of life and specializes in strength training and conditioning for sport and general fitness.

In addition to training Scott has spoken at numerous colleges and universities about personal training and strength and conditioning and has been featured in the Atlanta Sports & Fitness Magazine. Scott is a competitive drug-free powerlifter and kettlebell-sport lifter.