

Go to any gym during peak hours and you may have trouble getting a bench to work on right away; the bench press is that popular. Most lifters, even non-competitive ones, have a bigger bench near or at the top of their lifting goals and spend a lot of time and effort trying to succeed. However, in my opinion, many lifters are unknowingly holding themselves back by using too narrow a bench grip width, lying 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 a closer grip because their first barbell set came with some instructions to basic exercises that told them to bench with a "shoulder width grip" and they never looked back or any farther. With time, this grip most likely produced results and the lifter grew comfortable with it and saw no need to change. However, there eventually comes a time when progress in the lift abruptly halts or slows down and the lifter usually looks for a new routine or supplement when at least a partial solution may be a technique change revolving around grip width.

With such a narrow grip, the lifter is not using the full potential of his pectoral musculature, but relies on the much smaller and weaker triceps to do most of the work. I say potential, because if the lifter doesn't approach widening his bench grip correctly, their 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 (within a few inches), he has not placed enough demand on his pecs to develop them to a high strength level. In past talks with bench sensations Rick Weil and Chris Confessore, they both conveyed to me they used a narrower grip early in their careers, but moved their grip out later and became two of the greatest benchers in history. They moved away from relying on their tricep power and made use of more of their upper body strength, most of the contribution coming from the pectorals. There is yet another advantage to a wider grip that I will explore later.

STARTIN' OUT

*A special section
dedicated to the
beginning lifter*

Get a Grip on Your Bench

as told to Powerlifting USA by DOUG DANIELS



Gary Frank has the right grip for his bench. Here he opens with 639 at the APF Seniors (Herb)

The best way to strengthen the pecs is to slowly increase your bench grip over a period of time. Even a small change in width, as little as one inch farther out on each side, would substantially alter the involvement of the pecs and change the physics of the lift. Also don't expect to take your grip out from shoulder width to the 81 centimeter, competition limit and immediately add 33% to your bench. Injury prevention is another reason not to go out too wide too quickly. Your shoulders, chest, tendons and ligaments should be slowly introduced to the different stress.

Let's look at how a lifter on a 12-week off-season training cycle might want to work on widening his grip. On week 1-3, take your grip out 1 finger width 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 90% of your reps on weeks 1 and 3, take your grip out an additional finger width for weeks 4-6. If not, stay at that width for 3 more weeks then move out. Two fingers widths may not sound like much, but remember it's actually 4 widths as you went out 2 widths on each side. Depending on your finger width, that can be 2-4 inches. Increase another finger width each of the next 3 weeks or until you register a major decrease in bench power.

Now it's time for evaluation. If you're at or close to your usual strength level with an increased grip width, stay there. If you're lower, take it back in 1 or 2 widths and start again. If you're still down after 3-6 weeks, go back to normal grip. You still should be stronger using your old grip than before because of stronger pecs. 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 to 2 widths

in that 12 weeks, consider this venture a 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 is a factor. On the next cycle, try to go out a bit more if there's room. Just remember to do it slowly.

If you are already using a 81 centimeter grip, you cannot go any wider than the legal width in competition, but training with a wider grip still can strengthen the chest which can add up to a bigger bench with the 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 width grip or style you use and using a wider grip in training is a superior way to develop it. I mentioned earlier that there is another benefit of using a wider grip; that is you will now have less distance to push the bar up. That's just pure physics. The less distance you have to go; the more you can lift even with the same amount of strength.

Your triceps will still get a good workout using a wider grip.

You can include a few sets of close grips after your benches for additional tricep work. Close grips, shoulder grip width, seem to be the exercise of preference for many big benchers for building tricep 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 inject variety and hopefully new gains into your bench. Your off-season is the best time to try to widen your grip out, but come meet time, use the method that will yield the best results. When looking for methods to increase your strength, look farther than just a new routine or supplement, look at your technique. Get a grip on your bench and you may get a grip on some new personal records and make that wait for the bench at the gym more worthwhile.

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