

# Bench Press Training for the Master Lifter

as told by Will Morris

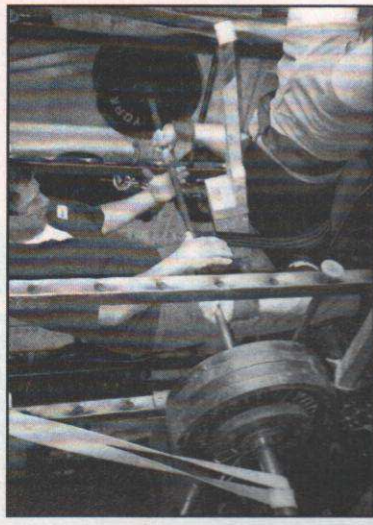
As we age, it becomes increasingly difficult to make gains in the bench press. With that said, there is much we can do to improve the bench press, if we lift smart and train properly. I have tried many methods in order to bench more weight, some were total failures and some were very helpful. It is true that what works for one lifter will not always work for another. Big chests and short arms are a major asset, but I have seen men with long arms and smaller chests do very well in the bench press. I have a man in this category from my gym who is a very good bench, his name is Greg and he has been lifting for four years. He weighs 210 lbs., he is 46 years old and he can bench 420 lbs., double bodyweight.

For those who use the bench shirt, you should get a good pop out of the bottom and you must build your lock out strength. This is very important as there is no shirt that will do much to help you lockout. Working your triceps alone will not solve your lock out problems either. By adding boards, bands, and a common sense approach, you can add many pounds to your bench press. What amazes me is, even at a national and world class level, I still see lifters, after struggling to make a opener, failing to make their second or third attempts because the lift stalls at the point where the triceps kick in. I have seen some lifters do this for years. Yes, I was one of them.

Another thing that I have seen is a veteran lifter who comes to a contest with an old shirt that has been stretched and worn out, and yet the lifter refuses to accept that the shirt is shot. It's my opinion that a shirt will last about a year, and that's if you use it 3 to 4 times in a contest, and in training for those contests. While on this subject, you must take the time to wash your shirt after using it. Not just once or twice a cycle because your shirt will dry rot from sweat. Take the time to rinse your shirt

your shirted bench. If you bench without a shirt you are looking at the same issue. This will take time. It took me about six months to do this. You must be patient, but you will like the results.

If you don't have boards, you will need to make them. Purchase one 6x2x8, cut the first board at three feet, then cut the next three at 18 inches. You can use heavy duty rubber bands, velcro, or any method to attach your boards together. You will need two spotters; one to hand you the weight and one to hold the boards. I have used a Super Wrap tied around my chest to hold the boards in place, when I only had one other person in the gym. Make sure you have a strong, alert spotter when you do this, because it is risky. I always do my boards after my heavy sets. Here is an example: make sure you stretch out your shoulders, chest, and triceps for at least five minutes prior to taking your first warm up. The following is my first

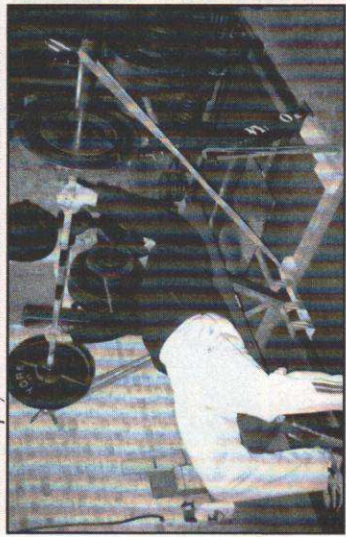


**Greg Stang** doing the 3 board hang band bench press. This lift works the bench from midway to lock out. Note, the spotter's hands are near the bar, and the bands are attached to the top of the rack.

week of training in a 6 to 9 week cycle. I will train on Wednesday for my heavy day, and on Saturday for my speed day. I take 135 for two sets of 10 reps. The first set is slow, and the second set is fast. (In colder weather always train in a loose sweat shirt to keep your body heat in). Next I will take 225 for 5 reps at a fast clip, and then it's 275 for three reps, then 325 for a single. I will add 10 lbs. to this shirtless bench each week. At this point I will put on a loose shirt and do 3 sets of 3 reps with 360 lbs. with a start and press signal on each rep. Next, I go to the four board press for 3 sets of 3 to 5 reps with 405 lbs. Each week I add 10 lbs. to this lift, and each three weeks I put on a tighter shirt. The last three weeks I will use the shirt I will compete in, which most times it is my tightest shirt. If you change shirts after your opening bench, make sure that you have ample time and that your shirt is set properly. It is critical that you lock out, as best as you can, each rep. If you can't do a rep or two, on your board press you must drop your weight down and make sure that you stay in the groove on each rep, and do not let the weight drift back towards the rack.

Next I move to the hang band/4 board press. If you don't have bands, please purchase a complete set of four bands. I have a squat rack that has cross bars at the top and I pull my bands through and put them inside the weight at about an inch from the inside of my hands. You will have to judge the size of your band by how much you bench and how much you can handle in this lift. Again, keep your strong and alert spotters close in all your heavy lifts. I like to have my spotter's hands on the bar. I would guess that if you bench 300 lbs. an

**Speed Bench** is done on your second training day. Above the bands run from the floor to the bar. This lift is about SPEED not STRENGTH. You can do the Speed Bench with the bands going under the bench as well. Note (below) how 2x4s are used to keep the bands down. Keep your sets of 3 to 3 seconds or less.



inch band will work. At 375, a one and one half inch band, and at a 450 bench, a two inch band. This will change as you get stronger. In this lift, I will do 2 to 3 sets of 3 to 5 reps. Like the board press, don't let the bar drift back. After this, I remove my shirt and move to weighted dips, 25 lbs. x 5 to 6 reps for 3 to 4 sets. I will add 5 lbs. a week up to two weeks before my contest. Keep in mind you only need to do the half dip as you are only looking to build strength at the top. I stop all assistance lifts two weeks from the meet, except prone triceps extensions. These I stop one week out from the meet. Next I do dumbbell flies. The weight starts in front of my lower stomach and arcs up over my head from the side, again 3 to 4 sets of 5 to 6 reps. This exercise helps my shoulder strength a lot. If you can't do these, then try dumbbell front raises. Lastly, I move to one of my favorite lifts, the prone triceps extensions or 'nose breakers'. They are set for 3 to 4 sets of 5 to 6 reps. I start with 150 to 160 and add 5 to 10 lbs. a week. Don't wait around too long between sets. Try and set a good pace between sets, so that when you get to a contest and there is only 10 or fewer in your flight you will not get as tired.

On Saturday I do my speed bench workout and speed in the bench is as important as power. You don't have to use a lot of weight to increase your speed. I will start at 135 lbs. and I will add five lbs. a week. If my speed slows down, I will back down on the weight. I only use the half inch bands doubled up one for the speed bench, and I do only 5 sets of 3 reps. Make sure each rep is pushed up as high as you can. If you can lock out, do so. I can not lock out my right arm. Each set should take only 3 to 4 seconds. When starting the speed bench I would suggest only using about one third of the weight that you benched in your last meet. Going

up or down a class will change the weight you use for this lift. One point I want to make: I like a 'press' signal at the meet and in the gym from someone who has a very loud voice. When this is practiced in the gym you will explode at the meet. Make sure you have a very experienced lifter give you the press signal at the meet because I have heard some people yell 'press' and they were too soon and the refs turned down the lift because of this very bad error.

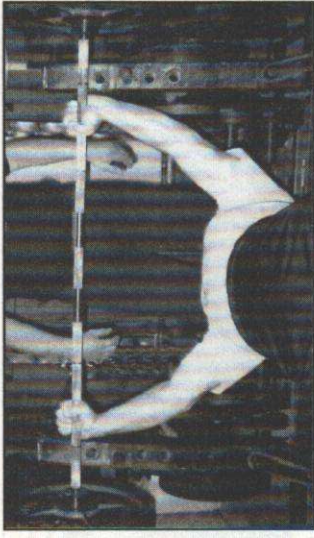
In order to do the speed bench you must be able to attach the bands to the floor. If your bench rack does not have an iron strip running across the bottom you will have to improvise. You can run an eight foot 2x4 under your bench and block it down from the seat you lay on. Next, place the hook screws into your 2x4s at about 6 to 8 inches from the end of your bar. Make sure that your 2x4s are 6 to 8 inches out from the bar. Then, when you

take the weight in your hand the bar is over your chest. Put one end of the band into the hook and pull the other end over the bar and back to the hook. For those of you who can't double up the band because it offers too much resistance and slows down your speed, just put the band in the hook and tie the other end of the band off at the bar by putting a knot into it. Keep the band snug at all times and keep in mind, this is about speed, not strength. If you do not want to use a 2x4, then use two heavy dumbbells. Make sure they are stationary by putting plates next to them to prevent them from rolling. Back to the Saturday workout. After doing my speed bench, I do three sets of dips only using bodyweight. I do these as quickly as I can for 10 to 15 reps. As stated before, you only need to do the half dip. Next, I do 3 to 4 sets of the pec deck for 6 to 8 reps. I finish off with 3 to 4 sets of 8 reps of the standing press outs with a rope. These are done from the lat pulldown machine and are pulled over my head to lock out. Last, I do crunches with weights behind my head, 10 to 20 lbs. for 30 to 40 reps and weighted leg raises also for 30 to 40 reps. Strong abs are a must for all lifters, young and old.

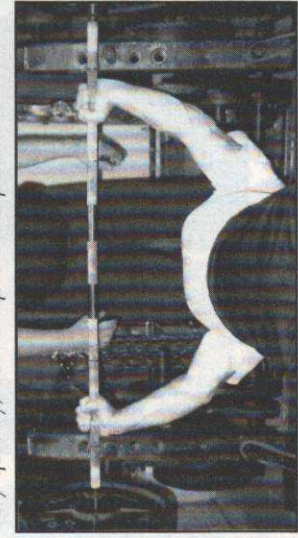
When benching never ever let the weight sink into your chest or relax. Stay tight at all times when you bench, as it will help your speed off the bottom. Some of you are 'arch benchers' and some use only a little arch. I prefer to bench with a flat back, as this keeps my butt down and keeps my feet from moving. It also helps to keep the bar in the groove. I have seen several high arch benchers drive the weight off their chest fast and strong only to have the weight go too far back toward the rack, out of the groove, and thus they miss the lift. For those of you who have had this happen, try not to arch as much and squeeze the bar to help prevent the bar from going back into the rack or getting out of the groove. At the meet, always sit facing the back of your chair with your arms in and resting on the chair back, as this will help keep your shirt tighter as you wait to lift.

Use sleeves and baby powder to put your shirt on. The shirt needs to be set in tight bench if not done properly. You must make sure that your shirt is pulled down on both sides and most important the chest must be pulled down. This must be done on each attempt, both in the gym and at the meet, as this is most important. The best way to do this is to first pull your singlet up over your shoulders, then have a very trusted lifter reach up under your singlet and pull it down while you are bending over toward him. Next, straighten up and pull your belt tight, since you must use your belt to keep your shirt down. I suggest a lighter, thinner belt. Keep in mind, the sweet spot or the narrowest point in your shirt panel is where you want to start the lift, not an inch above or below. In the gym, put some chalk on the bottom of the bar and when you bench the chalk will show you where the bar touched your chest. You must get to know your shirt like the back of your hand and this is done by training in it well before your contest day.

I have seen some very good benchers take the weight at arms length with their shoulders up. This is not good, as you should lower your shoulders down as far as you can before you get the start signal. This can take several inches off of how far



**Above, Will Morris** with his shoulders up, below, they are down. This is where I start my bench at a contest. Once you learn how to do this, your bench will go up, very quickly, both in speed and power.



you have to bench the weight. Try this in the gym first, with about 225 lbs., and while the weight is at arms length, have a training partner use a tape measure and measure the distance from the bottom of the bar to your chest with your shoulders up. Next, do this with your shoulders down. The difference may surprise you. For me, it is about four inches less. Also, train with different grip widths on all but your heavy sets as this will help strengthen your pecs. Bar speed coming down is very critical. I recommend a slow descent, as this will give you a faster take off. For the big lifters who handle the big weights, it will help to keep the bar itself from oscillating. A training log is very important. Keep a good record of your training; how you felt, did you have a cold, did the weight feel heavy or light, and add in your bodyweight on each day you train. Include when you have a good training day or a bad one, also what size shirt that you trained in that day. You can always go back to your training log to see what worked and did not work. I have every workout that I have done since 1977. Invest a few bucks in a work out book.

In closing, for those of you who do not squat you should start. The squat can add pounds to your bench if you do high reps, ten and above. Squats will enlarge your chest and will give added strength to your legs. This helps all benchers who drive with their legs when they are benching. I hope that some of you will get some helpful hints from this article. You will travel many miles and invest many dollars in your quest for a bigger bench press, so why not take the time to do it the right way. You lift the way you train and even under the eyes of experienced trainers mistakes can and will be made, so invest in a camcorder and take the time to tape all your bench workouts and contests lifts and review them again and again. May the bench gods be good to you.

**Editors Note:** Will Morris has won 9 ADFFA/USAPL national masters in the 242 and 275 classes. He's a 3 time IPF world masters champion who holds the current IPF masters bench in both the 242 lb. class, (60-64) with 402 lbs., and in the 275 lbs. with 442 lbs. He also holds the world record total 1548 lbs. at 275 lbs. Will has been competing for almost 30 years.