

There can never be too many articles in weight training magazines on the bench press. It has got to be the most popular lift or exercise of them all. A big bench and the tangibles as well as the intangibles that go with it are a top goal of just about every weight trainer, be he/she a competitive bodybuilder, powerlifter, or a lift for fun person. The best way to become better at the bench is to bench, however, well chosen assistance exercises can greatly increase your results. There are countless exercises that can be considered assistance moves for the bench. Many are very effective; many are not. What I would like to do is to evaluate and recommend a few of the most popular exercises and give you extra clues on their usage. So let us begin.

Perhaps the most popular exercise is the close grip bench press. They are a favorite of my friend and partner Jim Vrabel (485 at 181). Here we take a narrower than usual grip in order to minimize the use of the pectorals and maximize the use of the triceps. The actual grip used by some lifters may not be optimal. Many use a very close grip of less than 12 inches, some bench with their hands touching. There are two big disadvantages to using such a close grip. First, it may cause pain in the wrists which is not desirable and may lead to injury. Second, the closeness will limit the weight you can use for the move, further decreasing potential gains. The wrist strain may also limit the weight you can use. What grip is the best? I believe that a grip about shoulder width, within a few inches, is the best. This relatively close grip will minimize pec involvement to a high degree as well as cut out the wrist strain and pain. I say minimize pec involvement because there is really no way to totally take the pecs out of this move. Another trick is to hit your chest a little lower than you usually do in the regular bench.

Another good, but not too often used exercise are reverse grip benches. I think the Barbarians of bodybuilding fame popularized this one. Mega bencher Rick Weil (556 at 181) also used them. It seems to take the pecs largely out of the press and stress the tri's a little differently than other moves. This movement can be a little tricky and dangerous. Your grip width should

be the same as your regular bench grip. For max safety, always use a spotter as it can be hard to take the bar out of the rack and get it set to start the set. Get your shoulders right between the rack for the move and hand-off. Press the bar straight up as any tilting can cause you to drop the bar on yourself. Use wrist wraps if there is any wrist strain. Start with a very low weight until you get used to the weird feel of this press. Move the weight up gradually. Once you get the feel of the exercise, pile on the weight, always keeping in mind the safety precau-

tions. This exercise can be very result producing. After Weil advised Billy Nichols to include this one in his routine, his bench shot up out of the doldrums. Use either this one or regular close grip benches for tricep overload.

Varying your grip width out further than normal has the opposite effect of close grips. That is, it lessens the use of the triceps and increases use of the pecs. Even taking your grip out an extra inch can really hit those pecs hard. If you are using a relatively narrow grip for your competition bench and wish to

take your grip out over the long run, try these. By using a narrow grip bench for a long period of time, your pecs might not have been strengthened enough to allow you to go out wider and bench more cold turkey. Slowly work into a wider grip. If you already are out to the 81 centimeter limit, the additional work your pecs will get from wider benches could add up to a bigger bench and better drive off the chest. You may, for further variety, try wider benches without locking, say keeping the movement to the bottom 2/3's of the range. This will maintain tension on the pecs. By hitting the chest with the bar at different spots on the chest, you can emphasize upper, mid, and lower pecs. Hitting high near the neck will really get the upper pecs. Keep the elbows out at right angles to the chest for more pec involvement.

Many of the top benchers stress the contribution of the delts in the bench. Ted Arcidi was famous for his big behind the neck presses. Rick Weil stressed to me how important delts were to the bench. Chris Confessore, who has all-time best at 181 with 562 and has benched 590 at 198, has built his delts to an extreme level of strength and size. He has done sets of 275 for 5 reps and as high as 315 for 3, all at way under 200 pounds of bodyweight. The only drawback on these is that you may need a larger shirt size soon. Front or behind the neck, you may ask? It really doesn't matter. Whatever is comfortable and remember to maintain a full range of motion.

Now for a review. For working your triceps, try either close grips or reverse grips. You may want to alternate between the two, but there is no need to use both at once. The wide grip benches to different points of the chest, either lock or non-lock, are best suited for off season training before you start your specific contest training cycle 8-12 weeks prior a meet. They also can be used as a finisher after your regular benches, if you choose. Presses can be used year round. You also might want to consider dumbbell presses as an occasional substitute. Sets and reps are up to you on all these exercises. Just keep in mind not to overdo assistance work. There is a fine line between hard training and overtraining.

THE BENCH

Assistance Exercises as told to PL USA by DOUG DANIELS



The Barbarian Brothers, David and Peter Paul, did heavy duty assistance training.