

# STARTIN' OUT

A special section  
dedicated to the  
beginning lifter

## Backing Up Your Bench as told to PL USA by Doug Daniels

It would be pretty safe assuming that everybody out there would like to add to their bench press. The normal route is extra or different work on the pushing muscles like the pecs, delts and triceps. This is fine, but how about exploring a totally different route and work your pulling muscles or back harder.

Most top benchers include some back work in their routine like lat pulldowns, rows, etc. Though the back muscles do not directly push the bar up in the bench press, they add stability and act as 'launching pads' for the pushing muscles. I always knew that, but I never really appreciated their contribution until just recently. Yeah, even us PL USA writers don't know everything all the time.

I decided to increase the amount and intensity of back work in our routines for a few months with no particular bench press benefits in mind. My training partners, Jim Vrabel and Ed Boncela, and I undertook a type of 'back building' routine once a week where we hit our back with 20 sets. After 6 weeks, we all noticed that our benches were consistently moving up without any real explanation. The only thing that really changed was our increased dedication to working our backs. Ed was the first to hit on that and he was right. The weights felt lighter and we had fewer workouts with no progress.

You may be thinking that 20 sets of back work is just too much, and if not handled correctly, it may be. First, schedule a period of 6-8 weeks in your off season to dedicate to your 'back building'. Blitzing during a period too near a contest, could be a disaster and result in burnout. Work the back between your squat and deadlift workouts or hit it after your deadlifts or squats. You also may think that your lower back will surely tire with all this extra work, but not so if you limit your back work to moves that don't stress your lower area. Let's look at what our 2 month workout looked like.

Since the back structure is so large and complex, for best results it's preferable to hit the back from many angles through several exercises for more complete development. We would always start with wide grip chins for 3 sets. Chins are best to start with because if you do them later, you will be too fatigued to get many reps. For those of you who can't do chins, try wide trip lat

pulldowns til you build your strength level up. Next we would do 3 sets of T-bar rows on a machine that supported our lower backs. These are good for the upper and mid back. Next we'd turn to 3-5 sets of dumbbell shrugs with a full range of motion up and down. If you're really strong in the traps do either high reps or use a barbell, but shrug in a full range of motion. Next we'd add 4-5 sets of close grip lat pulldowns with a 'V' or triangle shaped bar to the sternum. After that, we'd do 3 sets of medium grip palms facing each other pulldowns. The finishing move was 3-4 sets of one arm dumbbell rows with your knee on a weight bench for lower back support. This move is best done with a medium weight. That would add up to about 20 sets of back work that hit the back muscles from just about every angle and didn't stress the lower back.

We generally used lifting straps for most of these exercises. Lifting straps are invaluable for back exercises. Without straps, most lifters can not hold on to the weight for the whole set, but the most valuable feature of straps is that they let you pull more with your elbows and lats than with your biceps which are the weak links of the chain. Think about pulling the elbows back or down, depending on the exercise, not pulling with you biceps and you'll notice better gains. You may use a little less weight at first, but you will be reaching your target muscle group to a higher degree than you did before. For your deadlifts, we don't recommend dependence on straps, we're just talk-



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ing about assistance moves here.

I also believe that when working your back, you're better off using a moderate weight instead of a heavy weight. With a moderate weight, you can 'feel' the move better and, again, work your target groups harder. It will also permit better form.

20 sets or so may seem like a lot and you may think you need to be on a heavy drug cycle to get through them, but that's not the case. By emphasizing the back in the off season, when your training intensity and workload is relatively low, your recuperative powers will be better able to accommodate this demand. If 20 sets is out of the question, try

10-12 sets, concentrating on chins, T-bars, shrugs, and V-bar pulldowns. In addition to extra back width and thickness, you'll notice increased bicep and forearm power and size.

You may want to ease into this routine over a period of 2-3 weeks, starting with 10 or so sets. Even after you finish the 6-8 weeks, you may want to maintain a higher amount of back work in your routine. Reps are up to you, but we kept them around 6-10 and worked hard.

One source that has been invaluable to me on proper exercise methods has been Health for Life's 'Secrets of Advanced Bodybuilders'. Though it's not a powerlifting book, it supplies the reader with unique and effective exercise variations and theory. Assistance work is important to the powerlifter and this book gives great clues on the best ways to do these exercises. The section on back work is especially good. You can find order info for Health for Life products in IRON MAN.

I hope I created a little interest in the importance of back work for all the bench press. It isn't just pecs, delts, and triceps after all. I didn't mention that increased back development will have positive effects on your squat and deadlift too. Next off season, try 'backing up' your bench.