

If you've read any of my previous articles, you know I always stress that proper use of any lifting gear is crucial in achieving maximum results and the bench press shirt is no different. Following the success and impact of the squat suit and knee wraps was the bench press shirt, which became popular in the early 1980s. Since then, countless bench records have been set with them with many top lifters endorsing them, but it's not just as simple as ordering one from an ad in PL USA.

Since bench shirts first became popular, many choices have been made available. Most are differentiated by thickness, which includes single and multiple ply design or material such as denim. There are also designs such as closed back, Velcro and open back. If you are a novice or intermediate lifter or if this is the first time you decided to use a bench shirt, I strongly suggest a thinner or single ply, closed back shirt to start out with. After you gain more experience feel free to experiment with different styles, materials, and thicker shirts.

I can not overstate the importance of proper sizing. For the shirt to be most effective, you must give accurate measurements when ordering. I have seen lifters wearing shirts 1 or 2 sizes too big then gripe the shirt didn't work.

STARTIN' OUT

*A special section
dedicated to the
beginning lifter*

THE BENCH PRESS SHIRT

as told to Powerlifting USA by Doug Daniels

Don't provide larger measurements just to make yourself feel bigger than you really are. No one will ask what your shirt size is when you lift at a meet. I've seen veteran lifters struggle to get into their bench shirts that were smaller in size than many less accomplished lifters wear. On some, the bar could not even touch their chest until they had about 400 pounds loaded. That's how tight and supportive some veteran lifters prefer their bench shirts.

Getting one on is next on tap. Closed back shirts may require a buddy's help to get it on properly. If instructions on how to put it on come with the shirt, follow them to the letter for best fit. For a closed back shirt, the optimal position to assume while wearing one between attempts is with your arms crossed at the chest or with your hands behind your head. Some bench shirts have Velcro fasteners, etc. which can facilitate putting one on

and taking it off. These will require some practice to get the right fit. Again follow the provided instructions.

Training with a bench shirt is next. Since they have the same purpose and effect as squat suits, your training should follow the same principles. Using the shirt will cause it to wear and lose its spring, so consider having one for training and one for competition. The shirt used for training could also be used as backup for a meet in the event of your good shirt tearing. You can also use a looser or less expensive shirt for training and save your good one for the contest and the last few weeks of contest preparation. I suggest training in a shirt with singles and doubles only. Using it on higher rep sets defeats the purpose, as you would be using the shirt to lift the weight and not the muscles that need to be strengthened.

When training with one, experiment hitting the bar on the chest at different areas. Some lifters may get better results when the bar hits lower on their chest (towards their waist) than without one. Readjust your shirt prior each set in training. The shirt will alter your leverage, so experimentation is a must. When you find your optimal point on your chest, hit that spot on every rep in training with your shirt. It will then be second nature at the contest. If you change to a different style shirt your leverages may change as will the optimal position to hit the bar on your chest.

Now we turn to the meet itself. Make sure you bring at least one backup shirt with you in case your main shirt tears or gets lost. Put the shirt on for your last two warm-ups. Have your buddies re-adjust the shirt just before every warm-up and

contest attempt as they can get out of line.

There are a few more things to think about when using a bench shirt. First, most shirts supply explosive power off the chest to the midpoint of the lift, but after that, the shirt essentially loses its effectiveness. As a benchner you must always be aware of this. If not, you will not keep up with the bar and it will stall and you could miss the lift at the midpoint. The bar should be pressed explosively throughout the entire movement to help prevent stalling later in the lift. Just like a car is easier to push after it is moving than it is to start it moving, keep the bar moving also.

Actual additional weight gained by a lifter from a bench shirt can vary considerably. Most will gain a minimum of 5-10 pounds while others could gain 30-50 pounds or more. It depends on leverages as well as a particular weakness in the bench press. If a lifter has a weak start off the chest, the shirt will partially compensate for that weakness. Even if the lifter has good drive off the chest without a shirt, he still stands to benefit. The added drive off the chest can provide additional momentum to drive the bar past a sticking point further along in the lift provided he pushes hard and explosively early in the press. Lastly, an injured lifter could benefit from the support given by the shirt.

The bench shirt is as an integral part of powerlifting as a bat is in baseball. If you as a lifter do not use all your lifting gear to its fullest, you are giving your opponents an automatic advantage. Be sure the shirt you will use is legal at the meet you will compete in. Always bring another shirt as a backup or spare. More information on each brand and style of shirt is available at many of the vendors' websites which can help you choose the best shirt for you. If you have not yet tried a bench shirt, give one a try. If you have and haven't got the results you had expected, give my suggestions a try. Always remember that a bench shirt will not make up for poor or inconsistent training. You can bet your shirt on that.