

# The BENCH

## Let "Anything Goes" Go Right Out the Window: Proper Bench Pressing Technique for Powerlifting as told to PL USA by Mark A. Holowchak, M.A.

In most powerlifting circles, there is one common technical belief: lifters cling to stubbornly, unremittably, and wrongly concerning the execution of the powerlifts. This is the belief that the structural uniqueness of each individual makes it difficult to apply a standard lifting technique to everyone.

With respect to bench pressing, the structural-uniqueness hypothesis may be loosely translated as follows: There is no one technique that all successful bench pressers use. Strictly speaking, this is true. No one best bench-press technique exists which is applicable across-the-board and without exception. Yet, does this mean that there is no one best bench-pressing technique applicable to the *overwhelming majority* of benchers irrespective of structural uniqueness? In short, if each lifter is structurally unique, does it follow that, technically speaking, anything goes? Everything, it seems, hinges upon what is meant by "structural uniqueness."

If by "structural uniqueness" we mean that each lifter differs wildly and unpredictably with respect to body structure (muscle type, tendon/ligament insertion, bone length and thickness, etc.), then, of course, anything does go. Yet, "structural uniqueness" does not mean that in the main, the structural differences, from one person to the next, that concern how one should approach the bench technically are negligible. The structural similarities that almost all of us share give me good reason to say that, unless you are a freak of nature (or some injury prohibits you), one should perform the bench press in the manner described below!

In what follows, I detail a technique that I believe will work for the great majority of benchers. I also list the technical rules that you should follow in performing the lift.

**Proper Bench-Pressing Technique: The Ready Position.** After plentifully chalking your hands and the top of your back (to assure that your grip does not slip and your shoulders do not slide on the bench during the lift), situate yourself on the bench in such a manner that your feet are squarely and flatly on the ground, your shoulders are firmly on the bench (each shoulder overhanging the sides of the bench by an equal amount), and your body sufficiently down the bench, just enough to prevent any possibility of the way up. Your weight should be both on your shoulders and feet (on the whole of each foot and not on one part) and your buttocks should only be lightly touching the bench. This allows for maximum arch of the back, thereby making the chest

hangs the bench by an equal amount (this can be roughly done by simulating a press with no bar and gauging the feel of the shoulders on the bench), grasp the uprights of the bench and push yourself down the bench, toward your feet, which remain squarely planted on the ground. With your feet planted and your back firmly in position (lower back arched and upper back tocks should lightly touch the bench). Your hands should be evenly chalked and widely spaced on the bar. You are now in the ready position and prepared to receive the handoff (Figure 1).

**The Descent.** Just prior to the lift-off, take in a huge breath of air, as much as you possibly can. This, too, enlarges the chest cavity for improved leverage. (The one doing the lift-off should lift no more than 50 to 100 pounds of weight from the racks. Maybe a bit more for pressers attempting more than one quarter of a ton. Concentrate mostly on guiding the bar to your perpendicular or lockout position.) Upon receiving the lift-off, I recommend that you breathe out while steady-ing the bar in preparation for the descent. Just before the descent, take in another huge breath of air. Using a wide grip (one where the angle of the upper arm to lower arm when the bar is at the chest is at least 90 degrees), begin the movement with your arms, at lockout, exactly perpendicular to the body (Figure 2). Maintaining the arch with the strictest consistency (with your weight primarily on his feet and shoulders with buttocks only lightly touching the bench) slowly descend the bar, by a path that describes one-half of a hyperbola (Figure 3) to a spot on the chest that allows for maximum pectoral usage and drive. This is generally slightly above the nipples for most lifters, but may vary ever so slightly from lifter to lifter. A slow descent is essential for two reasons. First, at quick descent occurs when the muscles lowering the weight are relaxed significantly. Gravity becomes the prime mover and the stress on the tendons and ligaments upon catching the weight at the bottom is prodigious! Injuries are much more likely. Second, a slow descent allows for perfect control of bar placement on the chest, which is necessary for the strongest surge possible.

**At the Chest.** At this bottom position, the arms should be at slightly less than a 90 degree angle to the body, at about 75 degrees (Figure 4). Also, the bar should be at or slightly above the nipples. A spot lower than this may involve the pecs more, but at the expense of



Figure 3: bringing the bar to the drive position (Holowchak photos)

being unable to lock the lift out because the leverage of the arms is lost. A higher spot uses the leverage of the arms most efficiently, but takes the all important and larger pieces out of play. In short, any significant deviation from your "sweet spot" on the chest will result in poorer leverage and greatly reduce the blast you get at the bottom, thereby reducing the probability of a successful lift. On hitting the "sweet spot," still the bar as quickly as possible so that there is no upward delay of the "press" signal.

**The Blast Off.** Upon receiving the signal, drive the bar upward with as much force as you can muster throughout with as much force as possible until completion.

cally, it is the most efficient grip. 2. **Maximize the arch of your back** as much as possible and maintain this arch throughout the whole lift. This improves leverage by, in effect, making the chest larger and, again, lessening the distance the bar has to travel. 3. **Work with the one who lifts you off** for a smooth transaction. 4. **Take in as much air as possible** before descending with the bar. This, too, enlarges the leverage. 5. **Utilize a slow, controlled descent.** With a quick descent, you lose control, and the likelihood of hitting the sweet spot is reduced.



Figure 4: shows the appropriate arm alignment at the bottom.

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