

BENCH PRESS GRIP WIDTH

as told to Powerlifting USA by Doug Daniels

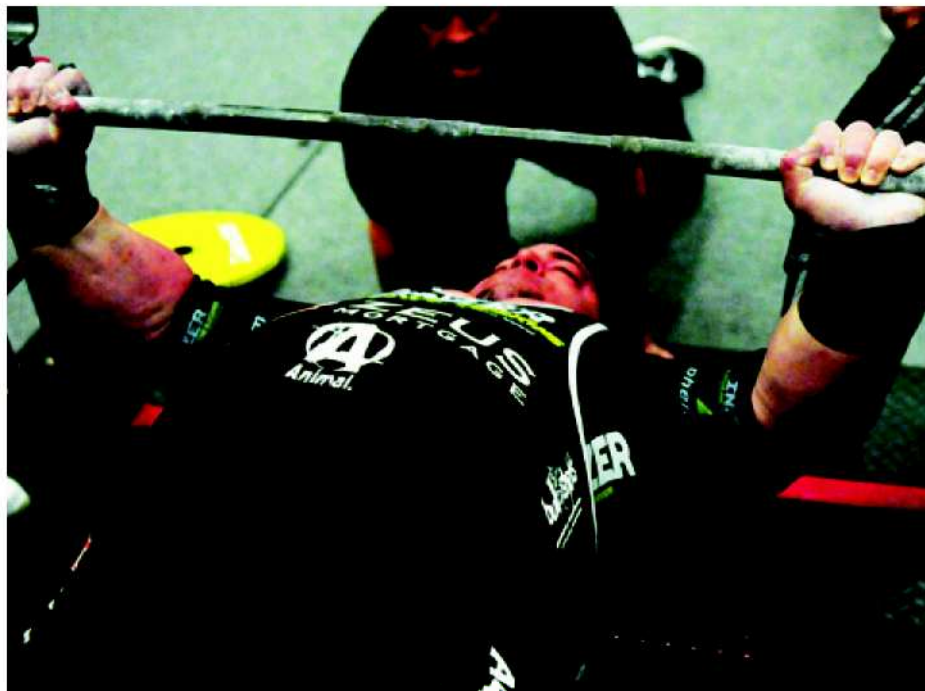
Last Sunday afternoon I stopped by the gym for a quick workout. Of course, the most popular exercise being performed was the bench press. What is frustrating to me is most of the benchers were using too narrow of a grip width for their bench press. The most common grip being used was just a bit wider than shoulder width which, in my opinion, is too narrow. Often the reason for using such a narrow grip is lack of proper coaching and knowledge. Many lifters started using such a grip because their first barbell set came with instructions of basic exercises. For the bench press, the instruction said to use a "shoulder width grip," and they never looked any further. Over time, the lifter progressed and grew comfortable with the shoulder width grip and saw no need for change. Eventually their bench progress slows or halts suddenly. At that point most benchers look for a new routine or supplement when the real solution may involve another look at grip width.

Most powerlifting organizations allow a lifter's hands to be up to 81 centimeters apart. This width is usually marked on power bars by a ring on each side of the bar knurling. To maximize results, a lifter should try to use every bit of that limit he can. Exactly how to widen out effectively is the subject of this article.

In a nutshell, when a lifter benches with too narrow a width grip, he is not using the full potential of his pec muscles. Instead he relies on the much smaller and weaker triceps to press the bar. The word "potential" is key because if the lifter doesn't approach widening his bench grip with a plan, his bench could actually drop. All things being equal, the wider the grip, the more involvement of the chest or pectorals. If a lifter has trained for an extended length of time with a narrower, shoulder width grip, he has not placed enough demand on his pecs to develop them to a desired high strength level. Numerous elite benchers I have met over the years have told me they used a narrower grip early in their careers. Later in their lifting careers they realized a wider grip was the way to go and became some of the greatest benchers in history. They no longer primarily relied on their tricep power, instead adding pectoral strength to the equation. There is still another advantage to using a wider grip that I will explain shortly.

I believe the best way to strengthen the pecs is to gradually widen your bench grip over a period of time. Even a small change in width, such as the width of one finger farther out on each side, alters muscular involvement and changes the physics of the lift. It is not realistic to expect that if you immediately take your grip out from shoulder width to the 81 centimeter competition limit, you will add 100 pounds to your bench. This sudden of a jump could also raise your chances of injury as your shoulders, chest, wrists, tendons and ligaments need to be slowly introduced to the different stresses of a wider grip.

I will use a 12-week off-season training cycle



Bench star Tiny Meeker has a wide enough grip to involve both his pecs and triceps in an optimal combination (Lambert/PL USA photo)

to map out how a lifter could widen his bench grip. On weeks 1-4, take your grip out one finger's widths on each side from your current bench grip. At first you may not be able to get the same number of reps you normally get with the grip you are accustomed to because of the reasons I explained earlier, but stick with it. If you get at least 100% of your starting reps after week 4, widen your grip out an additional finger on each side for weeks 5-8. If after week 8 you are not progressing, remain at that width for 1-2 more weeks then widen out the extra finger. Widening out two fingers may not sound like a lot, but it's actually four finger widths because you widened out two fingers on each side. Depending on your finger width, that can be 2-4 inches. Increase another finger width for the last 4 weeks or until week 12.

Now it's time to evaluate your status. If you're above or at your usual strength level with an increased grip width, I suggest you continue to use the wider grip. If your bench is lower, reduce your bench width one or two fingers and start the process again. If you're still down after another 4 weeks, go back to your original grip. You should be stronger using your old grip than before because of stronger pecs. Don't continue to bench wider and lift less just because I said to. If you get your grip out even one to two fingers in those 12 weeks, consider this effort a huge success. Obviously, a 5-foot tall lifter would be extremely hard pressed to go to the 81 centimeter-inch limit; for this effort, size does matter. Bigger lifters should

try to get wide enough so their index fingers are straddling the knurling to fully stretch the limit.

If you are already using a legal 81 centimeter grip, you cannot legally go any wider in competition. However, training with a wider grip can strengthen the pecs which, in turn, can translate to a bigger bench with your max legal width grip. More powerful pecs are a plus no matter what width grip or style you chose to bench with.

During the last 4 to 6 weeks prior a meet, bench with your normal grip width. Including one down set with a wide grip during this period can build and maintain pec power.

Earlier I mentioned another benefit of using a wider grip. It's simple physics; a wider grip means you need to push the bar up a shorter distance to lockout. All things being equal, the less distance you have to lift the weight, the more you can lift, even with the same strength capabilities.

Even if you have no intention or desire to widen your grip, a few sets of wider grip benches in your training cycle will add variety and hopefully new pounds to your bench. The off-season is the best time to try widening your grip out, but at the meet use the method that will yield the best results. You can use my example over several 12 week periods during your off seasons.

When searching for ways to increase your bench press or any other lift, look beyond a new routine or supplement; examine your technique first. Widening out your bench grip for competition or as assistance work may help reignite your progress. <<