

A few years ago, I wrote an article for *PL USA* entitled "The Bench Press, It's all in the Legs". Well, I've always believed that you're never too old to learn, and last July, 1998 at the USAPL Men's Nationals in Denver, I learned a whole bunch about benching. Now, I consider myself to be a pretty good bencher and in 1996-1997, as a lifetime drug free lifter, I finally made the top ranking in the 165 lb. class in *PL USA*. Some of you may conclude that I know a great deal about benching, but having returned from the IPF Bench Press Worlds in Germany last December, I believe that many of us (myself included) need to devote more time to technique. Most often we see articles on the bench press discussing what assistance exercises to use and the number of sets and reps to be done. My re-evaluation of my bench press technique began when I observed the great Japanese Powerlifter and Bench Presser, Hiro Isagawa, do a triple bodyweight bench press with a single ply polyester shirt and under very strict IPF judging.

I want to discuss 3 different aspects of the bench press including gripping the bar, body posture and the bench shirt itself.

I have always used a relatively wide grip with my bench press, but after watching Isagawa, I decided to move my grip out to the maximum width. I have tried not to alter where the bar contacts my chest or, in my case, my upper abs. Moving your grip out will shorten the distance the bar has to travel and, although I'm not a physicist, I would rather lift 480 lbs. 4 inches instead of 6 inches. Put a light weight on the bar and have a training partner measure the distance the bar travels from lock-out to the contact point on your body. Check this measurement again with the widest possible grip. In most organizations, you can't be wider than the 81 cm mark on the bar. That mark must be covered. Widening your grip may alter the role of certain muscles in your lift, and making those changes will take time. At the IPF Bench Worlds, I noticed that even the women in the 44 and 48 kg. classes were as wide as possible.

Having closely watched the Japanese lifters at the Worlds, I was convinced that I would be able to pass a basketball underneath their backs during their lifts. Their flexibility, from their light lifters to their SHW, was incredible. According to their coach, Susumu Yoshida, they increase their arch by placing progressively thicker objects underneath their back during the bench. Initially, they may not have their buttocks in touch with the bench but, with time, the arch improves and

TRAINING

THE BENCH PRESS - IT'S NOT ALL IN THE LEGS as told by Larry (Dr. Bench Press) Miller



Hiro Isagawa of Japan is a masterful technician on the bench press.

then they adapt the object under their back to increase its diameter and thus increase their arch. I have found that I am unable to wear a belt when I place an object underneath my back. I have found that a good object to start with is called a "noodle", which is used as a flotation device in swimming pools. Angie Overdeer has told me that she is using old knee wraps to increase the diameter of the noodle. As far as where to contact the bar across the chest, you'll see that the Japanese lifters are closer to their abs than to their chest. Again, change the bar position on your chest/abs and again measure the distance the bar travels. Personally, I probably bring the bar about 2-4 inches or so below my nipples during the bench press. Foot position will also play a role in your arch. A few years back I wrote an article indicating that by placing your feet well in front of your body and driving with your legs in this position you would simulate a decline bench press which I feel is a more efficient way to bench. The problem with this was, depending upon the surface of the lifting platform, you could very easily have your feet slip from underneath you. I resolved this problem by changing the soles of my shoes to sand paper. The

sand paper works great on carpet or rubber, but not well on wood, which unfortunately was the platform that I competed on in Germany. Recently at the suggestion of a dentist friend of mine, I went to a scuba store and bought a pair of "Deep Sea" scuba boots. The boots had a special rubber sole that seems to grip well on wood, carpet and rubber. I had a shoe repair store remove the sole on the scuba boot and place it on a pair of wrestling shoes so that my feet would not slide with in the scuba boot. I have also attempted to move my feet back underneath the bench instead of out in front. I place my feet out with a relatively wide stance, but not so wide that I can't feel myself driving with the legs. The ability to learn how to use your legs to drive while benching is not easy and takes a while to perfect. Before working on your arch and changing the position of your feet, I suggest you contact a Physician or Chiropractor to see if your lower back will tolerate the change. I also suggest that you get a number of exercises to stretch your back before and after you bench.

Having recently returned from judging at the Collegiate Nationals in Fort Wayne, Indiana, I was amazed at the number of lifters who

had on poorly fitted bench shirts. I may be exaggerating, but I seem to remember 2 or 3 individuals trying to remove H. Isagawa's bench shirt at the Men's Nationals in Denver. It almost appeared as if they would have to cut it off. Most organizations allow for your bench shirt to come within 1 inch of your elbow. Many lifters at the Collegiate had the shirt fitted to the middle of their biceps. I have always compared the fit of a bench shirt to the fit of a squat suit. I use an Inzer Z suit because it locks into my leg and prevents it from sliding. I want my bench shirt to lock in at my arm just above the elbow. This is what keeps the shirt tight across the chest. This will also help your triceps push against the shirt and the shirt in turn will help support your triceps. For an IPF legal bench shirt there are 2 seams that can be altered. The first seam runs below your underarm from your elbow to your arm pit. One of my training partners, Steve Spinelli, improved his bench about 20 pounds once I had the seam pinched tighter. The second seam that can be changed is the one around the armpit. If you have this seam pinched, have it tightened on the chest side and not the arm side. If you tighten it on the arm side, you will shorten the sleeve.

People are always asking me what type of bench shirt I prefer: Denim, Polyester or Canvas. I prefer a bench shirt that has as little give as possible since that provides a greater force pushing the bar off your chest. Just think of comparing pulling a tight thick rubber band back instead of a thin flexible rubber band. I still prefer the Frantz Denim over all other shirts. I don't like the Canvas because it has too much give that I have observed when I wash it. As far as Polyester shirts, the majority of US lifters use the Inzer shirt, but the majority of Japanese lifters use the Crain shirt. I have found that, for me, the Crain shirt doesn't tend to throw me out of the groove.

I think it is extremely important to use a shirt that doesn't change your technique by throwing you out of your groove. If the shirt causes you to bring the bar an inch too high or too low, you can probably kiss that lift good-bye. Remember, very rarely does brute strength make a champion. Technique plays an important role. The ultimate example is my friend Horace Lane who recently won the IPF Bench Press Worlds in the 275 lb. class. Under the guidance of Master technician C.J. Batten, Horace moved his bench up about 50 pounds mostly due to improvements in technique. Don't forget, you're never too old or too good to learn.