

VARIATIONS OF THE BENCH PRESS PT. 1

as told to Powerlifting USA by Doug Daniels

Hands down the bench press is the most popular weight exercise in existence. Walk into any gym at any time—night or day—and you'll see more members benching than any other weight exercise. The bench is also the lift that most competitive and even non-competitive lifters would like to excel at. Many lifters add assistance exercises to their routines in hopes that these exercises will provide different stimulus to the muscles involved resulting in a bigger bench. I am a strong proponent in the axiom that "if you want to be good at an activity, then practice or work at doing that activity." The unfortunate thing is, the less alike the assistance exercise is to the targeted one, the less the positive transfer of strength gained from the assistance exercise. By positive transfer I mean strength gains in an assistance exercise add up to strength gains in the targeted powerlift.

I agree that properly including assistance exercises in your routines can benefit your lifting results. The challenge is to choose exercises that provide the highest positive transfer of strength I mentioned earlier. The best way to accomplish that is to choose exercises that are the most similar to the bench yet still can provide different stimulus to that musculature. The slick thing about this is that this can be achieved by using variations of the good old bench press itself. In addition, these variations can also yield superior results without the need for additional equipment and just require a normal flat bench and a power bar. These variations are the result of merely changing your grip width on the bar, elbow position, bar path, range of movement or any combination of these. This month's article will concentrate on bar path and range of movement.

For the purpose of this article I define bar path as where the bar hits the chest. During a normal bench, the bar would hit the chest near the nipple area, which is generally the position of best leverage and power. By varying where the bar hits the chest, a lifter can stress different parts of the pectorals. To work the upper pec, most lifters rely on the incline bench press. Though an effective choice, superior results can be had by lowering the bar higher on the chest, near the shoulders, during a regular bench press. One warning is to not go too high on the chest. Some lifters lower the bar to the neck which, of course, could be dangerous if they lose the lift. Always use a spotter while benching as a normal course of business, this includes all these variations. The opposite effect is gained when hitting the bar lower on the chest, more towards the waist. This variation would impact the lower pecs, like declines, but

without the need for a decline bench. Do not go too high or low on the chest or heavy too quickly, work into the weight gradually. I would suggest using a weight that is 75-percent of your normal rep weight and work up from there. Also there may be some initial soreness due to the different stimulus on the pecs.

Range of movement options is the last variation of the bench. This simply means limiting the range of movement to less than a full bench press. Pressing from the chest to $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way up maintains tension on the pecs and builds power off the chest. Pressing from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way down to lockout switches the stress to the triceps. The final variation is pressing in the mid-range of the movement. That spreads the load equally to all the muscle groups involved while providing continuous tension. I strongly suggest lifting the weight the same distance each time. If you lessen or increase the distance you move the bar, you will not be able to judge or measure your actual strength level as well as you could by doing a complete to-the-rules lift. A trick we used for the chest to part-way-up press was to have a training partner place and hold his hand at the desired point above the lifter's chest. The lifter then would push the bar up to touch his hand. That way the range of movement was somewhat consistent over the set.

It may be obvious that you can combine these two variations together and develop a bench workout that can fit whatever needs you may have. For example, a lifter who needs more pec work could include low on the chest presses while pressing the bar from the chest to $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way up. This can also be done by benching high on the chest. I suggest adding 3-5 sets of these after your regular workout or in place of the normal bench on your second bench day of the week.

The standard bench press is still your best bet for increased power in the lift itself. But by simply varying bar path or range of movement, the standard bench press can be tailored to fit your individual needs. These bench variations can easily be incorporated into your routine and they require no additional equipment or space. I must mention another benefit; that was increased variety of assistance exercises. Since all these variations are still considered bench presses, the positive strength transfer to your competition bench will be high. Be careful not to go overboard and do too many extra sets. Next time I will explain a few more variations of the bench press that do not require any additional equipment then a bench and a weight set. Plus I will provide ways to combine any of all of the variations in your routine. «

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