

REVERSE GRIP BENCH PRESSES

as told to *Powerlifting USA* by Doug Daniels



Anthony Clark benching with a reverse grip (Lambert/PL USA photo)

A few decades ago, the reverse grip bench press was regarded as nothing more than a novelty lift—but that was changed in the 1990s when the late, great Anthony Clark captured the imagination of the powerlifting world by challenging the 800-pound bench press mark while using a reverse grip bench press style in competition. In case you're wondering, the reverse grip bench is a bench press with your grip going the opposite way with your knuckles facing your feet; palms facing your head.

This style of the bench significantly alters a lifter's leverage and muscle involvement; the load lifted by the pecs decreases, while the triceps and delts take on more of the burden. The stabilizing muscles used to control the weight are called into action in an entirely different manner. I have always been a believer that in order to successfully lift a weight, you must first control or stabilize it. Since reverse grips are in reality a bench press, this increased stabilizing strength built doing reverse grips should spill over to your competition bench. In other words, the strength gained through reverses would have a high positive transfer to the regular bench.

Let's start by describing the correct execution of reverse grips. The feel of reverse grips is extremely different from the regular bench so extra care and patience should be practiced before moving into heavy weights. For one thing, spotters are an absolute must because if the weight falls, it will tend to drop on your face

and that's not a good thing for your face or the bar. A hand-off from an alert spotter is also a requirement. I also suggest getting close to the bench racks for a handoff. For the regular bench getting this close to the racks is not desirable as the bar would bump up against the racks, but for the reverse grip it's the way to go. The path of the bar to lockout tends to go straight up as opposed to the bar path of a regular bench that goes upwards in an arc from the chest towards over the head and shoulders.

Common sense should dictate starting out with lighter weights for safety reasons. You absolutely need to get accustomed to the unique feel of this exercise. As with any new exercise, if you start too heavy too soon, you risk injury. For increased safety you can do reverses inside a power rack with safety pins set to catch the bar in case of a mishap. I strongly suggest a thumbled grip over thumbless. A thumbless grip poses a greater risk of the bar falling out of your hands and onto your face or neck. Using a thumbless grip in any form of bench press is not a good idea! Bodybuilders during Arnold's hey-day popularized the thumbless grip claiming they got a better feel during the exercise. Let the bodybuilders keep their feel and use your thumb to hold the bar safely. It would be tragic to have all your training go to waste due to a wayward bar falling on you.

There are many ways to add reverse grips into your routine. I treat it as a substitute for close grip benches since both of these exercises de-

crease pectoral involvement in favor of the delts and triceps. Because of that, there is no need to perform both of these exercises in the same workout. I suggest 3–5 sets of reverse grips after your regular benches.

You can also experiment with various grip widths. I suggest not going narrower than shoulder grip or wider than your regular bench grip. The number of reps is up to you, but my suggestion is to have them coincide with where you are in your cycle. If you are doing 8 rep work sets, use 8s as your rep scheme for reverse grips, and so on.

Some weight machines, like Eagle, offer a seated bench machine that allows a lifter to do seated reverse benches in safe manner without a spotter. Reverse grips can also be done more safely on a Smith Machine, but since the bar is on a sliding rack, stabilizing power would not be built, which also applies to using the Eagle machine. However, in both of these scenarios your triceps will still get a good workout. I would not recommend using dumbbells for this exercise as controlling them would be too precarious.

Reverse grips provide the powerlifter with an excellent assistance exercise with high positive transfer of strength gains to the bench because they are benches—just performed with a reverse grip. As with any assistance exercise, never sacrifice proper exercise form for weight. If your bench press is stalled or in a rut, give reverses a try as your main assistance exercise. <<