

WORKOUT OF THE MONTH: MIKE HARA'S BENCH ROUTINE

as told to *Powerlifting USA* by Mike Hara

The first thing I would like to stress is the importance of having good training partners. I work out at Powerhouse Gym, located in Rancho Cordova, California. I am lucky in that this gym has attracted some of the most dedicated bench pressing talent in the Sacramento area. Although my training partners all have different schedules and goals, we are there for one another and make sure that everyone has help with spotting and equipment when getting ready for a meet.

I turned fifty this year and the one thing I can say for sure is that my training has changed a lot from when I started training in my twenties. Gone are the days of benching 3-4 days during the week using high reps and low weights. In this regard and as I have aged, I have found that less training actually equals more gains. I feel that over-training is one of the biggest reasons that lifters fail to hit their goals. My training strategies now include making sure I am getting adequate recovery time between workouts and especially plenty of rest in between the last workout and the meet.

My training changes have not only been initiated by age, but by injuries as well. Past major injuries have included a bulged disc in my neck and torn rotator tendons in both shoulders. I have been the recipient of a decompression/debridement surgical procedure on my left shoulder and anticipate undergoing a similar procedure on my right shoulder in the future. However, I wanted to stress that due to adjustments in my training, my bench pressing strength is better now than it ever was.

In terms of what has helped me the most since recovering from my shoulder surgery and neck injury is incorporating a lot of shoulder and neck assistance work. For the shoulder work, I use a shoulder horn and band/cable shoulder exercises. The band and cable work is done with my elbows tucked into my sides while pulling the band/cable both to and away from my body. I generally hit 3-5 sets of 10s with relatively light resistance and perform these exercises once a week. I also use the shoulder horn once a week using 10-20 pound dumbbells. In addition, our gym has a delto machine that allows us to perform front deltoid raises and these are also performed once a week.

My neck work is accomplished by using a head harness and a 10-20 pound dumbbell and performing head raises while laying stomach down on a bench. If your gym has one, a neck raise machine will work just the same. I firmly believe that I could not bench effectively now if I did not continue to perform these assistance exercises. I also feel that if I had incorporated these exercises into my regular routine twenty years ago, I might have averted some of my injuries in the first place.

In terms of my actual bench press workout, I am a big advocate of raw bench training. My theory is that if your raw bench goes up, your shirted bench will also. I don't normally get into my shirt until my training cycle is almost complete. The other thing I don't do prior to a meet is touch any weight to my chest with the shirt on. The closest I get to touching my chest while wearing a bench shirt prior to a meet is to one board. The reason for this is that all bench shirts will stretch with each use, which will result in less support. Also, if a lifter is dieting and loses a few pounds just prior to a meet, the weight loss and resulting upper body shrinkage will further lessen the effectiveness of the shirt.

My pressing workout consists of benching full range raw on Mondays (chest) and then doing triceps raw on Thursdays using boards. Back and arms are performed on Tuesdays and my leg work is done once or twice a month if I am lucky. I used to squat and deadlift once a week years ago, but perform it only limitedly now because of back and shoulder issues. The only reason I squat now is so that my legs don't look like they belong to one of those "bench only" guys!

The bench workout that I use is an "old school" progressive routine that I will start about 10-12 weeks out from a meet. I decide what my goal for the meet is and set up my training cycle based on that goal. My

goal during this time is to acclimate my body to using heavier weights over an extended period of time by increasing my working set by 10 pounds each week. The analogy that I will use with this theory is that you can't run a marathon every week and expect your body to perform well on the day of the run. Likewise, a lifter will become over-trained if he or she attempts maximum weights or goes to failure every workout prior to a meet.

As an example, if my goal is to hit 565, I know that my single-ply bench press shirt will carry over 100-110 pounds. Therefore I need to end my raw full range bench training hitting 455 pounds for singles and around 505 using boards. During the week prior to this I will have performed 3 sets of doubles at 445 and the week prior to that 435 and so on. All of the reps are performed using a pause—just like you will do in a meet. At the start of this training cycle, I will be hitting my working weight with 3 sets of 5s, but mid-way through the cycle I will drop my reps to 4s, then 3s, then doubles and finish the last raw workout with singles. I will then train with my bench shirt on which will be approximately 2-3 weeks out from the meet. My last workout is usually almost 2 weeks out from the meet.

Assistance work for the chest consists of dumbbell presses and I always go right up to my working set as the regular bench work has already warmed me up. I generally start with 140 pound dumbbells and will stay with those for the first 2 weeks of the training cycle. After two weeks, I will then increase to 150 pound dumbbells and stay with those for two weeks. I continue to increase my dumbbell weight every two weeks until I am using 170 pounders. All of the dumbbell work is performed on a flat bench hitting 2-3 sets of 5 reps.

Thursdays are a dedicated triceps workout. This workout consists of using boards raw which accomplishes a couple of things. One, it limits the range of motion and gives the pectorals a rest while taxing the triceps and two, it also allows one to load up on heavier weights thus allowing the upper body (back and shoulders) to experience heavier weights without using a bench shirt.

This workout starts with warming up to my working set of 3 using 2 boards with a normal (wide) grip with 3 sets of 5 at 405. I will then finish this routine using a narrow grip (shoulder width) using 2 boards hitting 3 sets of 5 with 315. At the end of this training cycle, I will be hitting 3 singles to the boards with 505 raw with a normal grip and 415 with a narrow grip.

Other optional assistance exercises that I perform during the "off-season" include performing weighted dips and decline presses. I will alternate the two exercises so they are performed every other Thursday. Dips are done using 150-170 pound dumbbells strapped around my waist and declines are performed using 405-455 pounds full-range raw.

Another issue I would like to address is bodyweight loss. I think many lifters underestimate the effect of weight loss on upper body strength. When I was dieting and losing 5-8 pounds to make the 148 pound class, I knew that I would lose between 3-5 pounds in my bench for each pound of bodyweight that I lost. Now this figure will change depending upon the size of a lifter, but, in general, I have found that all benchers will lose some strength when they lose a significant amount of body weight relative to their size.

I would also stress that losing power in your bench with weight loss is not just limited to losing physical leverages. Bench shirts that fit great at one's normal body weight will lose that fit with weight loss. For me, that means that bench shirts that fit perfectly at a bodyweight of 172 will not fit the same when I weigh 164. Again, an 8-10 pound bodyweight loss will be more significant for a 148/165 pounder (and even more for lighter lifters) as compared to a benchner that weighs, say, 220 pounds or above. I wanted to stress this because if you are truly serious about performing at a

high level in competition, you need to recognize the effects of weight loss and shirt fit.

Speaking of shirts, I have used both the Inzer Rage-X and the Titan Super Katana. Both are awesome shirts, but are very different in terms of how they perform. The Super Katana is very strong off the bottom and gives incredible support for the first 4-5 inches off the chest. After that, you are on your own. The Rage-X is strong at the bottom, but provides a little less support there than the Super Katana. However, the Rage-X provides more support throughout the entire range of motion of the bench, even up to lockout. I find that the Rage-X is a little more forgiving at the bottom, which in turn makes it easier to put the bar in the groove on the chest. For this same reason, I can put on a brand new Rage-X in a meet and bench to full range immediately without the benefit of breaking the shirt in. This cannot be done with the Super Katana. The Super Katana needs more time spent in it to stretch the material and requires that more weight be used to control the bar. For me, a properly fitted Super Katana requires several sessions in it before meet day. The benefit of the Super Katana is that if you can control the weight on the descent and hit your groove, you could potentially bench more in it compared with the Rage-X. In general, both shirts have their pros and cons. If you have not tried both, I would encourage you to do so to see what works for you.

Here are some other tips that I can pass along:

BREATHING: prior to taking your bench hand-off, take a deep breath and hold it throughout the entire lift. I always take a breath similar to the way I would take one if I were going to try and swim across a pool underwater—big and deep! The breath accomplishes a couple of things. It elevates your chest another inch or two which is an inch or two less that the bar has to descend in order to touch and it makes the bench shirt fit tighter. I not only use this technique during a meet, but on every single rep I perform while training in the gym. This means that if I am hitting 5 reps, I will do so using just one deep breath.

GRIP: I grip the bar to the full legal limit allowed by the USAPL and most other organizations (81cm). Gripping the bar in this way shortens the distance the bar travels from the chest to lockout. Also, if you are weaker on one side during the pressing movement, you can off-set your grip to compensate for the weaker side. As an example, if your left side is weaker and lagging behind the right side at lock-out, move your grip on both hands a finger width towards the left side of the bar. Be sure to move both hands evenly. Conversely, if you are weak on the right side, then off-set your grip towards the right side of the bar. This little adjustment results in your weaker side having to press less weight than your stronger side and should result in even extension at lock-out. When I had some nerve damage in my neck years ago, I had to off-set so much that immediately before I benched, I had to inform the head judges so they would not freak out because my grip was uneven!

FOOTWORK: I try and arch my back as much as I can in order to get my chest up higher. I have found that tucking my feet under me as much as possible will increase my arch and allows me to stabilize my body during the pressing movement.

YOUR TRAINING: In general I would recommend that anyone who wants to bench big be open to new ideas and techniques and not be afraid of change. Because of the differences in everyone's body types—age, health etc.—a routine that works for one may not be as effective for another. I developed something that works for me as a result of trial and error and by trying out the routines of many top benchers that I read about here in this very magazine. Hopefully, some of you will be able to benefit in the same way I have by learning from my experiences as well. «

