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The Forgotten Lift

Bill Starr explains the technique for the Olympic-style press, which helped set records but ultimately ushered the lift out of competition.

By Bill Starr

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The overhead press was once the standard test of strength for anyone wanting to get considerably stronger. Whenever anyone wanted to know how strong you were, he always asked, "How much can you press?"

The first goal that every beginner strived for was to clean and press his body weight. In some cases this took a year or more. The next goal was to be able to clean and press 200 lb. That separated the men from the boys. It still does in my opinion. How many athletes are able to handle that much weight currently? Very, very few. Of all the athletes that I have trained in various universities of the years, only a handful were able to handle 200 or more in the press.

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How Much You Bench?

Now, of course, the gauge of strength is the bench press, and 300 lb. is what 200 was for the overhead press. If the overhead press is even part of the strength program, it is almost always relegated to being an auxiliary exercise, and only moderate to light weights are used. Why did this switch from the overhead press to the flat bench come about?

The first reason was an innovation that Tony Garcy of the York Barbell Club came up with in the early '60s. He invented a highly technical style of pressing that required timing, quickness, coordination and—most of all—balance. Previously, Olympic lifters used brute strength to elevate their presses. Tony's version was a high-skill movement, and it took a great deal of practice before anyone could get the feel of what he was trying to do.

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When the foreign lifters saw him press in the '64 Olympics and '65 Worlds, they saw that he was onto something and began copying his style. Within a short time, nearly every foreign Olympic lifter was using the technique with great success, and it was referred to as the "Olympic style" or "European style" press. Few people know that it was Tony and not any foreign country that developed this dynamic lift.

While the newer style sent records soaring in all weight classes, it became the death knell for the press because it became extremely hard to judge. The bar was rarely pressed at all. It shot off the shoulders and was instantly locked out. And those who leaned back excessively made the move in the blinking of an eye, so it was difficult to tell if the lifter leaned back too far, which was the reason for disqualification. But the hardest part to judge was determining if the lifter started the lift with bent knees.



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The Olympic press employs a degree of layback, and athletes need to train to be able to use the technique without injury. It takes years of practice to develop the strength required for safe layback with heavy loads.

Judging became erratic, especially so on the international stage, where politics came into play. Some lifters were able to get away with such blatant knee kicks that the lift looked like a push press. The battles between the Communist countries and those favoring democracy were the ones where the judges used the press to keep lifters from doing well. At the '68 Olympics, I watched a Cuban lifter elevate his first two attempts in the press in a strong, steady fashion. Two judges, one from Puerto Rico and the other from Canada, gave him red lights. They did give him white lights on his final attempt, but they had made sure that he would not be in contention for a medal.

It became obvious that the International Olympic Committee had lost all control over the judges when it came to the press. But how could they eliminate a lift that had been an integral part of the sport for so many years? Initially, they tested the waters with the idea that dropping the press would make the meets much shorter. That didn't wash because long meets only occurred at a few contests, mostly on the East Coast.



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Cleaning and pressing 200 lb. or more is an impressive feat of strength few can perform.

That's when someone came up with the idea of safety. All of a sudden, there were articles on the subject that overhead pressing was harmful to the lower back due to leaning backward to finish the lift. Athletic trainers, sports-medicine doctors and coaches, mostly those who thought all weight training was dangerous, joined the bandwagon.

In 1972, the International Olympic Weightlifting Committee voted to eliminate the press from official competition. For the record, there was never any evidence to show that the lift was harmful to the back. In fact, overhead pressing is one of the very best exercises to strengthen certain parts of the back, which I'll get into later on.

In this same time frame, several other events happened that altered the status of the overhead press from a primary movement to an ancillary exercise. Joe Weider took control of the sport of bodybuilding and immediately dropped the athletic points that were part of the AAU rules. A bodybuilder could gain those five points by participating in any sport, and because most were doing many of the same exercises as the Olympic lifters in the gym, they entered Olympic meets.

The lift that the majority of bodybuilders excelled at was the press because they did lots of them. They believed, and rightly so, that the overhead press was one of the very best exercises to build a strong, impressive upper body. There are few exercises that can develop the deltoids and triceps as well as overhead presses.

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test of upper-body strength.
But it should be.**

Yet once the athletic points were dropped, aspiring physique contestants stopped doing the three Olympic lifts and the flat bench replaced the overhead press in their routines. I have to believe most of them did this simply because the flat bench is much easier to do than the overhead press.

While this was going on, the sport of powerlifting was growing rapidly. It was much easier to train on the static lifts



In the start position, your wrists should be as straight as possible, and you can use tape to enforce the position if flexibility is lacking.

than it was the more complicated Olympic movements. The bench press was the test of strength for the upper body in powerlifting, and for the most part, the overhead press was completely ignored.

Strength training for athletes was also emerging during this time, and Tommy Suggs and I did everything we could to push this movement forward. With the full backing of Bob Hoffman, owner of the York Barbell Company, we put on countless exhibitions and clinics and attended several coaching conventions every winter. That's when we came up with the Big Three, a simplified strength program that could be done with a minimum of equipment. It consisted of the power clean, back squat and bench press (see [The Holy Trinity of Strength Training](#), published May 27, 2009).

Although we both believed the overhead press to be the better lift to develop upper-body strength, we didn't want to have to defend two of the three exercises in the program. We had our hands full with the back squat, primarily because of the bogus research done by Dr. K.K. Klein at the University of Texas. Our second choice after the overhead press was the incline press, but there just weren't any incline benches in high schools and colleges. In truth, not many fitness centers or gyms even had them.

So by default, the bench press became part of the Big Three, and after I published *The Strongest Shall Survive*, it became a fixture in every strength program in the country. And finally, highly engineered exercise machines, such as the Nautilus, exploded on the scene. As a result of all these changes, the overhead press virtually disappeared from the scene, and if it was included in a program, it was always done with light weight, usually at the end of the workout. No longer was it a test of upper-body strength.

But it should be.

Safe and Effective

As far as the safety factor, the overhead press is not nearly as harmful as the flat bench. In the quest for higher and higher numbers in the bench press, athletes resort to rebounding the bar off the chests and bridging when the bar sticks on its way up. Both are extremely stressful to the shoulders and elbows and, in some cases, the wrists as well.

The accusation that leaning back excessively in the press put the lower back in jeopardy was partially true. But what was understood was that those who did lean way back only did this after years of practice. And over those years, the muscles and attachments in the lower back grew

stronger and stronger so they were able to handle the stress. Secondly, as every athlete learns quickly, it's not easy to lay back when pressing a heavy weight.

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Some layback is desirable and necessary in order to handle a max attempt. But to lay back at the exact moment to help the bar stay in motion is a difficult skill to master. Timing and balance are critical, and it takes a whole lot of practice to get it down pat. This aspect of the lift was the most difficult to learn for all the athletes I taught to press in this fashion. So laying back too much is not really a problem at all, which means the lower back is not in danger of being overly stressed. As I just mentioned, as the athlete perfects this move over time, he is also making his lumbar, and the other muscles in his back, stronger.

Another point in favor of overhead presses is that they strengthen the rotator cuffs. When the press was still the standard of strength, no one had ever heard of an injury to the rotator cuff. In fact, they were unknown muscles. If you asked the most knowledgeable coach or lifter where they were located, they wouldn't have the faintest idea. They're not even mentioned in the kinesiology and applied anatomy text that was considered the best on the subject in the '60s.

The current rash of rotator-cuff problems can be directly linked to overworking the bench press and the lack of overhead exercises. When a weight is pressed overhead, those rotator cuffs are strengthened considerably. When doing a flat bench, they are not. Whenever athletes come to me seeking advice about their rotator cuffs and are not yet to the point where medical attention is required, I start them on overhead presses. I have them use dumbbells for several weeks before graduating to a bar. I also have them drop the flat benches completely and do overhead presses three times a week. It works, although it may take several

months for them to get their rotator cuffs strong enough so that they stop hurting. The overhead press is a perfectly safe and very beneficial exercise when it is done correctly. But this is true for every exercise in strength training, including rather tame movements such as curls, lateral raises, bent-over rows and even back hyperextensions.

One of the things I liked about doing overhead presses from the very beginning was they could be done with a minimum of equipment. All I had at my disposal for the first two-and-a-half years I trained were standard bars and weights. They worked just fine. I think having to turn the bar over during the clean rather than having the bar revolve smoothly actually helped me get a bit stronger. I also like the idea that I could do the movement alone, because I was the only person using the base gyms during my service. No spotter was necessary, and if I failed with an attempt, I simply let the bar come back down to my shoulders and put it on down to the floor.

Cleaning and pressing weights helped me build a stronger foundation than pressing off a rack. I did the combination movement for the simple reason that there were no racks available. And this was the same for nearly every other strength athlete in the '50s. We made use of what we had available, and it forced us to work harder than those who followed us and had the luxury of equipment that made things easier.

The Press: A Quick Lift

Having made my case for the merits of overhead presses, I'll move on to how to perform them correctly. Even if you do not plan on adding presses to your routine permanently, it's still a smart idea to understand the various form points in the event you want to teach the lift to someone else.

While learning how to do this dynamic style of the press, I find it's best to take the bar off the rack rather than cleaning it. That is, of course, if you have a rack in your weight room. This will allow you to concentrate on the various parts of the lift without having to think about the clean. Begin with an empty Olympic bar. Your grip for the press is about the same as you would use for power cleans or deadlifts. Extended your thumbs on an Olympic bar so that they just touch the smooth center. Should you have very wide shoulders, a wider grip will be needed, and vice versa for those with narrow shoulders. The general rule of thumb for all pressing movements is that your forearms are vertical during the exercise.

The rack position is extremely important, and it's slightly different than the rack for a jerk. The bar should rest on your frontal deltoids without touching your collarbones, at that point where the sternum meets the clavicles. To provide a muscular ledge on which to place the bar, just shrug your entire shoulder girdle upward so that your frontal deltoids provide that ledge.

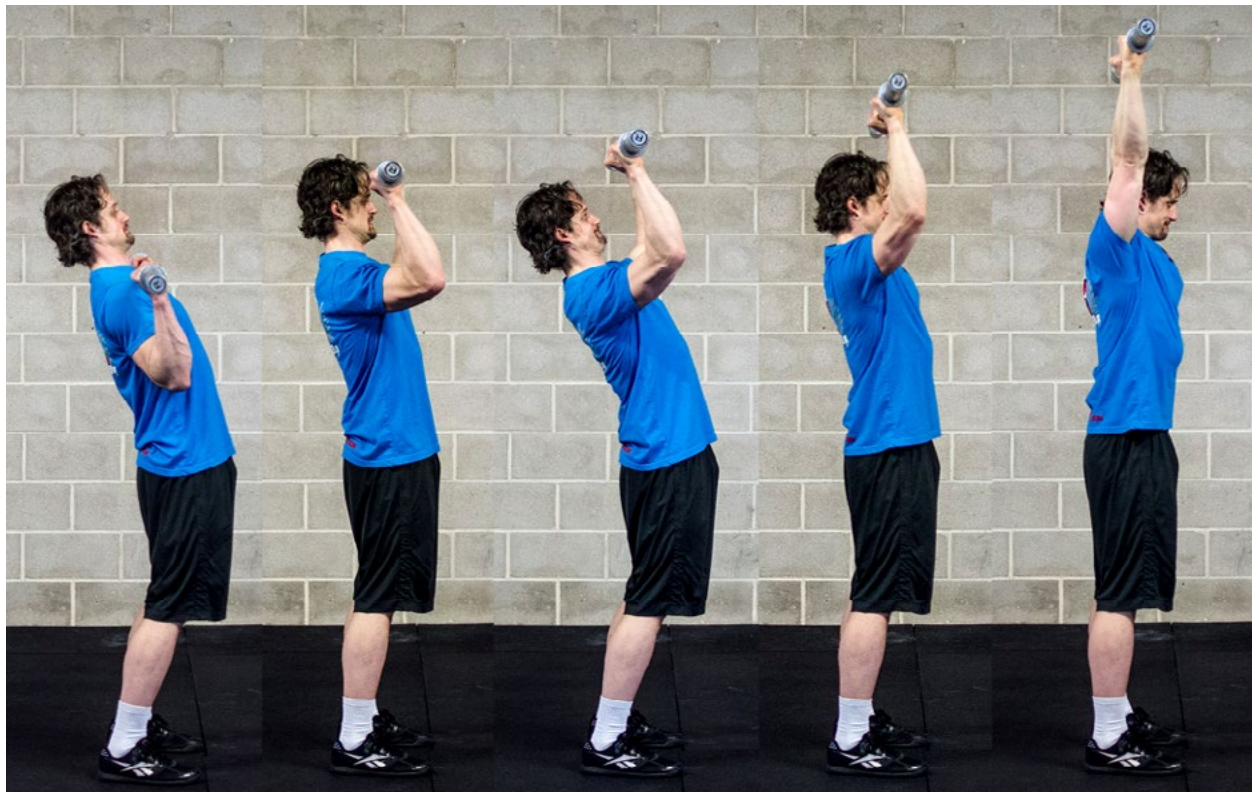
Your elbows will be down and tucked in tightly against your lats. Your wrists have to be absolutely straight. Should you have trouble keeping your wrists locked at any stage of the lift, wrap them with trainer's tape. This is a good idea for anyone just learning the lift because the wrists are placed under a new form of stress, and an ounce of prevention is still worth a pound of cure. Never allow your wrists to flex during the execution of the press because that diminishes the power generated from the shoulders into your arms and finally the bar.

Pressing really starts with your feet, so your base has to be solid and in the right position. Set your feet at shoulder width with your toes pointed straight ahead. Your feet need to be in this position so that the weight can be

shifted from the balls of your feet to your heels, then back again to the balls in a nanosecond.

To ensure a strong base, think about gripping the floor with your toes, much like a bird locked firmly to a tree limb. Everything up to this point is the same as if you were about to do a conventional overhead press, but now the form becomes quite different. With your knees straight, extend your pelvis forward and create a bow with your body. The bow starts at the back of your heels and ends at the back of your head. The bar should be directly over the center of your feet and your hips so you will be starting the lift from your power base.

Take a moment to tighten every muscle in your body, with special attention to your abs and glutes. Imagine yourself as a powerful coil of steel. I said that your knees needed to be straight, but they shouldn't be locked. This is usually confusing to a lifter. Yes, this is how they teach recruits to stand at parades in the military. Those who didn't heed the instructions often fainted because the locked-out legs impeded circulation. Try it without the bar and you'll understand what I mean.



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By locking your knees aggressively (Frame 2), the bar will jump upward. Then you must quickly drop back into your starting position while continuing to push the bar upward (Frame 3). This technique requires a precise bar path and perfect timing.



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It can take years to develop any proficiency in the Olympic press, which became popular in the '60s.

Get set in that coil, then blast the bar upward in a very precise line, and at that same moment, lock your knees. That combination will send the bar flying upward. Here's the tricky part: as soon as you have uncoiled and locked your knees, you must drop back into that coiled starting position while continuing to put pressure on the moving bar. Lock it out and hold it for a few seconds overhead. The bar should be set on a line right above the back of your head. Then lower it back to your shoulders and take a few moments to make sure all your mechanics are correct before doing the next rep.

This Olympic-style press is really a quick lift and is more difficult to learn than either the squat snatch or squat clean.

This Olympic-style press is really a quick lift and is more difficult to learn than either the squat snatch or squat clean. So don't expect to do it perfectly right away. It takes tons of reps before you will finally get the feel of what you're trying to do. But those who have the determination and patience to drill on this high-skill movement all eventually come to me and say, "One day, it just happened. The bar shot off my shoulders and was suddenly locked out overhead. It was like magic." When done absolutely correctly, that's just what the lift feels like.

A few more points:

- Never follow the upward-moving bar with your eyes. This will make you lean too far backward in the middle and final stages of the lift. In Frame 3 on Page 6, the lifter should be looking straight ahead rather than at the bar.
- As you are coiled and about to launch the bar upward, your weight needs to be pushed forward, over your toes. When you drive the bar off your shoulders and come erect, the weight shifts to your heels, and when you drop back into the starting position, the weight shifts once again back to your toes.

- At the conclusion of the start, your body must be completely erect so that you can put all your power into the bar. Over time, you will also be able to include your traps into that initial move, which will add even more punch.
- Also, as you drop back into the coiled position, you absolutely must maintain control of the line of flight of the bar and keep pushing up against it. Any hesitation in that move and the bar will stall. With max poundage, that will result in a failure.

Driving the bar upward with a burst of power in a very precise line is one of the hardest parts of this form of pressing. It requires a great deal of practice, and for those who have difficulty with this part of the lift, I have them drill on the start until their line is tight on every rep. Then they can incorporate the middle and finish into the movement more readily.

The key to making an Olympic press with a considerable amount of weight is locking your knees during the start with authority. This is exactly what ski jumpers do. When they hit the end of their takeoff, they snap their knees into a locked position, and this provides them with that extra bit of power to soar higher. The same idea applies to the Olympic press. By locking your knees forcefully, that added pop sends the bar a fraction higher, which gives you the time to recoil and press the bar to lockout.



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The knees are locked out in Frame 1—an error in start position. They are straight but unlocked in Frame 2, allowing the lifter to snap them into a locked position.

When every move is in sync, the bar will blast off your shoulders and be locked out in the blinking of an eye, and you will understand why it was so difficult for the judges to see any infractions. It's important to remember that you really don't lean back. You will be pushing your pelvis forward until you're curled into a tight, powerful coil.

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While learning this athletic movement, you might want to just do 3 reps per set so that you can fully focus on the various form points. But once you feel confident that you're doing the lift correctly, start following this routine: 3 sets of 5 as warm-ups, then 3 sets of triples. After a few weeks, add in another set of triples, then do it again after another month, so that you're getting in a total of 8 sets. And every so often, do doubles or singles instead of triples.

Those who have done conventional presses in the past or are still doing them will have more difficulty with the form on the Olympic press than those who have never done any type of pressing. But with practice, those with experience can make the switch. That's what nearly every lifter in the '60s had to do in order to be competitive. It took me the better part of a year to make the adjustment, and I still wasn't as proficient as some of the younger lifters who learned the Olympic-style press at the very beginning of their careers.

The question naturally comes up, "Why not just do a conventional press instead of having to spend a great deal of time with the more complicated Olympic press?"

If a person is just interested in bodybuilding, the conventional press is fine. But if an athlete would like to include an exercise in his strength program that not only will make him considerably stronger but will also enhance a host of athletic attributes—such as timing, coordination and most of all balance—then he should learn to do the Olympic-style press.



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About the Author

*Bill Starr coached at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the 1970 Olympic Weightlifting World Championship in Columbus, Ohio, and the 1975 World Powerlifting Championships in Birmingham, England. He was selected as head coach of the 1969 team that competed in the Tournament of Americas in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, where the United States won the team title, making him the first active lifter to be head coach of an international Olympic weightlifting team. Starr is the author of the books **The Strongest Shall Survive: Strength Training for Football** and **Defying Gravity**, which can be found at [The Aasgaard Company Bookstore](#).*

Strive to keep your wrists absolutely straight in the set-up for the press.

When high-skill exercises such as full cleans, snatches, jerks and Olympic presses are done to perfection in the weight room, the attributes that are greatly enhanced by the dynamic lifts can be carried into any sports venue. In other words, lifts that require you to utilize a great many attributes will make you a better athlete.

Besides, you will discover that doing Olympic presses is fun, and you can't say that for many exercises in strength training.

Then when someone asks you "How much can you bench?" you can reply, "I don't do benches, but I can overhead press 200 lb. Can you?"

