

As you may know, I am a firm believer in moderate percent-training with weights between 70 and 85% for explosive strength. Because of this, I am always searching for methods to develop the eccentric (lowering) portion of the bench press and squat. Through research, I discovered eccentric work is important to mastering absolute strength. I also observed that most injuries occur while lowering the weight. It became apparent that more muscle contraction occurs eccentrically than concentrically. So, how can you build the lowering portion of the lift?

Years ago I did what are commonly known as negatives. One simply lowers a heavier weight -- in control -- than can be pressed back up. I found that negatives were not very useful for developing strength. The reason is that once the eccentric contraction is performed, no concentric work or, for that matter, static work is done. The lifter merely surrenders to the weight, which is then lifted off by spotters. This does not resemble an actual bench press at all.

A more effective method I have used over the years was to lower about 110% of my best lift, then strip off 30%, and press up 80%. This worked well, although it was somewhat awkward. The weight was lowered to rack pins set at chest level. It required three spotters--two

THE BENCH

ECCENTRIC STRENGTH FOR THE BENCH PRESS

by Louie Simmons, Westside Barbell Club

to strip the weights and one to steady the bar from behind. It was almost more trouble than it was worth.

Recently, I received a phone call from Bob Kowalczyk. He told me about a weight-releasing device he had patented that would revolutionize strength for the bench press. Well, when new equipment comes out, I am one of the first to try it. I have bought cambered bars, a magic squat bar, an isokinetic machine, a Bullworker, and even a Slim Gym; so, I bought a pair of weight releases. They are, no doubt, the best apparatus I have used for the bench press. Weight is loaded onto the releases, which hook onto the bar. They allow you to lower a heavy weight, and the instant the bar touches your chest, the additional weight loaded on the releases disengages from the bar. You then press up only the weight you have on the bar.

I tested the weight releases on three groups of lifters using three different methods. The first group did 75% for 8 sets of 3 reps with an additional 5% on the eccentric portion of the first rep. This method is closest to our usual percent-training workout. This worked well, but increased muscle fatigue was a problem. Using 75% of my best (400) for 8 sets of 3 reps equals 9600 lbs. This total tonnage is in the correct range for building strength. However, the extra 5% increased the total tonnage beyond the optimal range.

The second group lowered 110% and pressed up 90% for a single rep. This also seemed to exhaust the group, although they also increased their strength.

The third group lowered 110%, but pressed-up only 60% for a single rep. This group made the most progress; however, as in the other groups, it was still easy to overdo it.

My normal bench press tonnage is 9600 lbs in one workout using a particular percentage. We used the weight releases only on our assistance bench day. The typical workout load with this method is 4100 lbs, about 50% of my total tonnage. This tonnage is more reasonable for strength gains without over-training.

Pressing up 60% really builds explosive strength, an important aspect if your goal is a big bench press. Both eccentric and concentric movements are developed with this method.

I must include a word of caution. With the advent of the bench shirt, the supporting muscles are apparently weak on many lifters. Beware of overdoing it. Start out easy at first. The apparatus feels so good, you may not want to stop. I suggest one normal workout a week and one with the releases.

The three groups were comprised of mixed classifications: seven elites, three masters, and six class I or class II lifters. In a period of only six weeks, almost all made personal records.

(Editor's Note: the Weight Releases developed by Bob Kowalczyk are, we understand from Louie Simmons, in the process of being marketed through a major fitness industry supplier. Keep an eye out for them in the future).



Top Bench Pressers... like Joe Catalfamo (above) are always looking for a new training angle - Eccentric Training might just be the ticket!