

# BENCH-SHIRT BLUES

as told to PLUSA by  
J.M. Blakley



Love 'em or hate 'em it looks like they're here to stay. The truth is, that what started out as a good idea has, like lots of things in extreme sports, gone a bit too far. I am the first to admit it: Bench shirts are out of hand these days. But let me follow that statement immediately by saying that I'm not about to let my competitors leave me in the dust just because I don't exactly agree with the way the sport is moving. I think there is something inherently wrong when you load 50, 100, or even 150 pounds more than you are capable of lifting (by yourself) onto a bar for your opening lift. That just seems dangerous. Not to mention artificial. You are still lifting the weight yourself. But Good God! If you max out at 450 w/o a shirt and blast up 605 at the meet wearing one, certainly no one can reasonably argue that some real aid was not afforded your

450 pound press! Let's face it, nobody wears a bench shirt to protect their shoulders. They wear a bench shirt because they can lift a hell of a lot more weight! I know the shirt was originally intended to save wear and tear on the shoulders. But today's shirt is nothing like that in function or in design. It is engineered to boost poundage and not as a joint protector. I won't even waste time arguing with anyone who maintains that "all it (the shirt) does is support my shoulders." I still have to lift all the weight! That's just nonsense and I won't give it any more attention. The shirt makes it possible to "lift" more than you can lift—plain and simple. I am conceding the artificiality of it. But that's sort of like the first time a fiberglass pole was used in the pole vault. All the steel pole guys said it was the pole bending in half and

doing all the work and called it "cheating." Well, I'd like to see a guy vault over 19 feet with a steel pole. Nowadays it's carbon fibers and graphite and such. The point is that the sport ahead even though there were protests of artificiality. What I'm saying is that just as it is extremely unlikely that there would be many 19 foot vaults with steel poles, it is also unlikely there would be many 700 pound benches without bench shirts. (There is only one single individual who has done this legitimately and it has never been repeated; my respects to Mr. Henderson.)

There are 5 (and most surely soon to be 6/700) pound benchers in my own town! I can say with certainty that without the bench shirt there would be none. That is just the level that the sport is at. At the top level, the bench shirt is an essential

part of the competitive endeavor. Competing today without it is a disadvantage akin to an NFL line-backer hitting the field without a helmet! It is pointless to argue about it.

So what do you do if you've got a case of the Bench Shirt Blues? You get to work! Quit whining and get busy figuring out how to use it right! Sure, I still do an occasional meet "raw" and that's a great marker of strength and lots of fun, I advocate doing an occasional meet shirt-free just for the challenge of it. But don't count on the sport swinging back to the good ol' days where lifts were made in T-shirts and singlets. It won't happen! Get yourself up to speed with the technology and learn the shirt.

What should you expect from a bench shirt? At a minimum, you must strive for an added 60 pounds.

But for a rule of thumb we'd better call it 100 pounds for an average and 130+ pounds for a top end. No matter what style or make, if you aren't getting 60, you haven't learned to use it. Most people talk to get 40 or so. There is plenty of room for improvement! I wrote an article on alterations and size changes, you will

where I said everyone should keep working on the shirt and try to get 100 pounds out of it as a top end. I had seen this done and knew it was possible even though I was getting only about 80 or 90 consistently from my shirt. Now, in 2002, I am re-adjusting that expectation. I have on more than one occasion gotten the 100 pounds myself (although not consistently) but have seen people get 150-200 pounds out of the shirt... (and their skill with it). I know, I know it seems unbelievable especially if you're at 35 or 45 or so now, but I have one trainee who is getting 130 every time. I have spoken to several of today's top lifters at major competitions and they reveal that 150 is nothing and that much more can be attained... and then they prove it by lifting incredible poundages right before my eyes! I believe them! I've seen it! And you can believe me, I'm working very, very hard to get stronger, but I'm working even harder to get the groove on my shirt to be able to get more than 100 pounds out of it. I used to think I had to bench 630 raw to hit a 715-720. Now I believe that a raw 630 bench can put me over seven and a half. If a guy benching 375 raw hits a 500 right in front of you, you start asking yourself why not me?

The first thing to do is to start expecting more. In fact, you must demand more from your shirt-work. It's admittedly tough to think of all that weight on the bar when you haven't used those poundages before. You must get past that and you must believe that you can do it if others can. If you don't expect more, you'll end up satisfied with only 55 or 60 pounds thinking "hey, 60 pounds is pretty good!" Well, that ends right now. You can do much better than that. Even if you're at 90 pounds or more, keep pushing the envelope. If no one kept pushing we wouldn't know that you can actually get 150 pounds out of a shirt! Whatever you're getting now, set a higher expectation for yourself! You have to believe strongly that it is do-able.

The reason that this need for belief is so important is that it will not be an easy task. I NEVER SAID IT

you only some of what the middle part gave you. Likewise, if you lifting the bar too high toward the throat you lose the support of the ball as well. The ball offers the most help to you where it is the biggest, and has the most pressure. The bench shirt is the same. There is an arc of support



LOW PRESSURE



HIGH PRESSURE

pull the bar back toward their head (back over their chest) and muscle the lift up. You can spot this mistake when you see the bar travel horizontally right after the press call. This begins to move up to lockout. This makes use of the shirt's supportive qualities, but little power is gained from the initial push. And it usually fails.

The other common mistake is to let the bar fall off the bubble toward your face. This can be disastrous! The lift looks OK at first then as the bar rises the elbows flare and the bar moves up the chest and promptly falls like a rock in water toward your neck! This is the same problem of not staying on the bubble but to the top side of the arc. At times a lifter will get "handcuffed" this way and stall out, but more often the spotters end up saving the guy's teeth! Remember: the greatest benefit to your lift is where you feel the greatest pressure as you lower the bar. Don't go around this pressure. Neither high nor low. Go right into it! Your eyes feel like they will pop out and your head feels like it will explode and the shirt is biting your triceps and armpits like a pit bull terrier... and if that's what you feel, I'd say you were on the right track! Don't fall below the pressure toward your abdomen. Keep lowering the bar on the bubble! Hold your line. Go right for the point of greatest pressure. Pressure is your friend! Embrace it. Don't hide from it.

The pressure is what is going to help you hoist that extra 100 pounds on the bar that you can't lift. That energy has to come from somewhere! Learn to tolerate pressure. You will get used to it. Lower the bar slowly and with great control. Steer the bar into the pressure. Pay attention. Feel for the most discomfort and you'll probably be right on it! This energy will come back to you on the press.

If you can't feel "the bubble" then your shirt is most likely too loose. I don't know you and I've never seen you lift, but I can say with good confidence that your shirt is probably too loose for you! This is an early stumbling block that only patience and help from a mentor or coach will remedy. Suffice it to say that whatever you now think is too tight is actually too loose and that what you think is impossibly too tight is almost tight enough and what you think is completely ridiculous is too tight is just right! Only experience and mentoring will change this but a good rule of thumb is that your

from your collar to the abdomen and at some point the pressure of the shirt is greatest. This is the groove of the shirt. It can be so supportive that it can be difficult to even get the bar to touch the chest. The shirt's fibers and construction tighten up and most trainees feel that they can not make the bar touch where they normally would because the pressure (and pain) is so great. They make the classic mistake of moving the bar toward their stomach away from the bubble's greatest strength (low on the arc). They move around the pressure of the bubble and also out of their own bench groove. This leaves the lifter with little compression from the shirt and with their hands too far in front of their elbows and shoulders. It's tough to push at that angle and the bar usually winds up falling back down after traveling up only 3-4 inches. You can't bench from "behind" the bar. You must be "under" the weight. Sometimes a lifter is lucky enough to touch the bar below the bubble and then with great effort

