

King, I., 2000, 12 Weeks to Super Strength – Pt 4, Fri Feb 31 2000

12 Weeks to Super Strength - Phase 4

by Ian King | Fri, Mar 31, 2000

Twelve Weeks to Super Strength, Phase IV Chest and back by Ian King To recap, this is a 12-week program, and there are four phases. This is Phase IV. We posted Phase III three weeks ago, Phase II two weeks before that, and Phase I two weeks before that. Use each phase for about three weeks. You'll do two upper body workouts per week. Workout A of this phase targets chest and biceps. Workout B of this phase targets shoulders or triceps (your choice). The two workouts are intended to be d...

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The two workouts are intended to be done on the first and third training days of your program. If you usually do a "four workouts a week" program, you just need to add a lower body routine on the second and fourth workouts. If you usually do a "three workouts a week" program, you just need to add a lower body routine on the second workout. And if you use a "five workouts a week" or five-day rolling program, these routines will constitute the first and third workouts. If you normally use a "seven workouts a week" program, then you need to kick back with a couple of Dingos (the beer, that is, not the baby-stealing wild doggies) and relax a bit, you overtrained animal!

This is it, the homestretch. If you've managed your recovery well, we can expect to see both size and strength coming together in this phase — everything that you've worked so hard to achieve over the last couple of months. In this phase, we're going to back *down* the reps, *up* the weight, and go for it!

You might've noted that I threw in an unsightly "if" in the preceding paragraph, referring to whether you've managed your recovery well. It's not enough to be wise in hindsight, although this can be a lesson learned. I'd prefer, however, that you applied wisdom during the program: wisdom to know whether to do that extra set, wisdom to know whether to do that extra rep, wisdom to know whether you should've even trained on that day, or even wisdom to know whether you should've worn your wife's pink tights because your workout gear was in the wash.

Are you one of those who has the confidence to do a set amount of work and walk away, not feeling the common human desire to strangle the goose that laid the golden egg? To give you an example, when I hear an athlete say that they're really feeling good, I know that it's time to stop training. If they continue, they're going to train so well that they'll create a very deep fatigue hole — it could take weeks to come out of this hole.

If you feel a "pump," consider leaving it at that. Sometimes, we do an extra set to take it to the next level, only to feel the pump fade away and conclude a few days later that you erred by doing too much. I'm familiar with the reluctance to do less or take recovery weeks. And this "hard work" ethic is desirable — even necessary — *if controlled!*

So, assuming that you've been smart, you'll still be in a position to exploit what this fourth and final phase has to offer. This is the phase in which you should really reap the benefits, where those "light weight" exercises will pay dividends, and those pre-fatigue, strength-sapping, sequenced workouts will really pay off. If you don't go to personal bests in some area during the next few weeks (be it strength, bodyweight, size, etc.), we need to do some serious troubleshooting, maybe even pulling out some of those wicked scopes used by proctologists!

If you haven't taken a rest week or, at least, a half rest week in the last nine weeks, I can only hope that you're either living a lifestyle that allows you to focus completely on your training, or that you're the "one in a million" gifted athlete who doesn't live by the rules of mortal men! Whichever, *you're going to take a week completely off after this three-week phase!*

This workout is in big contrast to the last phase, one of the reasons why it's so effective — a contrast not only in the exercises and loading, but in mental approach. When you're doing "neural-based" training (Phase IV), you need to learn to relax while taking longer rest breaks *without* losing total focus, and then have the ability to direct that focus and elevate your level of arousal in time for the set.

It's harder than it sounds. You see it everywhere. When people sit around for extended periods, they often lapse into non-related conversation. You see it at the barbershop. You see it at restaurants. And, sadly, you see it at the gym — people talking about who's doing whom, where they're going tonight, and why that man over there is wearing pink tights. It's all valuable content in its own right, but not in the gym between the start and end of the workout proper!

So, when you're given a longer rest period in this phase, try the following:

- 1) Walk around for the first 30 seconds to one minute in order to accelerate recovery. And, depending on temperature, a towel on the shoulder or similar is used at the start or end of this period.
- 2) Sit down for about 30 seconds before the next set.
- 3) Never sit on the device that you're doing the work sets *on*. Have the attitude that when you approach the area, you're mentally up and ready to do battle. Don't confuse this with resting.
- 4) If you fear that someone is going to set up on your workstation while you rest, you're probably right! Sit close, facing it, and stare meanly! You can even try the old "unwritten custom" of leaving a towel or similar on the bench, or you can do what we do here in Australia, which is pissing on it to establish territory.
- 5) When the inevitable occurs (someone goes to set up on your station), you can use this to your advantage. Even if they ask, "Are you using this?" while commencing to strip the bar, you can reply, "No, I loaded six blues (20 kg) on either side and am sitting here with broken

blood vessels in my eyes just so I could sit here and watch the bar bend, you fuckwit!" Anyway, sort it out however you want, new-age sensitive man or dog-like and growling! Whatever the outcome, use that pent-up aggression productively — your old PB is going to feel like paper in the next set!

6) In this seated time, maintain body temperature and keep focus within reason.

7) About a minute before the start of the next set, start your mental preparation. Whatever you use, whatever's required for the level of effort that you're about to face, remember that low repetitions offer short windows of opportunity. When the few reps are over, it's no good to think about how you weren't really ready for it!

8) Take the towel off just before approaching the workstation.

9) Only start your approach if and when your head is in gear. If it isn't, stay a bit longer, pace around a bit, but don't assume that you have forever to switch it on! If all else fails, get cranky!

Enough talk, let's do it!

Phase IV (Weeks 10-12)

Workout A

Compared to some of the things that I had you doing in the earlier phases, you'll be thinking one of the following:

- a) This isn't much!
- b) At last, conventional exercises!
- c) Both of the above.
- d) Don't get sucked in — Ian will have some tricks up his sleeve that are going to blow me away.

Yes, "d" is the right answer! The workout appears to consist of, well, very little — just two exercises! And the exercises are basic, boring, conventional, garden variety, backbone of the iron game. But the results won't be small or conventional.

Used wisely, this next workout will take you to places of strength and size that you haven't been before! Remember, as always, apply my progressive intensity method. For example, use a manageable load for the first week (not going to failure), push it up a bit for the second week (but still ideally avoiding failure), and for the third week, go for it!

In Workout A, bench presses are to be alternated with biceps curls, using an EZ bar on a 45-degree preacher bench. Take two or three minutes between each set, whether you're doing the benches or the curls. The speed of movement for both exercises is 211.

Warm-up: Perform 10 minutes of light aerobics (optional) and 15 minutes of upper body stretching (compulsory). Refer to **The Lazy Man's Guide to Stretching** or my flexibility video series.

Bench presses: Take a medium grip on the bench press. For most of you, this will be with the little fingers just inside the lines on the Olympic bar. Lower the bar down to the lower portion of the chest. This is a strong position, allowing a greater arc in the bar movement and greater lat involvement. Your feet are to be on the ground.

I want you to use a *maximum arch*. The extent of the arch will depend on your skills in this technique and your lower back health. The greater the arch, potentially the heavier the loads you can lift, but also the greater the potential pressure on the lower back (from being in such an arched position). The simple concept of an arch is to bring the hips and shoulders closer together, creating a bow-like effect in the trunk. This reduces the distance of travel for the bar and, again, increases the contribution of the lats.

I talk the trainee through arching for the bench press in my recently released "How to Teach Strength-Training Exercises" video series. I suggested using a medium arch in Phase II, so I'd like to see a greater degree of arching in this phase. You may want to find an experienced powerlifter to give you some tips here.



I want at least three warm-up sets (more if your work sets are going to exceed 120 kg (264 pounds) and/or you have any chest/shoulder injuries or arthritis). Following the warm-up load selection guidelines as described in my "How to Write Strength-Training Programs" book, an approach involving three warm-ups requires using approximately 30%, 60% and 70%, respectively, of the first work set weight.

However, avoid causing fatigue in the warm-up sets.

For example, if the first work set consisted of 100 kg for six reps, the warm-up sets would be ten reps at 30 kg, eight reps at 60 kg, and six reps at 70 kg. If a fourth warm-up set is to be used, do four reps or less. In the work sets, I want to use a pyramid approach. *As the reps go down, the load comes up:*



- 1x4 at 100 kg
- 1x3 at 105 kg
- 1x3 at 110 kg

If you have an incredibly high recovery ability and can tolerate an elevated volume, or if you want to dump the second exercise and focus exclusively on benching, do a second "wave." The second wave might look something like this (note that each corresponding set is slightly heavier than during the first wave):

- 1x4 at 102.5 kg
- 1x3 at 107.5 kg
- 1x3 at 112.5 kg

Whether you've chosen to do one or two waves, I want you to follow up with an eccentric set. (Keep in mind, though, that you're going to be alternating between bench presses and biceps curls, so for each set of benches you do, follow with a set of curls before coming back to benches.) *Only do the eccentric bench set if you're experienced, injury-free, and have experienced spotters.* If there's any risk of injury, pass on this option.

An eccentric bench involves adding about 10-20% more than your normal 4RM and doing four reps in which the spotters lift the bar for you, then you're responsible for lowering the weight. Of course, their hands stay on the bar at all times. Terminate if you show signs of not being able to control the lowering (e.g. the bar accelerates). Take five seconds to lower the bar in the eccentric sets. Make sure that the spotter's hands stay close (under, but not necessarily touching, the bar).

You want a spotter who won't be distracted from the task. If they look away for as much as a split second, it could be very bad for you. Basically, you want someone who wouldn't so much as look up if a naked Pamela Anderson Lee walked by! You might even want to ask around the gym and see if there are any eunuchs who'd want to help you out.

You're not only going to need experienced spotters for the eccentric set, but all of the work sets, too. Make sure that you establish a game plan with the spotters before the set; you're in no position to negotiate when lying under the bar with shot triceps. Consider also using the spotter for liftouts and liftbacks from and to the rack. This will reduce the risk of shoulder injury, pre-fatigue, and negative thoughts such as "Oh, no, this is heavy!" as you lift the bar from a mechanically disadvantaged position.

The final set of bench presses is one of my favorites. You want to reduce the load to a weight that allows 10-20 reps. Coming down from doing a lift of 110-120% of your 1RM in the eccentric provides a greater contrast than if you'd come down from your last conventional eccentric/concentric set. The weight that you select will feel incredibly light, and you're going to exploit that temporary physiological and psychological opportunity by doing as many reps as possible (but just short of failure, except in the third week).

Remember, the bench presses are to be alternated with biceps curls using a method of full recovery and alternated sets.

Biceps curls: Take a medium grip on the EZ bar so that your hands are slightly internally rotated. If adjustable, set the preacher bench arm support to about 45 degrees. Position yourself on the preacher bench so that the full length of the upper arm is on the bench, and the armpits touch the padding at the top of the bench. Unless you specifically wish to employ the cheat technique, be mindful that these positions don't change during the lift.

You'll also require a spotter for biceps curls. While you might not need someone with the same degree of experience, you do want someone who'll stay focused, especially during the eccentric set. Now isn't the time to see how far back your arm can bend at the elbow during the



eccentric lowering!



The warm-up, work sets, tempo, and rest period are as per the bench presses. You'd need to have a superior "recovery" system to justify doing two waves (i.e. 4/3/2/4/3/2) on both exercises. For the majority, be happy to do one wave, which gives a total workout volume (not including warm-up sets) of ten work sets — more than enough for me and the majority of people that I've ever trained!

Remember the inverse relationship between volume and intensity — if you want to do more sets, don't lift as heavy. But after all, this is a neural program that's based on load, not volume.

Here's a summary of the first upper body workout outlined in Phase IV:

Bench presses

Position Straight bar, medium grip, low bar line, feet down, maximum arch

Warm-up set 1x10 at 30%, 1x8 at 60%, 1x6 at 70%

Work set 1x4, 1x3, 1x2 (biceps curls in between)

Optional Second wave of 1x4, 1x3, 1x2

Eccentric loading 1x4
set

High-rep set 1x10-20

Tempo 211

Rest 2-3 minutes between work sets of each exercise, alternating with biceps curls

Biceps curls

Position EZ bar, 45-degree preacher bench, medium grip

Warm-up set 1x4, 1x3, 1x2 (bench presses in between)

Work set 1x4, 1x3, 1x2 (biceps curls in between)

Optional Second wave of 1x4, 1x3, 1x2

Eccentric loading 1x4
set

High-rep set 1x10-20

Tempo 211

Rest 2-3 minutes between work sets of each exercise, alternating with bench presses

Phase IV (Weeks 10-12)

Workout B

Warm-up: Perform 10 minutes of light aerobics (optional) and 15 minutes of upper body stretching (compulsory). Refer to **The Lazy Man's Guide to Stretching** or my flexibility video series.

Chin-ups: The technique is the same as I described in an earlier workout. Take a shoulder-width grip with the palms facing away from you. Allow the feet to come off the ground slowly, without inducing any body sway. Cross the feet at the ankles and tuck them up behind you. Pull straight up and finish the pull with the chin *over* the hand grip level. Don't do another rep if you can't meet this pulling range.

I like to use the lat pulldown machine for warm-ups, using the same grip. As before, your warm-up loads are selected as a percentage of your first work set weight. In other words, if you're planning to do your bodyweight only in the first work set, and you weigh 100 kg, you'd look for warm-up sets of ten at 30 kg, eight at 60 kg, and six at 70 kg.

Again, if you feel that you need to do more warm-up sets, certainly do so. Just don't wear yourself out before you get to the work sets. If you intend to add external load to your bodyweight (and I hope that you do), take this into account. The higher the loading of the first work set, the more warm-up sets I'd use. If your first work set weight was going to exceed 20 kg of external resistance, I'd do a fourth warm-up set. The first three could be done on the lat pulldown bar, while the fourth might consist of a low number (two to four) of bodyweight chins.

In the work sets, I want to use the same pyramid approach that we used for the bench presses. *As the reps go down, the load comes up:*

- 1x4 at 100 kg
- 1x3 at 105 kg
- 1x3 at 110 kg

Again, if you have an incredibly high recovery ability and can tolerate an elevated volume, or if you want to dump the second exercise and focus exclusively on chin-ups, do a second "wave." The second wave might look something like this (note that each corresponding set is slightly heavier than during the first wave):

- 1x4 at 102.5 kg
- 1x3 at 107.5 kg
- 1x3 at 112.5 kg

Whether you've chosen to do one or two waves, I want you to follow up with an eccentric set. The eccentric chin is less risky than the bench press in terms of being "squashed," but the supra-maximal loading still presents risks, especially to the shoulder joint, biceps, and forearm muscles and tendons. If in doubt, don't do it.

As for how to get to the top of the chin bar to start the lowering, you have two main options. Either place a bench in front of the chin bar and "jump" up into position (but minimize body sway, if possible), or have a spotter *lift* you up by pushing up from around the waist.

The eccentric chin involves adding about 10-20% more than your normal 4RM and doing four reps in which your spotters lift you into position, then you lower yourself to the

prescribed tempo. Remember to include the external resistance that you used in the earlier work sets when calculating the correct poundage for the eccentric set.

If your grip isn't very strong, go ahead and use wrist wraps. I feel that the negatives associated with their use are less of an issue with these weighted, eccentric reps than they are in conventional concentric/eccentric reps.

The final set of chins is something that I can again get very excited about, or maybe I'm still thinking of that naked Pam Anderson. Regardless, I'm talking about a set of 10-20 reps. Now, I'm not going to mislead you by telling you to expect coming closer to 20 reps on this set while using just your bodyweight. Still, be happy with anything over eight! But anything less than eight means that you should probably be using an appropriate weight on the lat pulldown.

You can, if you wish, use wrist straps on this "back off" set, but it depends on what's more important to you on any given day — greater overload on the lats or the forearms!

Don't rush to go to failure on any work set unless you're in the third week of this fourth phase. And remember, chin-ups are to be alternated with the second exercise using a method of full recovery and alternated sets.

Close-grip bench presses or medium-grip shoulder presses: I'm going to give you a choice here. Choose either shoulder-width close-grip bench presses or medium-grip shoulder presses behind the neck. It really depends on which muscle group you want to prioritize. If you choose bench presses, you won't be doing (specific) shoulder work for three weeks. If you choose shoulder presses, you won't be doing (specific) triceps work for three weeks. Don't panic either way — both muscle groups will still get some work. And, the next time you're faced with this choice, you can balance it out by going the other way!

The warm-up, work sets, tempo, and rest periods are as per the chin-ups. If you're doing close-grip bench presses (shoulder-width grip), you'll need an excellent spotter for the eccentric set. If you're doing shoulder presses, you'll need healthy shoulders, good control and, again, experienced spotters in the eccentric set. I really want to stress the point that you need experienced spotters in an eccentric bench press, close-grip or otherwise! If in doubt, don't do it!

I can't see too many of you doing a second wave of the chin work sets, and I see that even fewer would benefit from doing two waves on *both*. Remember, this second exercise is to be alternated with the chin-ups above, allowing for full recovery in between sets.

Here's a summary of the second upper body workout outlined in Phase IV:

Chin-ups

PositionPronated, palms facing away, medium grip

Warm-up set1x10 at 30%, 1x8 at 60%, 1x6 at 70%

Work set1x4, 1x3, 1x2 (second exercise in between)

Optional Second wave of 1x4, 1x3, 1x2

Eccentric 1x4
loading set

High-rep set 1x10-20

Tempo 211

Rest 2-3 minutes between work sets of each exercise, alternating with second exercise

Close-grip bench presses or medium-grip shoulder presses

Position Bench presses: Shoulder-width grip, feet down, medium arch
Shoulder presses: Medium grip, behind the neck, seated

Warm-up set 1x10 at 30%, 1x8 at 60%, 1x6 at 70%

Work set 1x4, 1x3, 1x2 (chin-ups in between)

Eccentric 1x4
loading set

High-rep set 1x10-20

Tempo 211

Rest 2-3 minutes between work sets of each exercise, alternating with chin-ups

In Conclusion

That's it! I'd like to think that you've all improved in some way at the end of the program, and I'm not just talking about having gotten bigger or stronger. I hope that you'll be more knowledgeable as a result of working through this routine and more disciplined from doing a laid-out, four-phase program. I also hope that you'll have reached a certain, novel groove in your training, and that you'll have had the benefit of trying something different than what you would've normally been doing.

And finally, I want to stress what I've said from the start. No program is "totally balanced" — every program has its pros and cons. I really believe that this is a strong rationale for setting off on a different training path on a regular basis (i.e. every 12 weeks). This will avoid amplification of any of the downsides that are typically associated with doing one training program for too long.

So, I hope that you got *heaps* out of this program. Just don't get too enthused and resolve to do this training program all year round. In fact, I recommend that you only do it once a year. Don't worry, though...I have plenty of other stuff to keep you entertained.