

Every time I go to the gym I see lifters benching. What is frustrating is that most use a common technique that actually holds back their progress. That technique is employing too narrow width of a grip for their bench press. The most common grip is somewhere around shoulder width, which in my opinion is too narrow. Often the reason for utilizing such a narrow grip is lack of proper coaching and knowledge. Many lifters started using such a grip because their first barbell set came with instructions of basic exercises that told them to bench with a "shoulder width grip" and they never thought any further about the issue. Over time, the lifter progressed and grew comfortable with the shoulder width grip and saw no need for change. Eventually their bench progress slows or halts suddenly. At that point most benchers look for a new routine or a supplement when the real solution may involve a re-look at their grip width.

Most powerlifting organizations allow a lifter's hands to be up to 81 centimeters apart. This width is usually marked on power bars by a ring on each side of the bar knurling. To maximize his results, a lifter should try to use every bit of that limit he can. How to widen out that grip effectively is the challenge at hand; no pun intended.

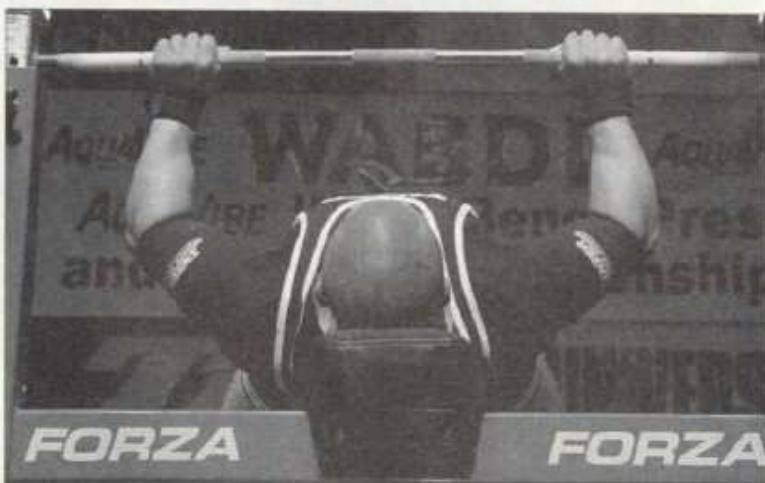
In a nutshell, when a lifter benches with too narrow a width grip, he is not using the full potential of his pec muscles. Instead he relies more on the triceps to press the bar. The word potential is key because if the lifter doesn't approach widening his bench grip with a plan, his bench could actually drop. All things being equal, the wider the grip, the more involvement of the chest or pectorals. If a lifter has trained for an extended length of time with a narrower, shoulder width grip, he has not placed enough demand on his pecs to develop them to the necessary high strength level. Numerous elite benchers I have met over the years have told me they used a narrower grip early in their careers. Later they realized a wider grip was the way to go and they became some of the greatest benchers in history. They no longer primarily relied on their tricep power, instead they were adding pectoral strength to the equation. Actually, there is yet another advantage to using a wider grip that I will explain shortly.

The most effective method to strengthen the pecs is to gradually increase your bench grip width over a period of time. Even a slight change in width, such as one finger's width farther out on each side, alters muscular involvement and chances the expect to immediately take your grip out from shoulder width to the 81

## STARTIN' OUT *A special section dedicated to the beginning lifter*

# RE-LOOK AT BENCH PRESS GRIP WIDTH

as told to Powerlifting USA by Doug Daniels



*A fairly wide grip versus a fairly narrow grip... different muscle groups are involved to different degrees, when the grip is varied this much.*

centimeter competition limit and add 50 pounds to your bench. This quick of a change could also increase your chances of injury as your shoulders, chest, wrists, tendons and ligaments need to be slowly introduced to the different stresses of a wider grip.

Let's use a 12-week off-season training cycle to demonstrate how a lifter could widen his bench grip. On weeks 1-4, widen your grip out 1 finger's width on each side. Initially you may not be able to get the same number of reps you normally get with the grip you are accustomed to because of the reasons I explained earlier, but stick with

starting reps after week 4, widen your grip out an additional finger

on each side for weeks 5 - 8. If after week 8 you don't get 90% of the reps, remain at that width for 1-2 more weeks then widen out the extra finger. Widening out two fingers may not sound like much, but it's actually 4 finger widths as you increased 2 fingers on each side. Depending on your finger width, that can be 2-4 inches. Increase another finger width for the last 4 weeks. Continue the process up to week 12.

Now it's time for evaluate your status. If you're at or close to your usual strength level with an increased grip width, continue to use this wider grip. If your bench is down after your bench width 1 or 2 fingers and start the process again. If you're still down after

another 3-6 weeks, go back to normal grip. You should be stronger than before, using your old grip, because of your stronger pecs. Don't continue to bench wider and lift less just because I said to. If you get your grip out even 1 to 2 fingers in those 12 weeks, consider this effort a huge success. Be careful not to go out too far because the wider you go, the more stress on your shoulders, etc. Obviously, a 5-foot tall lifter would be extremely hard pressed to go to the 81 centimeter-inch limit; for this kind of effort, size does matter. Bigger lifters should try to get wide enough so their index fingers are straddling the knurling to fully stretch the limit.

If you are already using a legal 81 centimeter grip, you cannot legally go any wider in competition, but training with a wider grip can further strengthen the pecs which, in turn, can translate into a bigger bench with the max legal width grip. There may be some lifters who are meant to be close grip benchers, but I think they're in the small minority. Even they can benefit from 12 weeks of benching with a wider than normal grip. More powerful pecs are a plus no matter what width grip or style you chose to bench with. During the last 4-6 weeks prior a meet, bench with your normal grip width. Including one down set with a wide grip during this period can build and maintain pec power.

I wrote earlier of another benefit of using a wider grip. It's simple physics; a wider grip means you need to push the bar up a shorter distance to lockout. All things being equal, the less distance you have to move the weight, the more you can lift even with the same strength level.

Using a wider grip will still give your triceps plenty of work. You can include a few sets of close grips after your benches for additional tricep work. Close grips, shoulder grip width (no narrower), are the exercises of preference for many big benchers for triceps power. Even if you have no intention or desire to widen your grip, a few sets of wider grip benches in your training cycle will add variety and hopefully new pounds on your bench. The off-season is the best time to try widening your grip out, but at the meet, use the method that will yield the best results, under your current circumstances. You can use my example over multiple 12 week periods during your off seasons.

When searching for ways to increase your bench press or any other lift, look beyond a new routine or supplement; examine your technique first. Widening your bench grip for competition or as assistance work may help re-ignite your progress.