15 Secrets to a Bigger Bench Press!

...naturally, legally and immediately!

If you have read my writings you may be familiar with my belief that loading (ie. how much weight you can move) is not the be-all and end-all that some make out. If fact, relatively speaking, I think it is over-rated.

If you look at the sub-qualities of strength that I identify (ie. control and stability, general strength and hypertrophy, maximal strength, power and endurance), you could see that loading is the dominant quality in one, shares the lime-light equally with at least one other variable in two of the sub-qualities, and is of less importance in the remaining three.

But there is a time and place for loading and when it is the desired goal, why not get it right! I cringe when I see the mistakes that many gym users make when it is apparent that their goal is to lift as much as possible. Whether they are going for max for the right reasons is difficult to say. From the physiques that most possess, I suggest the wrong reasons!

Overlooking this, if you want to lift as much as possible in the bench press exercise, here are a few tips. They are natural in that they don't involve any drugs. They are legal in that they can be used in powerlifting or bench press competitions. And they will work immediately!

Most strength trainers will never know these 'secrets', and unless they gain access to information such as contained in this article, continue to miss out on significant gains that come from such seemingly subtle modifications. Now you can benefits from the knowledge usually possessed only by elite bench pressers!

So if loading is your goal in the bench press and a given point in time, don't miss the boat! Try out some of the following. I have listed them in order that they would occur in a training session.

They include tips on how to pick the bench to use, spotting, body position, and how to behave during the lift.

1) bar tensile strength : if you use a 'whippy bar' eg. such as an competition Olympic bar, you will lose a lot of energy controlling the whip (the multi-directional movement) of the bar. Of course this is more of a problem the heavier you go. But don't get caught out. Use the bar that has the least 'whip'. Same the 'whippy' bar for Olympic lifting. You will be stunned at how much difference this aspect makes. I would say 5-10% to or from your 1 RM.

2) Bar circumference - there may be as much as a 1 cm (1/2 inch) difference between the circumferences of the bar at the point at which you grip. Whilst there will be an optimum bar circumference relative to your hand size, I would recommend using the bar with the circumference of 9 to 9+ cm as opposed to the over 10cm bar. Doesn't sound much, but it is a 10% difference in the actual measurement and will cause about 5 % difference in your lift! Safe the fatter bars for hypertrophy phases!

3) Avoid bent bars - once you go anywhere about 70% 1RM you really notice the impact of a bent bar. Not only will it reduce the load lifted it may also cause you to strain or tear soft-tissue. Avoid it like the plague! Put the bar on the ground and roll it. You will see if the bar remains equal distance to the ground throughout the rolling or whether it appears to move closer and further away from the ground. (you would do the same with a pool cue or the pool table!). I have seen bars that look like they could make 90 degree turns - and multi-million dollar athletes using them with no idea! I give this between 2-10% difference on your lift depending on the extent of the bar.

4) Check the circle on the bar - most Olympic type bars have a circle grooved in them to give you feedback about your hand positioning. For you, your medium or average grip may be with the outside of you palm touching this line. Don't assume that all Olympic bars in your gym have

this line the same distance apart! Doing so could result in you using a considerably weaker grip, and leave you scratching your head! My 'made in Taiwan' Olympic bar has lines 102 cm apart, as opposed to my Eleiko bar which has them 90 cm apart. Massive difference. Could make as muck as 5-15% difference!

5) Avoid slippery bars - the knurling is the roughening that you find in the bar. In the deadlift you find out how harsh the knurling is! This becomes a trade-off between getting some hand grip and not loosing all the skin on your shin! No such issues in the bench - if you use a bar that is shiny or slippery, you lose too much energy fighting the lateral hand slip. Even with chalk on. Doesn't have to be the roughest bar, but you want one with adequate grip. I find a slippery bar can cause you to loose up to 5% off your 1RM.

6) Pick the right height bench - Optimum dimensions for bench height will be influenced by your height. Ideally, you need to be able to have an acute (less than 90 degree knee angle) with your feet flat on the ground. If the bench is too high you will not be able to have this acute knee angle and have feet flat on the ground, and be able to exert force through the feet. If the bench is too low, your knee angle will be too acute and you will be mechanically disadvantaged when it comes to driving through the ground with your feet. Most competition bench presses are about 45 cm off the ground. This is for the average height person. If the bench is way off right for you, I give this at least 10% difference to your bench 1 RM.

7) Pick the right bench width - Optimum dimensions for bench width again will be influenced by your bodyweight, shape and back width. Ideally, the bench will allow you to place most of your force through your scapula, which should be in a retracted and motionless position. If the bench is too narrow, you will not be able to find a flat, firm place to create that action-reaction through your shoulder blades. If the bench is to wide, the only harm is that it will restrict your range during the lowering. (doing cambered bench I usually find symmetrical bruising behind my shoulders every time! Took me a while to work out why!) So the main concern is a bench that is too narrow. Most competition

benches will measure about 30 cm wide, which is ideal for the average lifter. An extremely narrow bench (relative to you) could cost you at least 10%-15% off your 1RM.

8) Pick the right bench foam density - if you have a bench that has a foam that is too soft, you will loose energy stabilising the movement of the shoulders. I would prefer a harder bench to a softer bench. Think of the mechanics of action-reaction : the harder the surface the greater the 'rebound', the softer the surface, the greater the dissipation. A really soft bench (as used in most commercial applications) may cost between 5-10% off the 1 RM.

9) The psychological impact of using a spotter : this can go both ways. For some, they know the spotter will do the work so they don't feel the urgency to complete the lift. In this case, I would discourage the use of the spotter. But I am going to assume that as you have the perception to have found this writings you are smarter than this. So rather that taking the spotter away I would recommend you have one from a psychological perspective and this is why : I don't want you to be using any of your mental energy wondering what will be the implications (eg. embarrassment, injury etc) if you cannot complete the set or rep. Rather, I want total mental focus on getting the lift. Positive mental rehearsal. This detraction from your focus can make the difference of at least 1-2 reps! And in a 1 RM, that's everything!

10) The physical impact of using a spotter to get out of the racks : if you take the bar out of the racks, you are taking it out in a 'weak' or mechanically disadvantaged position - from above your head. It will feel heavy (and the risk of injury is higher). You do not want to commence the lift with an image of 'shit this is heavy!'. Additionally, you will be using more metabolic and nervous energy to take the bar from the rack position to the over-the-chest start position. Use a spotter to do this with you! But train them to ease it onto you, not let go too suddenly! As above, this technique can make the difference between getting the single, double or triple, or not getting them.

11) Use an arch - if you want to lift at your max and you are not using an body arch of some kind you are kidding yourself! An arch of the trunk reduces the distance of the bar travel, increases the potential contribution of the lats and lower pecs, and creates an arc in the lift as opposed to a straight up lift. All this translates to more weight being lifted. I classify 3 arches. Firstly a gentle movement performed after you ly down on the bench where you slide your bum/hips up closer to your shoulders. Secondly, a more aggressive position is to place your shoulders down first upon lying on the bench, then place your bum/hips down as close as you can to your shoulders. The third, final and most aggressive (and therefore most effective) arch technique is the one used by powerlifters in competition. You start right up the bench, position your feet, drive your hips (in the air) back down the bench, then drive your shoulders into the bench in a position that is close to the feet, and this is your arch. A little more complicated than this but this is the general picture! A few words of advice. Warm and stretch the lower back before using any of these arches. Come out of them slowly. Do a reverse stretch on the bench (ie. cradle) before getting up. And don't overuse this technique - save it up for the max strength phase. Arching is probably the most powerful of all these techniques and tips and can give you up to 20% extra on your 1RM!

12) Use your action-reaction points - I identify 4 main points where vital action-reaction dynamics are occurring, and if you aren't using them, you will not lift to your potential. The most important would be the shoulders blades. Most of the loading goes through this point. You must learn to use your shoulder blades as non-moving, stable points of action-reaction. Drive through them! The next important would be the feet/legs! When I see lifters moving their feet or worse still flailing them about during a max lift, I cringe. The action-reaction potential of the feet onto the ground is significant. To do this make sure the knees are slightly bent, feet flat, and drive through them into the ground without moving the feet during the lift. The head and hips are not as significant but sill contribute, and contribute to the 'tightness' of the body during the lift. They are not to move during the lift. An awareness of how to use these action-reaction points could be worth another 10% on your lift!

13) Don't 'loose' the shoulder blades - I want the shoulder blades retracted and still during the lift. They provide the greatest area of action-reaction. Most allow them to protract (drift outwards) with the completion of the concentric phase. Don't! Hold them tight and still. If is almost impossible to reposition them for the next rep, and as soon as you have 'lost' them they can no longer act as the major action-reaction site. Could be worth up to 5% more on your bench.

14) When in trouble, 'go to the head' - you will have heard or read about the 'sticking point' during the concentric phase of the lift. The point of greatest mechanical weakness. The point you are most likely to fail at. When you get into this area, preferably at least a little way into it, and feel the lift slowing, consciously, progressively and minimally drive the bar more towards the head (ie. at a 45 degree angle upwards) than straight up. This keeps the bar moving, and may allow you sneak through this weak joint angle. Timing the use of this technique is critical. Too early and you will lose it, too late and you will be too tired. And if you overdo it, you will loose it onto the head altogether.

15) Breath with the lift - how you breathe during a max bench can make a massive difference. The use of holding the breath and it's impact on the intra-abdominal pressure is widely known. Hold your breath until you are just through the sticking point. This assists in the expression of force, as well as maintaining a firmer structure from which to drive from (more important in pushing than pulling movements). But what is less known is the use of breathing during other parts of the lift. When you take possession of the bar (from the racks), you should have full lungs and hold the breath temporarily. This prevents that initial feeling of being crushed by the load, a technique extensively in powerlifting in both the squat and bench. From here, any inhalations/exhalations not including during the lift have to shallow and quick to avoid loosing this firm base. Now for the breathing during the lowering. If you breath in too early, the time frame between the end of the inhalation and the sticking point can be too long, causing a degree of hypoxcy or shortage

of oxygen in the muscle cell. You can train to be used to holding the breath for a longer time and this is what most powerlifters inadvertently do. But for the average lifter, finishing the inhalation too early can cause you to miss the lift.