



# BREAKING DOWN THE BENCH PRESS

BY BRANDON LILLY

**T**his article is something quite different than what you are probably used to. It's not full of promises that you will someday be the greatest bench presser ever. There is no "easy way to bench 500 lbs." There is no one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter system of reps and sets with picture perfect percentages that will make you a great bench presser. If that was the case, everyone would be awesome at the bench.

This article is dedicated to giving you real, tried-and-true information. How do I know? Well, I talk to great lifters every day. I can share parallels in thought and remove the limitations of methodology. The only method that I have found cohesive among the truly great lifters is that no matter what their base program (Westside, Cube, Sheiko, block periodization, etc.), it is highly modified and personalized. So, if you want to keep believing that your favorite lifter is doing the method you Googled in an article from five years ago, then I've got a contract waiting for me in the porn industry when I am done lifting.

## THE TRUTH

When it comes to building a massive bench press, what you need to realize right away is that you are not going to achieve this if you look like a stick figure. I look at great benchers over time, and it is alarmingly obvious that these men have the following:

**Huge arms.** This means biceps and triceps. So many times the biceps are overlooked and undertrained, but the truly great benchers realize how much the biceps leverage against the forearms, and how beneficial this is to drive the weight off of the chest. Look at Eric Spoto or Scot Mendelson. Both have forearms at or above the 20-inch

mark. They receive the weight and stabilize it on the way down.

On the back of most powerlifters' arms is usually some god-awful deformity of mass that most mortals call triceps. In a big bench, what you will find is that it is usually an overdevelopment in this area that makes them amazing benchers. Some are genetic mutants, others are blue collar, but without big guns your bench is going to lack severely.

**Lats.** I spoke with several of my bench friends (all who bench north of 600 lbs. raw), and when asked what the most important muscle in the bench is, all but two said the lats. The other two said the brain, and I can't fault them for that.

The lats are even more misunderstood and undertrained by up-and-comers than the arms. If utilized properly, the lats can be trained to lower and stabilize the weight, as well as being the first muscle that fires to begin the reversal of the weight you are lifting. I believe the lats have a tremendous lifting ability, so I train them five days a week. Other big benchers agree; some train them two or three times a week, others four to six. You will adapt. Get used to training your lats.

**Shoulders.** One of the easiest fixes in your bench is the shoulders. A few methods came out that were popular for geared lifters, and the information began to spread that overheads and shoulder work weren't that important because a bench shirt would keep the shoulders tight and help prevent injury. In my mind that is all well and good, but I like my body to protect itself, and one of my favorite benchers (Bill Kazmaier) was also a pretty damn good overhead presser. If it was good enough for Bill, it's good enough for me.





No amount of reps, heavy weight, speed work, de-loads, bands, chains or boards will build the bench of your dreams if you don't know how to train the bench, and understand the individual parts of the movement and all the muscles that are involved. It's kinda like having a hot car, but no keys.

### THE BENCH PRESS

No matter what level of bench presser you are, there are a few key points that I always look to with lifters that are crucial, and they can be the cornerstone for success.

Set up properly. Make sure you are centered on the bench, grab the bar evenly, flex your glutes and position your feet so that you can push hard down through the floor. Lastly, just before you take the bar out, set up tall on your traps and take a big breath into the belly and get as "big" as you can. Remember that you cannot complete a lift properly if it doesn't start properly.

Receive the bar. If you ever hope to bench big, you must prepare your body for the weight that is about to be over

But in all honesty, I have yet to train a client that began doing overheads who didn't send me a message raving about how much better their bench was doing, along with the stability they felt while benching. No material will ever replace real strength.

**Pecs.** Every guy who walks in the gym wants a chest like Arnold. To

have a big bench press, you need a big set of pecs – but not in the same way as a bodybuilder. The pecs help by contracting hard off the chest, and again flexing hard at the top to assist in lockout.

What does all that information have to do with anything? It sets in stone the truth about what makes a big bench.

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you. Once you have perfected your setup, you need to learn to receive the bar. I do this by beginning the bar-body connection by squeezing my hands as tightly as possible. Don't think it will work? Sit in a chair and make a fist as tightly as you can. Do you feel your forearms, biceps, triceps and lats tighten up? That is the foundation for how you want to receive the bar.

I take one big breath when I bench. I count, "one, two," then take my breath and on what would be "three" I get the handout. I try to position it in a straight line just below where my sternum is if it were touching my chest. I wait for the spotter's hands to clear the bar, and I begin my decent.

**Lower the weight.** How you lower the bar can make or break the entire lift. I tell lifters to lower the bar as quickly as they can, all while maintaining control of the bar. Most lifters need to bring their elbows into the body as they lower the bar, as this creates tightness throughout the arms and into the lats. What I have found for myself and for others is that a 90-de-

gree position on the chest is ideal. This is when the wrist lines up with the elbow from all viewing angles and allows for a strong pressing position. Imagine punching something; you want as much of the body in line with your wrist to generate maximum force. Same rule applies. Lastly, do not lose tightness once the bar is on your chest. Stay as tight as possible to prepare for the reversal.

**Explode off the chest.** If everything is correct up to this point, you will be set up to drive the bar perfectly off the chest. I often see lifters fall apart with one simple failure: They let their wrists go soft and end up pushing the bar back into the rack. This will not happen if you are gripping the bar properly. Next, when the bar is leaving the chest, you should be driving the heels down hard through the floor and back. One common mistake people make is pushing in the wrong direction. They feel as if they should push "down" into the floor, but what should actually be happening is pushing the heels down as if you were to be driv-

ing your head off of the bench. This will case the body to rise even higher on the traps, extending the rib cage upward, thus shortening the lockout. While all of this is happening, you should be driving up with the arms but allowing the elbows to uncoil outward so that they stay in line with the bar. This is crucial, and will make locking out much, much easier.

**The lockout.** This is the most challenging of all the "parts" because it is when many people perceive all of the hard work is done. I see many lifters miss at this portion of the lift because their mind lets them go into "cruise control" when in reality, you should be driving harder than ever at this point. In training, many powerlifters do short reps, or "bodybuilding" reps, where they don't fully lock out their reps. For many, this equals a death sentence on competition day. I was told by Bob Coe and Dave Hoff during my time at Westside to overly lock every rep. Bob said, "It won't make a difference in a week or maybe a month, but in six months, a year, five years, those last

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few lockout inches will add up.” That was the single best bench advice that I ever got.

As you are driving upward and locking out, try to follow the bar with your eyes so you are locking out just above the nose, or directly above the eyes. The last thing is to always make sure you hold it for a second before you rack. It teaches you to lockout under control, and this carries over to the competition.

#### **YOUR OWN APPROACH**

I could sit here and preach to you that The Cube Method is the be-all, end-all — that it will make you the best bencher in the world — but no method can claim that. As I said above, the greatest lifters all have their own approach to the bench.

This is what I know is necessary for building the best bench possible:

- Train reps when you are further away from a competition and build up the weak areas in your bench with compound and individualized movements. Focus more on heavier weights as the competition draws near.
- Train the entire body with the

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focus of all the powerlifts. It sounds crazy, but if you can begin to understand how each body part compliments the three powerlifts, the more easily you will train those body parts because you understand it is necessary for the end goal.

- Film your sets. This will make you a YouTube star, but more importantly, this will allow you to watch your form over and over, and find your flaws. If you hit a new PR but it was achieved with bad form, realize that moving forward you will need to address the form

issue or new PRs will become harder and harder to achieve.

- Warm up properly. I see so many guys jump through their sets so quickly that it makes no sense when they attempt a max weight. Then again, I see others that warm up for an eternity before they take a maximum weight. Practice this, and find an ideal set of warm-up sets and reps that allows for peak performance.

- Train your back like your life depends on it.
- Set goals — short-term, long-term, whatever it takes to keep the train moving forward — and keep your goals in focus. Also, make sure that you have a plan that supports those goals. Make a plan and stick to it.

- Mix it up. Don’t expect what works today to work forever. Milk what works for as long as you can, but admit when it stops and be ready to adapt.

There is no magic trick or special method that will make you a big time bench presser, but if you apply these principles and weave them into your training, you will not only find yourself a happier lifter, but with a bigger bench to boot. **PM**