FORCED REPS

as told to Powerlifting USA by Doug Daniels

I would say almost every lifter who has ever touched a barbell has used the forced reps method at one time or another. Forced reps can take intensity to higher levels and, in turn, result in increased size and strength. However, even a good thing can be improved and many lifters stand to gain by re-evaluating their current practices.

Let's start with a quick explanation of the forced reps principle. With forced reps, a lifter completes a rep (or reps) of an exercise with assistance, usually from a training partner. For example, you may get three reps on the bench by yourself, but on the fourth one the bar stops half way up. Your training partner would grab the bar and provide just enough help to enable you to complete the rep. Forced reps allow a lifter to work past failure, thus adding intensity. The amount of assistance provided by your training partner can vary from a slight finger touch at the sticking point to an all hands on deck effort from every lifter in your gym. Of course, more reps can be done with increasing help from your partner.

Unfortunately, some lifters take forced reps to extremes that are not necessarily effective and could prove to be detrimental to their health and well being. Let's continue on the above example. Upon failing on the fourth rep, the lifter is able to complete the bench rep with just a little help from his partner, but he continues for more reps. With each additional rep, his training partner must lift more and more of the weight because of the lifter's rapidly increasingly declining strength. This can continue until the assisting partner is lifting almost the entire weight and in effect be doing an awkward upright row. This creates a potentially dangerous situation for both lifters. As the lifter tires, he has less and less control of the bar and could easily get hurt. The partner is also at risk as he must upright row the bar from an awkward position, which could result in a muscle pull or back injury. It could go as far as both not being able to get the bar back in the rack which could spell trouble for both lifters and potentially nearby lifters. The lifter could lose control of the weight at any time so the helper must remain alert and ready to take full control of the bar at the blink of an eye.

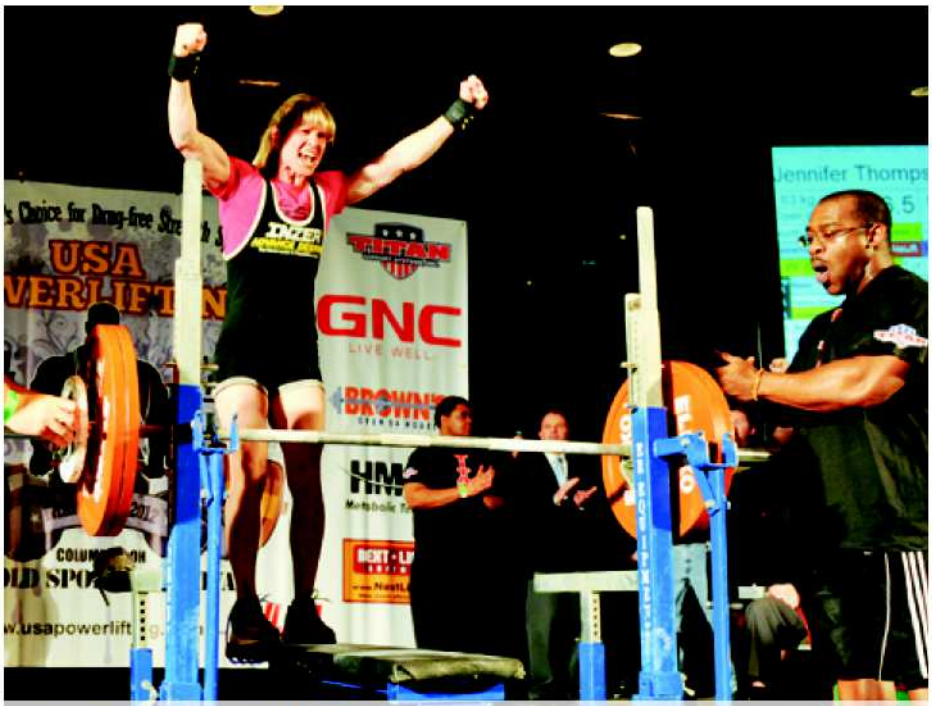
Another application of forced reps is using a weight over max with the goal of adding negative or eccentric resistance. In this example, a 300-max bencher loads 335 on the bar for a forced rep set. The goal is to lower the bar slowly to get negative resistance and then try to push the weight off the chest and then with a partner's help, finish the rep. What too often occurs is the bar is lowered slowly at the start, but as it nears the midway point of its descent, the weight of the bar overpowers the lifter and it crashes down on his chest. The effort to press the bar up moves about 1–2 inches, dies and comes back down. The helper must then react quickly and upright row the bar to the rack. In reality, the helper lifted far more weight than the bencher. In my opinion, if the lifter is not lifting at least 75% of the weight, stop the set immediately. Continuing after this point greatly raises the potential for injury. There's a guy at my gym that is big on this principle but most gym members scatter when he needs help to force some reps for obvious reasons.

A far better scenario of the example above would be use less weight, no more than 100% or perhaps 90–95% of max. Use of a lower weight allows the lifter to better concentrate on lowering the weight slowly and steadily, from the top to the bottom. This may help develop more power off the chest, in the case of the bench, instead of essentially working only the top of the lift when using a heavier weight. If you are determined to use a weight over max, I would not use more than 10% over your max. Going any heavier increases chance of injury and compromises the execution and desired benefits of the set.

Certain lifts are good fits for forced reps like benches, overhead presses and pulldowns while lifts like the squat and deadlift don't fit the scheme due to their complexity. Stronger lifters may need more than one partner to help force reps out. This can be the case for a strong bench presser. If there are not enough capable partners available in such cases, skip the forced reps for safety's sake. Use common sense to determine when and what lifts you can apply forced reps to.

Because of the increased intensity with forced reps, I suggest limiting their use to not overtrain. Recuperative ability varies greatly from individual to individual due to age and general health status. Some lifters might be able to push and maintain the level of intensity harder and longer than others before they overtrain. One to two sets per exercise using forced reps is more than adequate. Forego forced reps training two weeks before a contest to avoid being overtrained.

Forced reps is one of the most practiced power building methods used, but little thought has been given to its more efficient and safe use. Read this article over and see if any of my suggestions can be applied to your training practices. Be sure to keep in mind my safety suggestions such as if you feel yourself not lifting at least 75% of the weight on a forced rep, stop the set. Don't try a set or rep with a weight that is too heavy for you and your helper. You may need to consider getting an extra helper or two in that case. If members scatter when you come to bench, you may want to take another look at forced reps. «



Amazing bench pressers like Jennifer Thompson (seen celebrating after her 300 lb. effort at the Arnold Classic) have to try and employ a wide variety of training techniques and tricks, including Forced Reps, in order to achieve their maximum potential as strength athletes *(Donovan Thompson photo)*