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JOURNAL ARTICLES

The Slow Lifts

Part 4: The Bench Press

Mark Rippetoe

The longer I stay in this business, the less fond I become of the bench press. And it's not the fault of the exercise itself, which is a perfectly reasonable thing to do if it's incorporated correctly into the program.

It's the injured shoulders, the big pecs and little legs, the \$400 six-layer denim/moly-steel shirts, the 18-year-old football players who can "do 500," the spotters with traps more fatigued than the bencher's pecs.

But mainly, it's the noise.

Not at my gym, of course. The vast majority of my members learned a while back that the best way to keep their shoulders healthy was to press and bench press in equal doses, quietly. But there are other gyms in which the bench press is the only upper-body lift done and is the main trapezius exercise for spotters, since deadlifting is pretty scarce in these places. And the yelling just annoys me all out of proportion to how much it should. I get really tired of spotters trying to sound like Macho Man Randy Savage, with their hands on the bar "spotting" every rep. At CrossFit Wichita Falls/WFAC, spotters don't touch the bar unless it's going back down or has been stuck for long enough to get them worried. We all squat and pull, so our legs are generally in proportion. Just now there are no competitive powerlifters here, so most of the members don't even know what a bench shirt is. (Quite honestly, if a bunch of them starting spending money on bench shirts, I'd probably feel compelled to raise my dues.) Here, benching is just another exercise, not the absolute measure of personal worth it is in some circles, and the noise level is commensurate with this more balanced, peaceful, logical worldview.

The bench press is the best exercise for absolute strength in the upper body, because it allows the lifter to move heavier weights with the arms than any other exercise. It should be included in every barbell training program. But it is not the only lift we should do, and it frequently gets used as though it is.

Benching provides hard active work for the chest, shoulders, and arms and isometric work for the forearms, and it trains novice lifters well in the fundamental skill of pushing on a very heavy load. This last may be its most useful function. When people first start training, they have no experience with maximal effort. The vast majority of humans on this planet have never had to push really, really hard on anything, and that is a skill that should be developed, along with cooking, critical thinking, and interpersonal relations. The bench press is a very good place to learn how to bear down and push hard, and this invaluable lesson translates to all the other slow lifts quite well.

This is because the bench press is relatively simple to do and, once learned correctly, involves not much more than this: pushing very hard on something that is moving rather slowly because it is very damned heavy.

There are no other distractions since the back is braced against the bench, and the rest of the body—while it must be controlled in terms of position and tension—is not directly involved in the lift. Pushing hard is possible because the segment doing the pushing is very short, and the thing—or one of the things—you are pushing against, the bench, does not move at all. (Yes, you push against the bench too. The bench and the bar

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are pushed apart.) The press involves the entire body down to the floor, and while this makes it a better exercise overall, it also means that some extraneous movement will occur in the supporting segment secondary to the prime movers used in the exercise. The bench press allows you to focus on the push itself, without having to worry about controlling much of the rest of the body at the same time. This allows you to bench press more weight than you can press.

The two exercises thus provide balance in a couple of ways: the bench press works the anterior shoulder girdle and chest, while the press works the medial and posterior shoulder and the posterior stabilizers. The bench press works on raw “push” while the press trains total body stability while pushing. Both are best done without a lot of unnecessary drama.

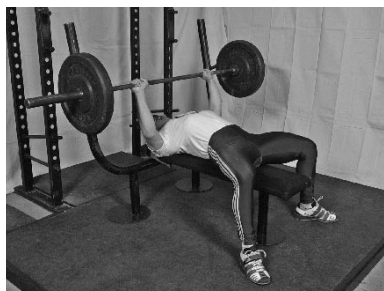
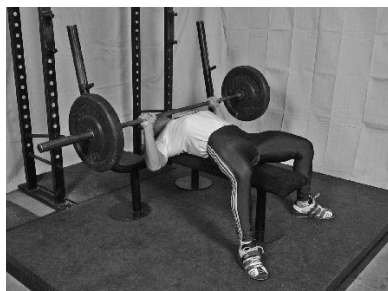
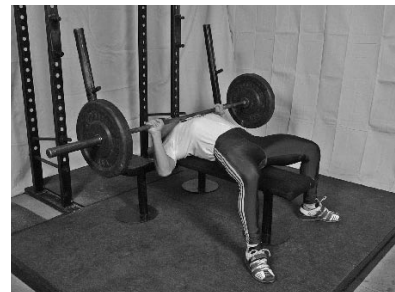
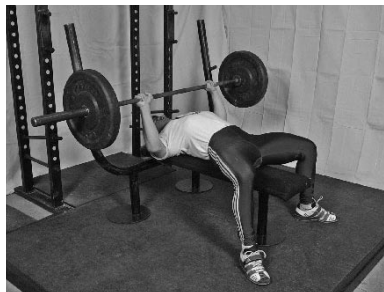
Since everybody pretty much knows how to bench press, at least in general terms, I'll address just a couple of points I consider salient. First, there is a little trick I use to make the bar go to the right place, through the right path, every time. It's about eye position, and it applies to every sport that involves the use of an implement, from benching to golf to tennis to throwing the shot. (Many other coaches have observed this, and I just stole from them. I am shameless this way.) When you take the bar out of the rack, you'll be looking up, since you're lying on your back. Find a place on the ceiling to stare at and nail your eyes to that place. This

point will be your positional reference for the bar path and its lockout position over the chest. If you return the bar to the same position at the top of every rep, having touched the same place on your chest every time, you will find that your bar path is uniform as well. This is due to the use of the stationary reference for the movement—the fixed point on the ceiling.

In golf, you look at the ball, not the club head. The head of the club goes to where the eyes are fixed. You look at the ball in a tennis volley, and, even though the ball is moving, your head moves with it and renders it stationary relative to your eyes. The implement in your hand then goes where it is directed by the eyes: the golf club goes to the ball, the shot goes downfield, and the bar in your hands will go to the same place in reference to the ceiling if you fix your eyes on that point. Most bench pressers do this without thinking about it. It has been my observation that very few good benchers look at the bar as it moves, since it is liable to move to a different place each time if the eyes follow the bar instead of directing it to the right place.

Use this technique next time you teach someone how to bench and see what happens. More than 90 percent of the time, their first reps will be almost perfect if the movement is explained this way.

But how, you ask, does this observation relate to, for instance, the snatch? Damn you, you're making me have to think. Okay, the snatch is a movement that



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involves the bar moving from the ground to overhead, and would be impossible to watch against the ceiling due to the neck position this would require. More importantly, a movement like the snatch or the clean is best thought of as a movement of the body, not the bar. As such, we normally fix the gaze on the facing wall, so that positional reference information is available about the body itself, not the bar, which will go to the right place if the body does its job correctly. As a general rule, there must be some fixed reference point for the eyes in any kind of movement of the body, and in every barbell (or dumbbell) exercise that fixed point should be stationary.

Next, the bench press, as mentioned before, has a little bitty short kinetic chain that goes from the hands to the place where the back contacts the bench. It would be better if we could involve more of the body in the movement, and as it turns out good benchers know how to do this. They brace against the floor with their feet, pushing the chest up and arching the back, in effect extending the kinetic chain on down to the floor. It is very common to see novice benchers raise one foot up in the air as they miss a heavy rep. I have no idea why this is so universal a reflex, but it is so normal to do this that I caution my other members to stay away from the new people's feet when they do their work sets the first few times. Obviously, if a foot comes up, a less-than-efficient use of the legs has occurred. The best foot position is open to discussion, but I like to use a stance that is about like the squat stance, with feet about shoulder width apart and shins approximately vertical. This produces the best drive down the bench with less tendency to bridge the butt up, as might be the case if the feet were too far back up under the hips.

Now, it is bad form to raise the butt up off the bench, and what should happen is that the push from the legs is directed straight along the bench to the back and shoulders instead of up so that the arch is supported without a loss of contact with the bench at the hips. This convention is designed to prevent things from getting too out of hand, turning the bench press into a decline bench press, an easier version of the exercise with a shorter range of motion. Our purpose is to get strong using the bench press, not to see how much weight we can bench press, which is an entirely different matter. That is powerlifting, and this is CrossFit. So we need to keep our butts on the bench while using our legs to support our position.

Some people prefer to bench press with their feet up on the bench, or even held up in the air. This is fine, as long as everybody is aware of what is being compromised when this is done. A lower back injury or a preference for a harder style might make this desirable, but it is less efficient, and not as much weight can be lifted this way. But, remembering that more weight is not always the point, use this if you want or need to.

Dumbbell bench presses are a very good substitute for the barbell version. The DB bench is actually the older of the two exercises, dumbbells having been pressed in the supine position on a bench before the invention of the upright support bench that allowed the barbell version of the lift to be performed without spotters. Prior to the invention of that equipment, the lifter would have to clean the bar, lie down with it, press it, stand up with it, and then set it down on the floor (which didn't leave much gas for that 500-pound set of five that all the high school powerlifters seem to be able to do today). The DB bench involves more of the body, and quite a bit of skill when using heavy dumbbells if the shoulders are not to be dislocated. As such, it is quite useful in CrossFit workouts.

The bench press is an important exercise that has suffered at the hands of people who lack the proper perspective of its value, its correct use, and its limitations. Use it wisely.



Mark Rippetoe is the owner of Wichita Falls Athletic Club and CrossFit Wichita Falls. He has 28 years experience in the fitness industry and 10 years experience as a competitive powerlifter. He has been certified as an NSCA Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist since 1985 and is a USA Weightlifting Level III Coach and Senior Coach, as well as a USA Track and Field Level I Coach. He has published articles in the Strength and Conditioning Journal, is a regular contributor to the CrossFit Journal, and is the author of the book Starting Strength: A Simple and Practical Guide for Coaching Beginners and the forthcoming Practical Periodization.