
THE CrossFit JOURNAL

Shake Hands With the Fat Boys

Professional and elite athletes include thick-bar training in their programming. Daniel Hersee says using equipment with an increased diameter can improve strength and reduce injuries.

By Daniel Hersee

June 2011



Rob Orlando/Hybrid Athletics

Old-time strongmen knew all about thick-bar training and used it to great effect, but it's been forgotten in modern times. Recently, there has been something of a rebirth of thick-bar training, with National Football League teams, Army Special Forces soldiers, Ultimate Fighting Championship fighters and powerlifters using thick bars to help make significant strength gains.

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The thicker the bar, the harder you have to work to hold onto it.

Thick bars are simply barbells, dumbbells and pull-up bars with a thicker diameter. A standard barbell, dumbbell or pull-up bar typically has a handle with a diameter of about 1 inch. A thick bar will often have a diameter of more like 2.5 inches. Some look more like truck axles, and if you've ever picked one up you will know that it feels completely different. Thick-bar training simply means using a thick barbell, thick dumbbells and a thick chin-up bar in your usual training program.

Thick-Bar Training, Past and Present

Thick-bar training was born by accident. In the old days, there was no such thing as a standard barbell, and high-quality training equipment was hard to find. Strongmen had to have their equipment custom made or improvise and train using what they could find in, for example, scrap yards. This made for some interesting training tools and is the reason for the famous challenges strongmen performed with implements such as Apollon's Wheels and the Thomas Inch dumbbell.

Old-time strongmen—many were stronger than most modern champions—were well aware of the incredible effect of thick-bar work and used it extensively. Thick-bar work is thought to be one of the reasons they were able to develop levels of upper-body power that are almost difficult to believe.

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Rob Orlando/Hybrid Athletics

Rob Orlando, a strongman and CrossFit competitor, has always had a love of fat-bar lifting.

Today, thick-bar training is relatively unknown in the mainstream fitness crowd but is widely used by members of the military and elite athletes.

The rediscovery of thick-bar training can be attributed in large part to its use by many of today's most highly respected strength coaches, including Joe DeFranco, who has worked with NFL teams; Mauro Di Pasquale, author of *The Anabolic Diet* and a world champion in powerlifting; *Dinosaur Training* author Brooks Kubik; Charles Poliquin, a Canadian strength and conditioning coach who has worked with hundreds of Olympic athletes; and competitive powerlifter Dave Tate.

How and Why Thick-Bar Training Works

Understandably, many people have trouble seeing how something as simple as switching to a thick bar can create major strength gains, not just in the hands and forearms but throughout the body. That skepticism might change the first time they use a thick-bar, as many trainees say their forearms and biceps are sore to the touch for days after their first thick-bar workout.

There are several reasons why thick bars work well:

1. Irradiation and Harder Muscle Contractions

Thicker handles stimulate far more muscle activation in the hands and forearms and in the upper arms and entire upper body. It works by the principle of irradiation.

When you contract a muscle hard, the muscles around it contract as well. Therefore, to get a maximal contraction in your biceps, for example, you need to get your forearms contracting maximally, too.

Try flexing your biceps as hard as possible without making a fist. Now try and flex your biceps as hard as possible while making as tight a fist as possible and squeezing. You should be able to contract your bicep much harder when making a tight fist. If you flex your forearms hard enough, you will begin to feel tension not just in your arms but in your shoulders, chest and back. This is called irradiation. The nerve impulses of surrounding muscles can amplify the effect of that muscle.

Because thick bars make your hands and forearms work harder, the contractions in other muscles that include the biceps and triceps, and even the muscles in the shoulders, back and chest, will contract much harder. That means more strength and more muscle.

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You can use a standard bar and squeeze it hard, but this doesn't work the way a thick bar does. If you grip a standard bar hard while doing something like bench presses, you will begin to feel the effects of irradiation. The problem is that gripping a regular bar is really easy, and its small diameter makes it very difficult to squeeze it hard.

In thick-bar training, you have no choice but to grip the bar hard because it's difficult to hold onto. If you use a weak grip, you won't be able to hold on. When you do pressing movements, you will be able to generate a better squeeze and more tension on the bar compared to a thin bar. This will allow you to use the irradiation principle to the max. You will be able to lift more in the military press, bench press, etc.

2. Weaklinks—and Neural Inhibition—Eliminated

Your body is highly sophisticated. It has protective mechanisms built in to minimize the risk of imbalance and injury. Therefore, it will hold back the strength and size of some muscles if it detects that other muscles around it are too weak. This is known as neural inhibition.

This is one reason successful powerlifters work hard to build huge, powerful back muscles—to improve their bench press. It sounds counterintuitive at first. But training your back “pulling” muscles gets you stronger on your front “pushing” muscles. They do this because they know their body needs that balance and stability to get stronger.

Thick bars make your hands, fingers and forearms so much stronger that your body can finally stop holding back the strength gains in your upper arms, back and chest.

This point cannot be emphasized enough. Your hands, wrists and forearms are almost certainly your weakest link, and once you strengthen them, your upper-body strength will go through the roof.



Rob Orlando/Hybrid Athletics

Pressing a fat bar has the potential to add pounds to your presses with a standard barbell.

3. Training at all Angles Automatically

Thick-bar training automatically trains your hands, fingers and forearms at all angles. If you are bench pressing, the thick bar will train your hands and forearms in a completely different way than if you are doing chin-ups on a thick bar. Other grip-training methods like grippers can be useful, too, but they are one-dimensional, training the hands and forearms in the same way over and over, which can potentially lead to imbalances and injury.

Thick bars also perfectly replicate the natural function of the human hand: lifting heavy, awkward objects. Humans have evolved to use their hands to climb trees and rock faces and carry logs and animals. Thick bars are a great way of replicating this.

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4. Grip Training No Longer an Afterthought

Training the grip, hands and forearms has often been relegated to an afterthought. Most trainees have thrown in a few wrist extensions or grip exercises after a training session. With thick bars, you are training your grip the whole time and don't need to do any extra exercises.

5. Concentration/Focus

Because thick bars are harder to handle, you need to concentrate a lot harder to lift the weight. Some credit this alone with making them significantly stronger.

Thick bars are more difficult to control. Compared to an Olympic barbell, a bar with a 2-inch or 3-inch diameter seems like a truck axle. Imagine bench pressing, military pressing and deadlifting a truck axle! That's what it feels like when you use a thick bar.



Rob Orlando/Hybrid Athletics

You're going to have to work a whole lot harder to deadlift 400 lb. with the bar in the bottom picture.



Rob Orlando/Hybrid Athletics

Once you've mastered the clean, try cleaning an axle. It's a whole new challenge.

6. Less Stress on Joints, Less Injuries, Less Imbalances

This is an interesting one. Many people use thick-bar training because of how fast it adds strength to their body compared to standard bars. It also is worth noting, though, how many lifters report that thick-bar training has actually cured—and presumably prevented—all types of injuries, including those to the wrist, elbow and shoulders.

It seems thick bars shift the stress off the joints and onto the muscles, which is exactly what we want.

This effect is thought to be because a thick bar spreads the weight over a larger area of the hand. That, in turn, means that weight is more evenly distributed throughout the entire arm. It's a bit like the difference between someone standing on you wearing sneakers and someone standing on you wearing high-heeled shoes. Neither is recommended, by the way. As a result, lifters who have long since given up various pressing movements like bench presses and overhead presses are often able to perform these exercises again pain-free—in some cases, instantly—the first time they use a thick bar.

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The thick bar also changes the biomechanics of the lift enough so when you pick up a thick bar, the forearm extensors (the muscles on top of the forearm) and forearm flexors (the muscles on the bottom) work similar amounts. If you just pick up a thick-handled dumbbell, you will instantly feel that. With standard bars, the forearm flexors do almost all the work. That can cause imbalances, injuries, strength plateaus and tendonitis.

Fewer injuries mean more productive training because consistency is essential.

How to Use Thick Bars to Increase Results

This part is simple: use thick bars for everything.

Use thick barbells, dumbbells and pull-up bars for all exercises: bench presses, overhead presses, chin-ups, pull-ups, rows, deadlifts and pulls. It's common for lifters to have to reduce the weight at first—in some cases, significantly. That really shows the weakness they might not have realized they had; however, they soon bounce back and go well beyond their previous training maxes.



Courtesy of Daniel Hersee

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About the Author

Daniel Hersee is a Poliquin International Certification Program strength coach, martial artist and competitive surf skier. He also works at [Fat Gripz](#).

A note of caution: Always use a properly set up power rack or competent spotters for thick-bar bench presses. Never do thick-bar benches without one or both of these. It's unlikely that you will ever drop the bar, but there is an increased risk, so don't take the chance. Take extra care when you begin to incorporate thick-bar work. Drop the poundage at first. You will not be able to handle your regular poundage when you first begin thick-bar movements. But don't worry: your hands and forearms will quickly catch up, and you will blow your old max lifts out of the water.

There is the only drawback with thick bars. They are rarely found in gyms because good ones are very expensive. A solution is a thick-bar adapter that converts standard barbells, dumbbells and pull-up bars into thick bars. They tend to be affordable and are thought to be as effective as thick bars.

