



Everybody Wants to Increase Their Bench Press

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As a performance coach I will tell you that increasing your bench press is not that important for improving athletic performance or fitness. In fact, I actually rank the push-up higher in importance than the bench press for performance enhancement. On the other hand, the bench press is a highly effective exercise for anybody interested in increasing upper body size because it activates a large amount of muscle mass.

Furthermore, the bench press is a favorite exercise of numerous athletes and fitness minded people. Many people I have worked with want to increase their bench press weight and have set specific goals for that exercise. I will also admit that the bench press is a favorite exercise of mine as well.

As popular as the bench press is, many people do not understand all the different factors that will increase their performance in this exercise and help them remain healthy in the process. I will present some of the things I have learned on bench press technique and ideas for training.

The Set-Up: Most people think setting up for the bench press is as simple as lying down on the bench in a comfortable position while gripping the bar. Actually, a proper bench press set-up is not comfortable at all. The feet should be firmly planted into the ground while creating a great amount of tension in the legs. The chest should be out with the scapulae retracted as hard as possible. Finally, the grip should be slightly wider than shoulder width. This position will create three main contact points: feet, hips and upper back. This creates a stable and efficient position to press from while reducing stress on the shoulder joint.

Execution: The bar should be lowered under control to the middle to lower part of the chest. This is primarily controlled by the lats and upper back musculature. After descending into the bottom position, ideally the bar is driven up in a mostly straight line with minimal movement back towards the head. While driving the bar up, the triceps should be strongly activated by gripping the bar and trying to pull it apart.

Training: Performance in the bench press is limited by weak links. The chest may be plenty strong but the triceps, lats or other smaller stabilizing muscles of the shoulder joint may be holding progress back. For example, the prime movers may be strong enough to bench a certain weight but may shut down if the external rotators of the shoulder are exposed to a high level of tension. Most people interested in increasing their bench press need to get significantly stronger in their triceps and upper back musculature. Chest or pectoralis strength is almost never the limiting factor. A strong upper back will allow for a stable base and a tightly controlled bar path. Strong triceps will allow the lifter to keep the elbows at the optimal 45 degree angle, contributing greatly to locking out and pushing through sticking points. In addition, smaller stabilizing muscles of the shoulder need to be trained for greater stability of the shoulder joint.

Without getting into specific program details, here are a few main points or guidelines to keep in mind:

- Set-up in the proper position as described above.
- Keep the bar path in a fairly straight line while lowering with the lats and upper back. Keep the elbows at approximately 45 degrees to the body while generating heavy recruitment of the triceps.
- In order to increase the bench press, significant training must be dedicated to the lats, upper back, triceps and smaller stabilizing muscles of the shoulder.
- Bodyweight is extremely important for bench press performance. The bench press is affected by change in bodyweight more than any other major lift. In other words, if you suddenly lose 5 pounds your bench press performance will likely be significantly worse.