

# The BENCH

## Making the Conversion

as told to PL USA by **GEORGE HALBERT**

As a lifter I am always seeking training or technical tips that will help me to progress to the next level. Two of the best sources are either someone who is continually improving themselves or someone who has been stuck or been making little progress for years and suddenly they make a big improvement. This is an account of the latter.

Mike Ruggiera has struggled with his bench press progress over the past 4 years. With a competition best squat of 1000 and deadlift of 805 only his bench press has held him back from that big 2400 total. Let me give you a brief history of his bench press progress. In June of 1999 Mike had a partial tear of his right tricep. Prior to this injury his best bench was 545. Since then his benches are as follows: November 99 - 500, February 2000 - 515, July 2000 - 525, November 2000 - 535, February 2001 - 565, March 2002 - 575. As you can see, Mike slowly got back up to his old record and then improved about 10 pounds a year. Not only was Mike's progress very slow, but he had a difficult time locking out his right elbow to the point where it was not

his problem?

Well, this February after the Arnold I ran into Mike and got him to come back down to train at Westside in April. In this environment Mike would best be able to make the conversion. The conversion I speak of is a conversion of technique which would shift the emphasis of the bench from the chest and shoulders to the triceps (not the big part of the triceps toward the shoulder, but the part of the tricep near the elbow). Mike knew coming in that this conversion would not be easy; in fact, he understood that he would have to go backwards to go forwards.

Mike's old technique left him with elbows out at the lockout and very little lockout leverage (using today's equipment). His new technique would leave him with elbows in and arms underneath the bar at the top to help him squeeze the bar out. So one of Mike's goals was to strengthen the correct aspect of his triceps, but to do this he had to learn to use his back to lock in his elbows. Don't misunderstand me - Mike has a massive and strong back from years of training, however, he never understood how to use his back in training. Well, at Westside we bombarded him with explanations of how to use his back. The explanation that he finally understood was that his back should be used in the same exact fashion as when he would do a bent over row. The first time he tried this he said his back got pumped during the workout and his benches felt much more explosive as he could now "lock his power in". Now that he came to understand the role of his back, he could focus in on his triceps. One of his favorite exercises to gain tricep strength was the board press. In the beginning, Mike hated this exercise because he would get crushed in his workouts by his training partners who could board press 100+ more pounds than him.

Not only did he get beat, but often times he would revert back to his old form to try to depend on muscles he was more familiar with. In the beginning I wondered if he would be able to stick it out because his frustration was evident. Then, on top of it all, he strained his right shoulder during a floor press session when he reverted back to his old form. However, this strain proved to be a great learning tool, because then he had to use correct form to take the pressure off of his

shoulder and any mistake in form could immediately be felt in his shoulder. Mike also figured out that by putting a mini-band around his wrists that he was able to better able to keep form. Using his new form Mike made good progress on a weekly basis and his tricep strength continually improved. Now there was no doubt that his arms were locked out at the top and his form was perfect. Within less than 6 months Mike had achieved perfect technique in training.

However, one day Mike couldn't make it to our session at Westside and took a workout in a local gym and tried a "raw" bench press max. To his chagrin, Mike was about 20 pounds off of his best raw lift. This greatly frustrated Mike. Back at Westside we explained to him that by switching his technique, his bench press strength now came from his triceps and not his chest and shoulders and therein lie the problem. He did not get weaker, but instead got

stronger in a different technique (one more suitable to today's equipment). Well, to make a long story short Mike just hit 610 with a near miss at 625 at the 2002 IPA Nationals in November. His confidence is soaring and he now understands how he will have to train to continually improve. His mottos are: stay persistent, keep plugging away, and find your weaknesses and make them stronger.

Making the conversion from one technique to another can be very difficult. The two biggest problems are confidence and re-programming the body to a new way of doing things. However, Mike and others have shown that persistence pays off. Mike did not let frustration or ego get in his way, but instead believed in the method and gave 100% effort. Mike now possesses the knowledge to continue his bench press progress. Mike went backwards to go forwards - a true sign of a champion.



Mike's Progress in the bench had been lagging his gains in the squat.

clear to spectators if his arm was locked or not.

Another factor about Mike was that his bottom end power was stronger than most 600+ benchers in this modern equipment era. In other words, I once saw him outpress a 670 pound bencher on the cambered bar press. I always said Mike had a 700 lb. chest and shoulders and 550 lb. triceps. However, if you looked at Mike's triceps they are mammoth, so what was

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