

BENCH PRESS VARIATIONS

as told to Powerlifting USA by Doug Daniels

When choosing assistance exercises for the powerlifts, I suggest you choose ones that provide the highest positive transfer of strength to the targeted lift; and for this month we will deal with the bench. The best way to accomplish that is to choose exercises that are the most similar to the bench yet still can provide different stimuli to the muscle groups involved. The cool thing is that this can be achieved by using variations of the standard bench press and do not require any equipment other than a normal flat bench and a power bar. These variations are the result of simply changing grip width on the bar, elbow position, bar path or range of movement.

The first variation of the bench entails altering your grip width on the bar. Grip width variations emphasize different upper body muscle groups for specific goals. A common competition bench grip is slightly wider than shoulder width. This width emphasizes the pecs, delts and triceps equally, more or less. By simply widening your grip, more emphasis is shifted to the pecs and away from the triceps. Before widening out too far all at once, I suggest widening your grip 1 inch on each side every 2-3 weeks. This will allow your muscles and tendons to become accustomed to a wider grip and develop the required flexibility and strength. Going too wide too quickly could result in an injury such as a pull or strain, take your time and increase gradually. You may notice some pec soreness after the first few workouts due to the new stress placed upon them. I suggest using a little less weight at first, as you may not possess sufficient pectoral strength to use the same weights with the wider grip. Lower your weights by 20 percent from your normal width grip bench. Before you know it, you will surpass your old narrower grip poundage. By adding more involvement from the larger and potentially stronger pectorals, you now are using more available muscle power to bench than relying on the smaller triceps to carry the load.

The flip side or narrowing your bench grip is another option. A narrower grip emphasizes your triceps while reducing involvement of the pecs. Too many lifters use a grip that is too narrow, some even going as narrow as touching their hands together in the middle of the bar—not a good idea. Any grip narrower than shoulder width does not work the triceps any better than benching with a shoulder width. Second, this narrow of a grip can cause a lot of pain on your wrists and shoulders. Lastly, you have far less control of the bar and can easily lose it, risking injury. A shoulder width grip is a win-win choice that provides maximum triceps stimulus, greater comfort and safety. Oh yeah, and you can use more weight.

Varying elbow position is the next bench variation. Positioning your elbows out at right angles from the body shifts more work the pecs. Flip-siding again, positioning your elbows close



The late Anthony Clark originally used a narrow grip to bench press his record poundages and then later converted to a reverse grip, yet another grip variation

to the body shifts the work away from the pecs and towards the delts and triceps.

The path of the bar can also be varied. Bar path is defined as where the bar hits on the chest. During a normal bench, the bar would hit the chest near the nipple area, which is the position of best power and leverage. Varying where the bar hits the chest enables different parts of the pectorals to be stressed. The incline bench press is relied on to work the upper pecs, but similar results can be achieved by lowering the bar higher on the chest, toward the shoulders, during a regular bench press. As with increasing grip width, don't go too high on the chest or heavy too quickly. Work into the weight gradually. Again, there may be some initial soreness due to the different stimulus on the pecs. I'll repeat the warning of not going too high on the chest. Some lifters lower the bar to the neck, which, of course, can be dangerous if they lose the lift. Always use a spotter while doing any bench presses no matter what variation. The reverse effect is gained when hitting the bar lower on the chest, more towards the waist. This variation targets the lower pecs, like decline benches. Neither of these variations requires any special benches and can be performed on a regular bench.

The last variation revolves around range of movement or in other words, limiting the range of movement to less than a full bench press. Pressing from the chest to one-half to two-thirds of the way up keeps tension on the pecs and builds power off the chest. Pressing from one-half to two-thirds of the way down to lockout switches the work to the triceps. The logical final range variation is pressing through the middle of the movement. This distributes

the load equally to all the muscle groups while providing continuous tension.

Several of these variations can be combined to tailor a bench workout that can fit whatever your goals are. For example, a lifter in need of more pec power would work wide grip benches with elbows out. For a final pump set, he would do partials from the bottom using the same grip and elbow position. For added variety, some sets could be performed high or low on the chest. Triceps can be targeted by using close (shoulder) width benches, regular benches with elbows in and benching from one-half way up to lockout.

One final recommendation on bench press safety I have is to not use the thumbless or false grip. This grip was perhaps made famous in the bodybuilding magazines of the 1970s. The California bodybuilders believed they got a better pump or feel with the thumbless grip. Please leave this to those golden boys! Benching while not having your thumb around the bar makes it more likely to fall out of your hand and on to you. I would bet most of the injuries involving a dropped bar could have been prevented by using a thumb grip.

The regular bench press is still your best choice for building power in the lift itself, but by simply varying grip width, bar path, elbow position or range of movement, the regular bench can be tailored to fit your individual needs without requiring any extra costly equipment or gym space. Since all these variations are hybrids of the bench, the positive strength transfer to your competition bench will be high. As with any assistance exercises, do not go overboard and perform too many extra sets. Sometimes choices can be too obvious and simple. «