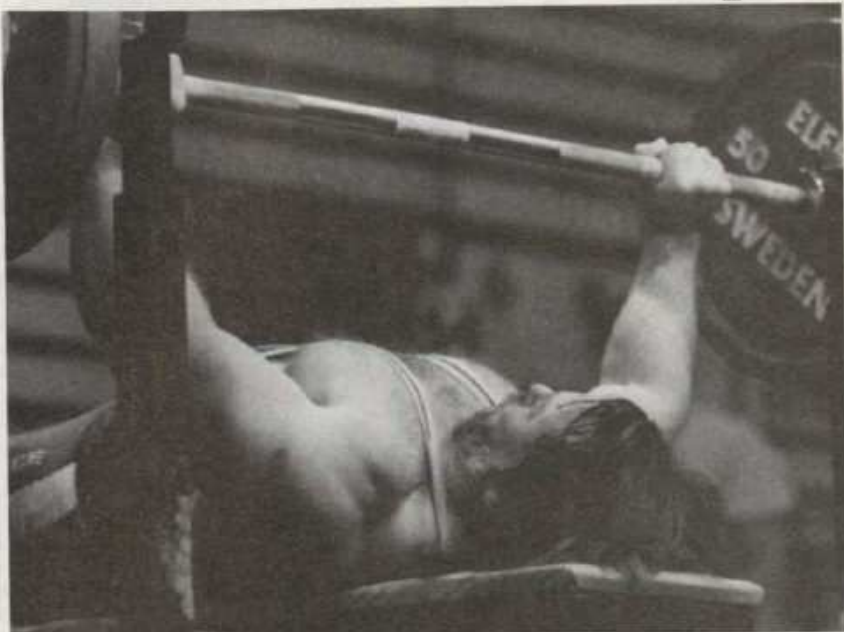


STARTIN' OUT

A special section
dedicated to the
beginning lifter

Widen Your Grip



Everybody Wants A Big Bench and widening your grip may help you add some pounds.

By far the most popular of the 3 powerlifts is the bench press. Go to any gym during peak hours and you may have trouble getting a bench to work on right away. Even readers not interested in competition have a big bench near or at the top of their lifting goal list. In my opinion, however, many newer lifters are limiting their progress in the bench by restricting their grip width to somewhere around shoulder width. Many times the reason for using a narrow grip is poor coaching or the lack of any coaching, and some lifters started using a close grip because their first barbell set came with instructions for the basic exercises that told them to bench with a shoulder width grip. In time, this grip may well have produced results and the lifter grew comfortable with it and saw no need to change. However, there may come a time when progress in the lift abruptly halts and the lifter looks to a new routine or supplement, when a practical solution may be a technique change revolving around grip width.

With a narrow grip, the lifter is not using the full potential of his chest musculature. He is relying on the much smaller and weaker triceps to do most of the work, not to mention having to push the bar farther to lockout. I use the word potential, because if the lifter

doesn't approach widening his grip strategically, their bench will actually drop. Generally the wider the grip, the more involvement of the chest. If a lifter has trained for an extended length of time with a shoulder width grip, he has not placed enough demand on his pecs to develop them to an adequate strength level. If the lifter tries to widen his grip immediately, the relatively weak pecs would not be up to task and his bench would drop. When talking bench pressing with Rick Weil and Chris Confessore, they admitted using a narrower grip early in their careers, but moved out and benched themselves into triple bodyweight immortality. They went away from relying on their tricep power and made use of more of their overall upper body strength.

The best way to strengthen the pecs is to slowly increase your bench grip over time. Even a small change in width, say 1 inch farther out on each side, would alter the involvement of the pecs and change the mechanics of the lift. Don't expect to take your grip out from shoulder width, straddling the inner knurling of the bar, to the 81 centimeter or 32 inch competition limit and add 30 percent to your bench. Injury prevention is another reason not to go out too wide too quickly. Your shoulders and chest should be slowly introduced to this different stress.

Let's look at how a lifter with a meet 12 weeks away might want to work on widening his grip. On week 1 to 3, take your grip out 1 inch more than normal on each side. You may

not be able to get the same number of reps you would normally get with your usual grip because of the reasons I explained earlier, but stick with it. If you get 80 percent of your reps on weeks 1 and 3, take your grip out 1 more inch for weeks 4-6. 2 inches may not sound like much, but remember it's actually 4 inches, as you went out 2 inches each way.

Now it's time for evaluation. If you're at or close to your usual strength level with an increased grip width, stay there for a few more weeks. If you're lower, take it back in 1 inch for 2 more weeks. If you're still down, go back to normal grip. You still should be stronger with your old grip than before because of stronger pecs. If your weight continues to go up or at least stays the same as the contest nears, stay wide, but if you can bench more narrow style at the meet, go narrower. Don't go wider and bench less, just because that Daniels guy said you're supposed to. If you get your grip out even 1 inch in that 12 weeks, you can consider this venture a success. Be careful not to go out too far, as the wider you go, the more stress on your shoulders, etc. Obviously a five foot tall lifter would be extremely hard pressed to go the 32 inch limit. Size is a factor. On the next cycle, try to go out another inch or so if there's room. Just remember to do it slowly.

Some of you out there may be on the big side and can't go any wider than the legal width in competition, but training with a wider grip can still strengthen the chest which can add

up to a bigger bench with your max legal width grip. Some lifters are meant to be close grip benchers, but I think they're a minority. Even those lifters can benefit from a few weeks of benching with a wider than normal grip. A more powerful chest is a plus no matter what grip width or style you use and a wide grip is a superior means to develop it.

Using a slightly wider grip will still give your triceps a good workout and little, if any, tricep strength will be lost. If need be, you can throw in a few sets of 'close grips' after your benches. Close grips, of about shoulder grip width, seem to be the exercise of preference for many big benchers for hitting those all important triceps. Even if you have no intention or desire to widen your grip, a few sets of wider grip benches early in your training cycle, will inject variety and, hopefully, new gains in your bench. Above all, remain open to new training methods, but don't drop everything each time you read something new. Evaluate suggestions for merit and give new ideas a try. Your off season is the best time to try new things, but come meet time, use the method that will yield the best results.

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