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ERIC SPOTO

KING OF THE BENCH

BY MARK BELL

Mark Bell: It seems like I interview one mutant after another for Power. But you are a 321-lb. mutant of titanic proportions! When did this all get started, Mr. Spoto?

Eric Spoto: I started lifting weights around age 11. I had those gray plastic weights in my basement that you would fill up with sand. I think my workouts consisted of bench press, clean-and-jerk and bicep curls.

Bell: Give us some stats. How tall are you? How old? How big are your biceps and forearms?

Spoto: I'm 5 feet, 11 inches, 36 years old, biceps are 23 inches, forearms are 19.

Bell: A 19-inch forearm is insane! Did you build your forearms up from arm wrestling? I heard you mention you have an arm wrestling background.

Spoto: Forearms, like calves, have a lot to do with genetics. I'm not saying you can't make them grow, but genetics play a huge role in how big they will get. I always had big forearms before ever doing any direct forearm exercise. I did train them directly for a couple years for arm wrestling, but haven't trained them in at least two or three years. I may return at some point.

Bell: I'm going to write a number and next to it tell us how many reps you have done with it. If you hit it up incline, write that in as well.

225: 80 3/4 reps
315: 60 3/4 reps, 40 full reps
365: never did it
405: 40 3/4 reps
455: never did it
495: 22 3/4 reps
550: never did it
585: 10 3/4 reps
600: 6 full reps
635: 5 full reps
650: 4 full reps
675: 3 full reps
722: 1 rep
210-lb. dumbbells: 17 reps

Bell: Mind-boggling! How much did you bench in high school?

Spoto: First time I did 315 I was 15, I was in the low 400's when I graduated HS.

Bell: Rather than focus in on how you train at the moment, let's get some ideas on how you built this tremendous base. How did you train as you were coming up through the ranks? Sets, reps, frequency and so on?

Spoto: I trained like a bodybuilder. This was all pre-Internet, so muscle magazines and books were your only source for training information. I would do a ton of sets, at least 15 sets for chest, and then still do shoulders and triceps all on the same day. I would do at least 35 sets on a chest, shoulder triceps day. The sets were faster paced and I would be in the eight- to 12-rep range for most exercises. My favorite compound movements were bench, dips, pull-ups and squats. I would do a bunch of isolation exercises for each muscle. Knowing what I know now, I would change a lot of things about how I trained back then, but I do think the tremendous amount of volume I did for all those years helps enable me to train with the volume that I use today.

Bell: What do you feel are some key factors to staying healthy on the bench? What methods and exercises do you include to keep yourself bulletproof?

Spoto: Healthy is a relative term, and I don't think there are too many 600-plus raw benchers who aren't nursing some type of injury on a daily basis. We know you can never fully prevent



Spoto benching 722 lbs. to set the Raw Bench World Record.

injuries, but a proper warm-up will go a long way. I have no problem doing five to 10 sets before I get to my work sets on bench, if that's what it takes to feel ready. Of course, every raw bencher at some time or another is going to have some sort of shoulder issues. The rotator cuff is a very small and weak group of muscles compared to the bigger muscles that are involved in a bench press. I try to train them at least once a week and warm them up before every bench workout. Stay warm. During those brief Vegas cold months I always wear a sweatshirt and try to get a sweat going before I get to my work sets.

Bell: You drilled the biggest bench ever at 722 lbs. However, it looks like there are at least two or three other men out there who will attempt to break your record, like Siamand Rahman and Kirill Sarychev. What do you feel you need to do to keep them off your heels?

Spoto: The fact that there are so many great raw benchers right now is a testament to the resurgence of raw powerlifting. There will always be great athletes in any sport who are at or near the top; you can't focus on what other people are doing you can only try to be the best athlete you can be. That being said, I don't think 722 is the best I am capable of. I am just getting use to the whole peaking at the right time and understanding the timing of trying to be your strongest the day you step on the platform. If I can time everything

up right and have a good training cycle where I can stay relatively healthy, I definitely feel like I am capable of more.

Bell: We spoke about what separates you from everyone else. You mentioned how you started at 11 and just been pounding away consistently. Can you elaborate and share what you said with the people of Power?

Spoto: I always wanted to be big and strong. It seems like every kid from my generation grew up to Arnold movies and wanted to be like him. I started out in my basement like most kids, then moved up to my first gym membership around age 13. My friends and I would lift for hours following some pro bodybuilder's program. I think all the volume and sets I did as a kid really helped build a foundation for when I got older. By growing up and training bodybuilder-style you become extremely conditioned because of the pace and volume of the workouts. Powerlifting is all about moving as much weight as possible; bodybuilding is about focusing on muscle contraction and isolating the particular muscle you are training. The bodybuilding foundation helped develop my slow twitch type I muscle fibers. Most powerlifting articles I have read have said anything more than six reps is pretty much pointless, and 20 to 40 reps would be an absolute waste of time. I tend to disagree with that theory, especially for an athlete that is at or very close to their genetic peak. If an athlete has been stuck at the same 1RM

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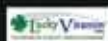
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or 3RM for an extended period of time, if I can get his 1ORM to increase by a couple reps then there is a good chance he will hit a PR on his 1RM. One of the main benefits of this training would be the added muscle hypertrophy from the higher rep sets. A larger muscle has the capability of being a stronger muscle.

Bell: How have you avoided major setbacks and injuries?

Spot: I have had setbacks and multiple injuries, like any competitive athlete. It is close to impossible to push your body to the upper limits of its capabilities without getting injured. The key is to know when to back off when you feel your body starting to break down. Most powerlifters and athletes in general are competitive people, so it is hard to ease up on your training and not try to push past the pain. You just have to listen to your body and lighten up the weights for a couple weeks to let your tendons and ligaments heal up and adjust to your increase in muscle strength. Then I go back to smashing some big weights and having some fun breaking down my body again.

Bell: I'll throw out some assistance moves and you tell me what you like about them. Dumbbell bench flat or incline dumbbells?

Spot: These are great because you get the added benefit of building your stabilizer muscles. I think less experienced and younger lifters will get more benefits from them than an elite lifter, but it is a movement that should be in everyone's program. One major drawback for an elite lifter is that as you get stronger the dumbbells need to get bigger, so instead of having an increased range of motion they almost become a two-board press because of the weights hitting your chest. Holding them vertical can help with the range a little but they still hit your chest and I feel a little awkward in that position.

Bell: Shoulder presses – what kind do you like and why?

Spot: Each and every kind of shoulder press is going to be important. Standing military press is going to be extremely important to younger or intermediate lifters for building overall core and total upper body strength. I still do standing military presses a few a month. The reason seated shoulder press is the best shoulder movement for an elite



lifter is you can lift more seated than standing. It goes back to my theory that whatever exercise allows you to lift the most weight for that particular muscle is going to be the most beneficial to getting stronger. That's one reason I like the SlingShot.

Bell: Triceps extensions and JM presses?

Spot: Triceps extensions are a great warm-up exercise before a heavy movement like a JM press. Extensions are more of a bodybuilder movement; I don't really see that much carryover in triceps extensions to bench press. JM press is one of the best triceps power movements you can do.

Editor's note: For examples of how to perform a JM Press do a search on YouTube.

Bell: Lateral raises?

Spot: Great exercise, and one of the few movements I prefer doing using a machine instead of free weights. I think it helps with overall shoulder health and helps prevent muscle imbalances. Your front delt is always going to get way more work than your side and rear delts, so you want to try to stay as well balanced as possible to prevent injuries.

Bell: Rotator cuff work?

Spot: Extremely important for any powerlifter and especially a bench press specialist. They are weak muscles and get injured really easy. You want them as strong as you can get them

Bell: Now a few questions from our Facebook fans.

Marco Millul: What's the key to a massive bench? What's the element that brought you to 700? And what got you from 300 to 400 to 500?

Spot: The key to your bench press is you are only as strong as your weakest bench muscle. If your chest can bench 500 but your triceps can bench 400, you are a 400-lb. bench. It is a cliché, but a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Find out where you fail when you miss a press. If it's off your chest, it's going to be back and/or chest. If it's middle transition, it is normally shoulders, and if it's at the top then it's triceps. Always be aware of what other lifters who have a similar 1RM bench can do at other exercises. If you both have a 400-lb. bench and he is doing shoulder press with 275 and you are struggling with 200, that is a good indication your shoulders are holding you back. Always look to find that weak link and make it stronger. Over the years my weak link has changed several times. I decide what muscle is the weakest and I focus on that muscle. After a while the weak link isn't the weakest anymore, and a different pressing muscle is now the weakest. It is a never-ending constant progression.

Jesse Burdick: What's the deal with Creed?

Spot: Is this a real question or you just being a wiseass?

Stan Efferding: Why are you scared to squat?

Spot: I figure if I start squatting, I will break your 2,303 and I don't want to hurt your feelings. Kidding aside, I am slowly trying to squat again. I have tried a few times and every time I get to that 585 range, my compressed discs get to the point I can't walk right for a week. If it's going to affect my bench training, it isn't worth it to me. I am trying to take it slower this time and let my lower back adapt to the weight better. Hopefully it will work and I can start putting up some big squats.

Emonn Harford: Explain your shoul-

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der workout, and do you train shoulders on a separate day from bench?

Spoto: On max effort bench my shoulders get so fried that I don't need to do any other shoulder movements. On my second bench day, which is either a rep day, speed day or board work, I do direct shoulder work.

Bell: Tell me more about this second bench day. Tell us what a rep day, a speed workout and a board workout look like. Do you feel this second day helps?

Spoto: Rep day: On the rep day I am looking to get a good workout for type I muscle fibers. I will lift at a faster pace between sets and use lighter weights. I will bench press but I will also do some isolation movements for chest on this day, usually one or two types of fly movements. During my max effort day I am focusing on explosiveness and the amount of weight being used. The rep day I actually concentrate on contracting the muscle I am using, very similar to how a bodybuilder would work out. Between the higher reps and the faster pace I actually get a pump, which almost never happens on max effort days. Besides the type I muscle benefits, I also feel this type of training helps with recovery from max effort work and helps strengthen tendons.

Speed day is pretty simple. The goal of this is to move the weight as fast as possible on the concentric portion of the press. I think a lot of people don't get the maximum benefit from this style of training because they do it like it's three fast reps. I look at this as three singles. So instead of going fast on the eccentric portion of the lift, I try to go at a speed that would be similar to my 1RM decent. Once you touch your chest you explode like it is your 1RM, then reset and repeat for a couple more reps. I will do six to eight sets of this. I prefer to have bands so I don't hyperextend my elbows. After warming up I will go use 50 percent of my 1RM for a couple sets, then decide if I want to stay there or add a little weight. I don't count the bands as part of the 50 percent.

For board work I prefer using a three-board because it puts my arms at a 90-degree angle at the bottom, which is



Spoto teaching Mark Bell some arm wrestling pointers

a common sticking point for most people. Most of my board work will be in the three- to five-rep range. Its gets rough doing board work on your second bench day, so if you haven't been eating right or getting enough rest, then you might not be ready for another heavy day so soon. I think most bench specialists can recover enough to add this to their routine once or twice a month, but it would be really hard for a full meet guy who probably has done squats and/or deadlifts in between the two bench days to be ready to go heavy again.

Bell: What does the main bench day look like? Can you lay out a typical three- or four-week cycle?

Spoto: A max effort bench day will start on the flat bench every workout. I will do a bunch of warm-up sets until I feel ready for some work sets. I will take around 10 percent less than my goal triple for the day, and do my first triple. That is considered my first work set. I put a little weight on and hit another triple — that will be the second work set. Now I go to my planned triple for the day and do that for around three sets. After that I throw on the SlingShot for a couple triples of some overload work. Then I lower the weight and do a couple close grip sets for eight to 12 reps, and flat bench is done. From there I go to a push press movement or dips. I finish the day off with some triceps accessory work.

A three- or four-week cycle would all

be based around the triple work sets and trying to add 5 lbs. from the week before.

Bell: I noticed you like to use a lot of reps in the warm-up. I know that's how you roll, but many great lifters past and present have used low reps to "save their strength" for the big sets. Do you feel that if you train in a slightly pre-fatigued state that you'll get results faster? Perhaps it's from an increased work capacity?

Spoto: I have tried on a few occasions to cut my warm ups, but didn't like it. I really think your body can adapt to almost any workload and volume. High volume is how I've always warmed up; my body has just adapted to it by now. I would rather be over-conditioned than under-conditioned.

Bell: Looks like you're fixing to crush your own record in November at Super Training. With the team of Stan Efferding and Creed Childress in your corner, I have no doubt you'll smash another WR or two. As our last question of the day, let's have you finish up by talking about how your team got you honed in on the world record.

Spoto: I am very lucky to have great training partners. Any lifter will tell you that good lifting partners are an absolute must to really excel in this sport. We all have days when you just don't have that fire in you. Having elite lifters pushing you is indispensable on those days. One of the most important benefits of training partners is lifting technique. An experienced lifter can see flaws and mistakes you are doing that you can't see or feel when you're lifting. Their feedback on bar height, elbow position, leg drive, etc., is what helps you fine-tune your technique. I can't forget the actual lift-off — nothing will screw a lift up more than a bad hand-off. It gets a little tricky when you're dealing with 700-plus lbs. and lifting off from an awkward angle. I am lucky that I have never had a bad hand-off in training or a meet. There is no doubt I would not have broken the record if not for all the people who helped me, and not just my training partners. I would like to thank all my friends and family for their love and support. **PM**