TRAINING

WESTSIDE BENCH PRESS PROGRAM

as told to Powerlifting USA by Louie Simmons

I am frequently asked to write personal workouts for a fee. However, I don't have the time to do this. Westside makes training tapes on all matters of training. Plus, I write articles for *Powerlifting USA* almost monthly. This way we can reach a large audience. Besides not having the time to do personal workouts, if I can't see you in person, I can't tell your weaknesses, which could be a muscle group or bad form.

It takes years to learn the powerlifts. After 13 years of training, I realized I knew very little about it, even after making Top 10 lifts in all categories from 1972 to 2002.

I was eighth in the bench press in 1980 without a bench shirt, so I know how to raise a raw bench. I was sixth in 2002 with a bench shirt, but very weak. Shortly after that, I received a new shoulder socket, bicep surgery, and a second shoulder operation.

I started to understand bench press training in 1993 after 23 years of continuous training. Back then, Westside had three 600 pound benchers, all juniors. Now, after 25 years, I am beginning to understand more fully how to bench. As of 2005, Westside has produced 16 700+ benchers and one 800+ bencher. In addition, 25 650+ benchers, with the lightest being Jason Fry, who did 650 at 180 pounds.

6 Week General Program

The following is a 6 week general program that Westside follows. Incidentally, all the men I write about, train at Westside. Anyone is welcome to visit. Just set up a date, as we are not open to the public.

Speed work, or the dynamic method, will develop a fast rate of force. Maximal strength comes from special exercises. On Saturday, or Sunday, do speed work. After a good warm up, do 9 sets of 3 reps. John Stafford's bench is 733 at 275. his weight on the bar is 205-225. This is 45% of his 1-rep max on floor press. This formula works for everyone. The grips are 3 sets with the index finger touching the smooth part of the bar, 3 sets with the thumbs extending from the edge of the smooth part of the bar, and 3 sets with the little fingers on the power ring. You must use mini-bands or 2 or 3 sets of chains, Westside style.

This simple method will build all major muscle groups. Press the bar in a straight line, not over the face. This is the safest way to bench, and remember, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Lower the bar as fast as possible to create a strong stretch reflex for reversal strength. Your speed with your worst grip should be at least 0.7 meters/second.

After benching, choose a bar triceps exercise -- J.M. Press, straight-bar triceps extensions, or football bar extensions -- 3-6 reps per set, working up as heavy as possible on that particular day. Then choose a second triceps exercise with dumbbells, e.g., extensions with elbows out to the sides or roll-backs with palms facing, working up in weight, or choosing a weight and do multiple sets. Dumbbell reps are in the 6-12 range, 40-70 total reps. The triceps are the prime bench press mover. They must fire first. To do that, they have to be the strongest muscle group. At the first sign of staleness, change the barbell or dumbbell exercise or both, so progress can continue throughout the year.

Next, do lat work. Again, choose one or two exercises: barbell or dumbbell rows, chest supported rows, lat pull-downs, etc. your lats help place the bar on the chest, by helping you to lower the bar. Reps and sets, as for all exercises, are based on your level or preparedness.

Last, work the side and rear delts, upper back, and biceps with hammer curls. Do pre-hab work for pecs and rotators.

On max effort day, work up to a max single. It may not be an all-time record, but it must be a current max doing sets of 2 or 3 reps with weights about 90% is known as the method of heavy efforts. Please remember, the volume is high, but the intensity can be higher. If you train at 85, 90, or 95%, you are really only using 85, 90, or 95% of your muscle potential, not 100%. Your technique must be built by singles.

Limit the top lifts, after a good warm up, to 3. The first weight should be at 90% or so, the second near a record or just above, then possible one more single. For example, for a floor press record of 500 pounds, the first attempt might be 450, the second 490., and the last, 505.

This workout should occur on Wednesday. This allows 10 days off heavy weights before meet time. This also is 72 hours from the last extreme bench workout.

I will now outline a 6 week program. The sequence can change to fit your preference, and you can add or replace the core exercises in this program.

Workout 1: Do floor press with 200 pounds of chain draped over the sleeve. Next, add weight to the bar until a max on that day results. George Halbert' best is 445 with 200 pounds of chain. This is how George works up to his best:

135 plus chains for 5 reps
225 plus chains for 3 reps
275 plus chains for 3 reps
315 plus chains for 1 rep
365 plus chains for 1 rep
405 plus chains for 1 rep

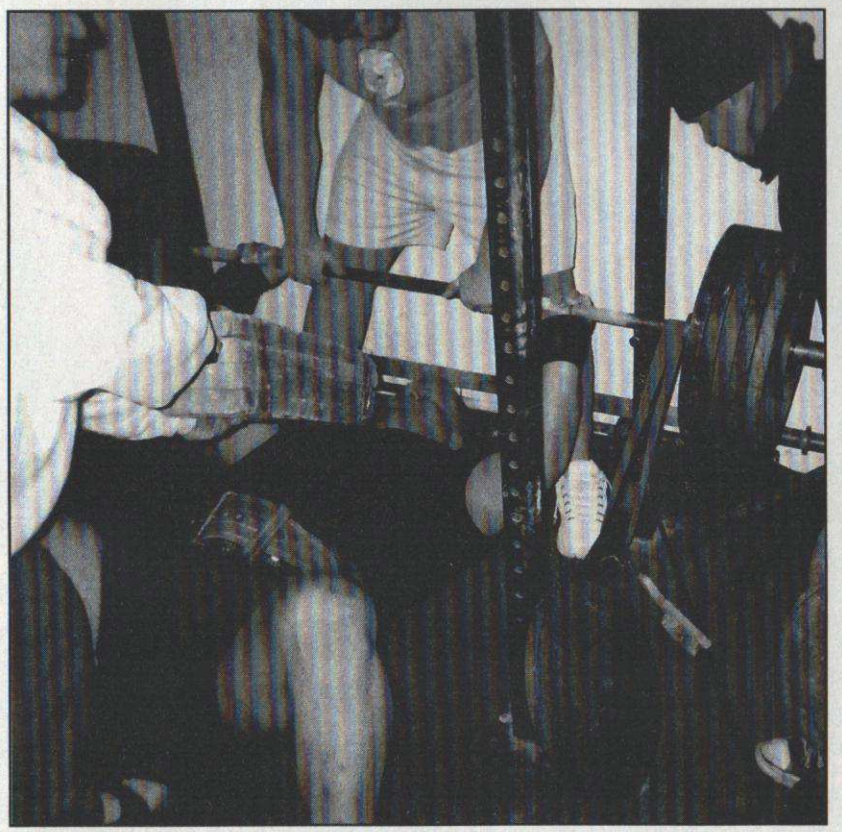
Try a new max or the most on this day. Then, as a speed day, do triceps lats, upper back, and rear and side delts.

A 300-350 pound raw bencher should use 3 sets of chains. A 350-450 pound bencher should use 4 sets of chains, although anyone can use any amount of chain to set a record. If you use two different grips with all three chain weights, you have five workouts to choose from.

Workout 2: Do overhead band presses, or the lightened method, by attaching a Jump-Stretch band at the top of a power rack. You can reduce the weight at your chest by 155 with a strong set of bands. A medium set will reduce the weight at your chest by 95 pounds. A light set will reduce the weight by 65 pounds. After warming up, work up to a max single.

My personal records were 580 with strong bands and 520 with medium bands. This was right on with the 60 pound difference between the band strengths. Amy Weisberger has a 370 bench and mostly uses the medium and light bands.

This is very close to duplicating the value of a bench shirt without using one. Get a PR with a close grip and a wide grip with three different band strengths and two different grips. This represents five completely different workouts.



Inside Westside ... *Amy Weisberger handles the boards as Matt Smith trains the bench press. (this photograph provided by the courtesy of Randy Bumgarner)*

Always follow with triceps, lats, upper back, and read and side delts.

Workout 3: do football bar presses. This bar allows the palms to be facing each other. We work up to a new PR for 3 reps or a 1 rep max. the bar has different width grips to choose from: close, medium and wide. We use it by itself or with mini-bans, light bands, or a set(s) or chains. During the workout, at least two grips are used. This bar works the triceps hard. Then flat, incline, or decline presses are done the J.M. Press is performed at times also duplicating the groove of a bench press shirt. It is very effective, although it hits the triceps very hard. You must again work extensions with dumbbells, with the elbows in or the roll-back variety. Then do lat work. Always rotate exercises that work the same muscle groups, but in a slightly different way. Last, do upper back, rear and side delts, and hammer curls.

Again, look at the possibilities: two different band tensions, three chain weights, and three grips to choose adds up to eight different workout PRs to break.

Workout 4: Do illegally wide benching. Take a grip outside the power ring, wider than allowed at a contest. Work up to a max 6 reps. I got this from Bill Seno, a great bencher and bodybuilder from the 1960s through early 1980s. You can also work up to an 8 rep max and even a 10 rep max. this was Bill's intention for me, but I didn't like 8 or 10 reps. It simply took too much energy. Sorry, Bill. But those wide 6s gave me a top 10 bench in 1980. If you never trained for a raw bench, you would never know how to get one. I'm sure Scott Mendelson will have good tips for a raw bench.

On the day after benching, do dumbbells on an incline or decline for several sets. This is primarily a hypertrophy day. Most dumbbell presses are done with palms facing each other. A few sets can be done with the thumbs facing each other because that simulates taking the bar out of the rack. As always, do triceps first, than lats, upper back, and rear and side delts. Note: We don't work front delts directly too often due to over training. I observed that the guys who do a lot of front delts are not our best benchers. As you can see, max effort day can be replaced with a repetition day to increase muscle mass. No one method will work; you must use all proven methods.

Workout 5: Do band presses by attaching bands to the bottom of your neck. You can build a fast start and a strong lockout. A mini-band attached to the bottom of our power rack (see the Bench Workout DVD) will add 40 pounds at the chest and 85 pounds at the lockout. A monster mini-band will add 50 pounds at the chest and 110 at lockout. A light band doubled up at the bottom will add 100 pounds at the chest and 200 at the top.

Halbert, Wolf, and Winters, guys who bench over 600 raw, use medium and strong bands and even multiple bands. Work up to a single. Full range is mostly used, but sometimes we press off power rack pins or boards. Your band tension may vary, depending on how you hook up the bands. Use two grips: a wide grip and also a close grip. This will result in two PRs. Don't forget to do triceps, lats, and so forth.

Workout 6: Do board presses. I did board presses in 1970. The Culver City Westside guys were doing them at that time. I got very little out of them. Why? I had weak triceps. Larry Pacifico said I had to work my triceps if I ever was to bench big. He was right. In 1993, Jesse Kellum said I should use them again. Now we were training our triceps very hard. After our success, everyone is doing board presses and everyone's an expert.

Here's the truth about board presses. They are not a tricep builder if you start the lift with your pecs. Many do just that. Start the motion with the arms. I watch a lot of people do board presses thinking that they will build a strong lockout. I saw people do board presses with bench shirts continuously, and two of them lost their lockout at the meet by 60 pounds. The others were not Top 10 benchers anyway. Remember, the bench is a full range motion. Maybe this is why so many dump the bar on their belly, not practicing full range motion.

The workout is simple. After a warm-up, work up to a max single. One, two, or three boards are used at Westside. Four and five boards are for isolating the triceps.

There are exercises that build strength and those that test strength. Board presses test strength. Have you ever watched point karate? They always stop the punch just short of the face. Well, I believe the board press does the same thing. I hear what so and so did off a board press, only to go to the meet and be unable to touch their chest. I think his name was Curly or Moe. Or maybe it was Larry. But who cares? What a stooge!

These workouts give you a wide variety to choose from. Mix and match any way you want. See you at the meet.

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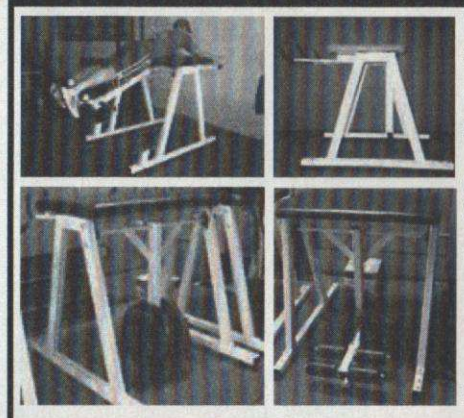

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