



RAW BENCHING BASICS



BY BRANDON BRANER

In a world of double and triple-ply bench shirts and guys weighing more than 350 lbs., a 650-lb. bench press doesn't sound very exciting anymore. A person can go to any powerlifting meet and someone will bench press well over 800 strapped into their two or three layers of material, and there is nothing wrong with that. The sport of powerlifting has gone the way of the "shirt ninja" and mastering gear to get the most weight out of it.

Where does this leave someone whose best gym bench is 650 lbs. to their chest and 785 off a three-board, and whose best meet is a beautiful 635? I would get murdered if I tried to bench with the big boys out there in their shirts. Lucky for me, those numbers are 100-percent raw. While raw lifting is starting to emerge as a larger part of some federations, powerlifting seems to have forgotten about raw strength and how much fun it can be to go head to head with someone — just you and pure, raw muscle.

Don't get me wrong, I own a single-ply shirt, and there is no better rush than throwing that on and going for 900 lbs. But when I started this sport back in 2009 I knew I wanted to be the strongest, best bench presser around. When I say the strongest, I mean I want to lay down on the bench with just my wrist wraps and know I can out-bench anyone out there. I have a long way to go. I am no Scot Mendelson or Ryan Kennelly, yet my 650-lb. raw bench seems to get me tons of questions on how I do what I do. So, I am going to walk you through how I set up from the time my ass hits the bench till the weight is re-racked. Hopefully this can help you visualize how you bench, and maybe improve your form just a bit more.

FORM

Back/shoulder position. The first thing you need to do is get your back and lats tight and rotate your shoulders back while you are still standing by the bench. Imagine a dot in the middle of your shoulder blades. You want to pull your back tight to that one spot as to encapsulate that dot with your shoulder blades. Your back should be uncomfortably tight at this point, if you're squeezing correctly.

Now that your shoulder blades have surrounded your spine, take that same dot and attempt to pull your shoulders themselves down to the dot in such a way that you are actually rotating the tops of your shoulders back. This will increase the tightness in your back and help your chest stay up and tight.

Rack height. Some people enjoy the rack way too high; they have to reach to get the bar out. But this removes your shoulders from the tucked back position,

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makes you lose your form and adds distance to how far the bar travels. Others seem to start the bar too low and require almost a two-board press to get it out of the rack, wasting precious energy.

I lay on the bench back fully tucked and tight. I tuck my butt up toward my back and plant my feet properly so I am in the form I want. My eyes should be lined up directly with the bar in the rack. When I reach up to grab the bar, I make sure to keep my shoulders and back tucked and tight, and I grab the bar with my index finger on the ring. Now that everything is tucked and tight and you have a firm grasp on the bar, you should have a roughly 20-degree bend in your elbows. You're ready for your lift off.

Body/feet position. While lying down on the bench, have your eyes lined up a little bit past the bar — as if you were trying to slide off the edge of the bench, about 1 inch past the bar. Find that dot in the middle of your back and set up your back and shoulders as described above. Bend your legs slightly past 90 degrees and up on your toes. Then use your legs to drive up on your toes to get up on your traps, back still tight in the same position as before. While still driving with your toes, take that dot in the center of your back and imagine someone has attached a string from that dot to your tailbone tip. Now they are going to take said string and pull it; this should force your ass to pull underneath your body, as if you are trying to set your taint on the bench. Doing this will give you the start of your arch. Now that your ass is firmly planted on the bench, you want to move your feet out away from the bench so you are pushing off your heels and the inside of your feet.

Keeping your feet planted, grab the bar as described above. Once you have the bar, walk your shoulders toward your butt. You want to make sure your butt is still stapled to the bench and your feet are still driving. Now take one shoulder at a time and walk it down. This should be increasing your arch and moving your eyes to the desired position: right under the bar.

Time to press. You are now set up and ready to press. Find your favorite liftoff guy and, with your arms at that perfect position, have them lift the bar just high enough to clear the hooks. Your shoulders need to stay back and tight. Now here comes the hardest part: You want the bar to be positioned right above the spot on your chest where you want to touch so it can go straight up and down. To get the bar to this position, simply flex your lats. This should pull your arms down and move the bar to almost the perfect position. While

TYPICAL WEEK BREAKDOWN

Monday is usually my lighter day, but keep in mind I'm always shooting to hit a max number. If I want a max of 650 I will jump online and find out how many reps I need at a certain weight for, say, three to hit that number. For example, 590 lbs. for three reps. I always add at least one Sling Shot set to the end of the workout. I love my Maddog Sling Shot and always go for my max double or triple, which is around 700. Find that number, order a Sling Shot and use it.

Depending on how I feel, my next bench day is usually Thursday or Friday. I will work up to my one-rep max for that day, which is hopefully sequential with the numbers I did Monday. I will try to hit that number at least once, if not twice. Then, using the Sling Shot, I hit the heaviest single I can then drop down to something I can rep for 10 raw. Most bench days I am so fried by the end, that's all I do, but if I have any energy left I will hit dumbbell inclines for sets of five. I use dumbbells to work the stabilizer muscles vs. a barbell. It isn't rocket science, just heavy lifting and a lot of food. Keep it simple.

Sample Workout

MONDAY

- Warm up 225 x 10, 315 x 10, 405 x 5, 495 x 3
- 590 x 3 x 3 (three sets of three)
- Add the Maddog Sling Shot for 700 x 2 x 1
- Dumbbell inclines 130 x 5 x 3
- High rep triceps pushdowns with V-bar

THURSDAY/FRIDAY

- Same warm up as Monday
- 600 x 1
- Might hit 650 in the Maddog Sling Shot to feel the weight
- 650 x 1 x 2 (two sets of one)
- Put on the Maddog and hit the heaviest single possible

you are bringing the bar down by tightening your lats, slightly rotate your elbows. This will put you in a better power pressing position. Bring the bar straight down and touch your chest. Check your elbow position; they should be close to your body. Make sure that your elbows do not break the plane of your back. In other words, when you are bringing your bar down make sure your elbows do not drop below your back — otherwise you will lose significant power and potentially rip some shoulder muscles and tendons to hell.

When you push the bar back up, remember that the bar needs to go in a straight line. After all, that's the shortest distance between two points. It all starts with leg drive. Once you hear "press," keep everything tight and press your legs into the floor quickly, as if you're trying to jump really high. This will give the bar more explosion off the chest. Then start to drive up with your lats and shoulders; they are both very strong muscles and will get the bar moving off the chest. As the bar starts to move up, incorporate your triceps and drive like hell. You want to drive yourself into the bench, as this will help



with explosion and keep you under the bar and in a better position to lock it out. Once the bar is about three-quarters of the way up, feel free to bring your shoulders forward and your back out. This will help pull you away from the bar and get the "rack" command.

TRAINING

I have developed what I refer to as the H.T.F.D.I.F (how the f*ck do I feel) training method. The H.T.F.D.I.F method is simple. Go to the gym. As yourself how you feel. Is it a heavy night or is it a light night? Do you still hurt from the last workout? Lie down on the bench and start doing your warm-ups. You will easily be able to tell how sore you are and what your workout should be.

I train as heavy as I can every single time. This doesn't mean maxing out every time to a single, but it does mean maxing out reps

if I need to go lighter. I either work up to a one-rep max for the day or sit around 550 to 575 and hit sets of five to three. Every last rep on each set should pretty much be to failure. I don't incorporate speed work into my workouts. I am in the business of moving heavy weights. I overload my body all the time and by doing so my CNS is accustomed to weights heavier than I am actually trying to press. I overload by doing partial reps with boards. I always end with something like that after my normal workout. I usually never do more than three or four sets, as going to either a single or a rep max is very taxing. However, now that I have the Maddog Sling Shot, my training has gone to a whole new level. Boards are out the window as the Sling Shot allows me to hit a full range of motion and rep as heavy as 760 lbs. It teaches me how to control the weight all the way to my chest. Then I have to blow it off my chest, so leg drive is huge. And once I'm at the top it's all me, so my triceps and lockout strength goes to a whole new level.

POWERLIFTING TIPS

Find a local gym. And I mean a gym, not a chain club. Need help? Log onto www.powerliftingwatch.com to find a list of them. Find some place that lets you do what you want, one that isn't full of fancy-ass equipment. Stick to the basics.

Get online and read. Find good lifters on Facebook. Trust me, we will friend you and we will talk to you. If you need help or advice, we will give it. Most likely someone helped us out once, and we will help you out. Eat big, lift big and you will get big. It's that simple. **PM**

