

STARTIN' OUT

A special section
dedicated to the
beginning lifter

Bench Grip Width

as told to *Powerlifting USA* by Doug Daniels



PAT CASEY... the first man to bench 600, shows his bench grip width. (Charles)

By far the most popular lift at any gym is the bench press. Even the non-power competitor most likely has a bigger bench as his top lifting goal. However, too many lifters are unknowingly holding their progress back by using too narrow a bench grip width with the most common grip somewhere around shoulder width. Most of the time the reason for using 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 to basic exercises that told them to bench with a "shoulder width grip" and they never looked any farther. With time, even this grip produced results and lifter grew comfortable with it and saw no need to change. But, there eventually comes a time when progress in the bench suddenly halts or slows down. All too often the lifter looks for a new routine or supplement when potentially the solution may be a technique change involving grip width.

Most powerlifting organizations allow the width a lifter's hands to be up to 81 centimeters apart. This is usually indicated on power bars by the two rings on the knurling. A lifter should try to use every bit of that limit he can to maximize his results. How to get there is the challenge.

Simply put, by benching with such a narrow width grip, the lifter is not using the

full potential of his pec muscles, instead relying on the much smaller and weaker triceps to carry the load. I say potential, because if the lifter doesn't approach widening his bench grip correctly, his bench will actually drop. Generally 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 shoulder width grip, he has not placed enough demand on his pecs to develop them to a high strength level. Several elite benchers I have known over the years have told me they used a narrower grip early in their careers. Later they caught on and moved their grip out and became some of the greatest benchers in history. They stopped relying on their tricep power and made use of more of their upper body musculature, with most of the contribution coming from the pectorals. But there is still another advantage to using a wider grip that I will explain shortly.

The best way to strengthen the pecs is to gradually increase your bench grip over a period of time. Even a small change in width, such as one finger's width farther out on each side, could alter the involve-

ment of the pecs and change the mechanics of the lift. Don't expect to immediately take your grip out from shoulder width to the 81 centimeter competition limit and pack 50% on your bench. This would raise your chances of injury as your shoulders, chest, wrists, tendons and ligaments need to be slowly introduced to the different stresses a wider grip will produce.

Let's use a 12-week off-season training cycle to show how a lifter could work on widening his grip. On week 1-3, take your grip out 1 finger's width worth 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 at least 90% of your reps on weeks 1-3, take your grip out an additional finger's width for weeks 4-6. If not, stay at that width for 1-2 more weeks then move out. Two finger's width may not sound like much, but remember it's actually 4 finger widths as you went out 2 fingers on each side. Depending on your finger width, that can be 2-4 inches. Increase another finger width for the next 3 weeks. Continue up to the

12th week.

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 that grip. If you're lower, take it back in 1 or 2 fingers and start again. If you're still down after another 3-6 weeks, go back to normal grip. You should be stronger using your old grip than before because of stronger pecs. Don't continue to bench wider and lift less just because that Daniels guy said you're supposed to. If you get your grip out even 2 to 3 fingers in those 12 weeks, consider this venture a smashing 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; size does matter in his case. Bigger lifters should try to get wide enough so your index is straddling the knurling to fully stretch the limit.

If you are already using a legal 81 centimeter grip, you cannot go any wider than the legal width in competition, but training with a wider grip can strengthen the pecs which can add up to a bigger bench

with the max legal width grip. Some lifters may be meant to be close grip benchers but I think they're in the small minority. Even those lifters can benefit from a 12 weeks of benching with a wider than normal grip. A more powerful chest is a plus no matter what width grip or style you choose and using a wider grip in training is a great method to develop it. Train the bench with your normal grip width the last 4-6 weeks in preparation for the meet. You can include one down set with a wider grip to build and maintain pec power.

I mentioned earlier that there is another benefit of using a wider grip; you will now have to push the bar up a shorter distance. It's just pure physics and common sense. The less distance you have to press the weight, the more you can lift even with the same amount of strength.

Using a wider grip will work your triceps hard. 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 exercise 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.

When looking for ways to increase your strength, look farther than just a new routine or supplement, look at your technique too. Widening out your bench grip either for competition or as assistance work may help you get past sticking points in your training. If you still have room to go out, resume the same method on your next cycle. Combine more upper body power dedicated to the lift and a reduced distance to press the bar to lockout and you have a lifting scenario that is easy to get a grip on.

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