

WORKOUT OF THE MONTH

THE DECLINE PRESS AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO BENCH PRESSING as told to Powerlifting USA by Wade Johnson

As my career in lifting has progressed, I have learned that continual linear progress gets harder and harder, even with improvements in form. While that is certainly not a startling discovery, it did spark some thought and theory behind my training and for the group of lifters who choose to follow my suggestions. As I progressed from struggling with my bench press to actually being able to bench a respectable weight, obviously I had to make changes in my training. Overtraining had caused me to struggle. I was getting older and training without enhancements, so to speak. I wanted to avoid injury and to maximize training. I chose to avoid movements that weren't really proving beneficial. In short, I wanted to make sure I was doing the right things without diluting my training.

After competing for the last time in 2002, my bench was a big let down. I was injured, but I was really expecting my bench to come through. I had good meets that year and then not so good, where the bench press was concerned. Not only was the weight a concern, but so was my inability to be consistent. I came back to compete in the WPA Worlds in 2003 and hit a personal best of 570, but I knew I was leaving something in the tank. This led me to question my current methods of training. I was previously doing speed work ala Westside and doing some board pressing and mainly working in the shirt. I struggled to find a happy medium with the shirt sessions and just plain old flat pressing with no gear. Doing mostly speed work left me without

a feel for heavy weights. And each shirt day left me somewhat beat up. I related my training to my inconsistency issue. At the end of 2002, I approached a writer/trainer friend of mine whom I knew had coached a great number of lifters to big benches. He wants to remain nameless, so I will respect that. And while I am at it, my remarks about any of Louie's theory and principles are only a personal statement. I have nothing but the utmost respect for all that Lou does and stands for, however; it wasn't working for me and of all the folks in the world, I know Louie would support me searching for answers as they relate to me. For the record, we have lifters in our group who still use speed work.

The suggestion made to me involved the decline press as a primary movement for my bench press training. Just like you are now, I was thinking, "what in the hell is this old man thinking about. Using an angled press to increase my competition bench? Is he crazy?" Initially, I just plain resisted. Then, I added some declines to my training sessions. Finally, I gave in after my 2003 meet and decided to give this a real and honest go. I was really tired of being beat up all the time with sore shoulders and elbows. Then he really dropped the bomb on me. I had to stop doing any isolation work on triceps. What in the blue hell? That was exactly my question and I initially argued, but I knew in order to give it a real try, I had to be open-minded and stay honest. Here is the workout.

We would start on a "one to one" alternate from decline to flat bench, meaning one day a week I would decline and then my second session, I would flat bench. The rep and set scheme would be the same each session, just using different benches and grips. Another thing, there are no percentages, just a weight that you can do for the prescribed reps and nothing more. I will get back to weight in just a moment. Here are the outlines for both sessions.

I have found how I warm-up is also a big issue. As you get older, this becomes even more important. Also, to you young lifters out there, the muscles and tendons you strain today could come back to haunt you later in life. Not just in the lifting arena, but in other aspects of life as well. Please, take the time to warm-up properly. Not only to avoid injury, but to promote your performance in training and the competitive platform. I will outline for you my warm-up. It is what works for me and I will explain myself as we go.

I will start with 2-3 sets of 15 of the standing rotator with 5 lb dumbbells. This just loosens me up and pumps some blood into the shoulder area and is good for the rotator cuff. I will also do some side raises and hammer curls using a very light weight. I have found that this makes my shirt fit better for flat sessions and that I am more stable in the decline session, and that if the shoulder and bicep tendons are warmed prior to benching with any significant weight, I am less prone to let the bar drift over my face at the top of my bench press. I generally do a couple of sets, in the midst of this, I will do the bar, 95 and 135 for my warm-up on the bench. By this time, I have a little sweat going and feel loose. I will finish my warm-up with some light pull downs and some side rotators on a crossover machine. Again, I use very light weights and just do 2-3 sets. By this time, I am well into some weight and my arms and shoulders feel great. This seems like a lot, but it is very light and allows me to warm-up quickly. I will do these while the others are warming up and it takes very little time.

Monday - decline bench set at a medium angle (15 to 20 degrees). I was to use a medium close grip and it was decided, due to my size, to use a grip just shy of shoulder width. So I used my pinky on the rings. All sets are pre-planned, including warm-ups.

For example, a lifter that can bench in the mid 300's, we would start them this way.

Warm-up sets:

Bar x 12, 95x10, 135x8, 185x5, 225x3,

275x1. Then on to the working sets: 315x6

We always strive for 6 reps with 5 reps being acceptable and 4 or less meaning the weight was too heavy. If the weight was made with 6 reps too easily, then we add 10 lbs. Then, do a second set of 6. The last set, yes I said last set, is 8 reps with 20 pounds less than the top

set of 6. The key is the rest intervals. After the last warm-up, we rest a minimum of 7 minutes between sets. Also note, no percentages. We go strictly by how we feel and take what the session gives us. I have had to learn that the only bad session is a missed session. Our progress is from the consistent sessions and not always by added weight per session. Also, about every third session, if we are feeling good, we will do our first set of 6 and then follow that with two sets of triples. This allows us to handle some heavier poundages.

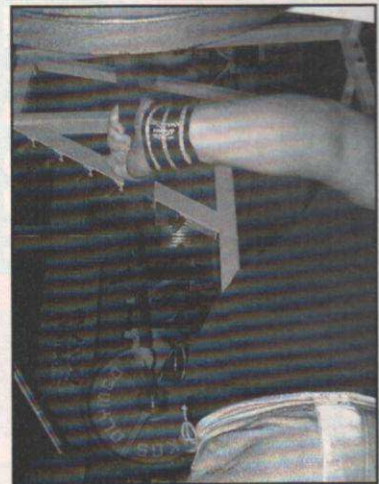
On the Flat sessions, which is Thursday and 72 hours apart from the decline session, the set and rep scheme remained the same. We only adjusted the weight that would allow us to get 6 working reps, something that would press us, but not quite to failure.

Assistance would be in this order. Lats, shoulders, biceps and traps. We always make sure to do some abs to finish on all sessions. The set and rep scheme is 3-5 sets of 8-12 reps. We lean to doing 3 sets and strive for 12 reps. The idea on the reps is never do fewer than 8 and never more than 12. That gave us a good view of what weight to train with. If we could not get 8 clean reps, it was too heavy and if 12 reps were easy enough we could do 15, we added weight.

For lats we typically used a rowing movement. The idea is not unlike many routines and that is to train the lats in the plane of the bench press groove. That is not to say you should not do pull downs or chins. Find a movement and do it. Vary it as you see fit. Ultimately, it is more important that the lats are trained more than what movement that is. We choose to row mostly and will vary different types of rows with different grip widths. Generally, if we row on Monday's session with a wide grip, we use a narrow or medium grip on the Thursday session. So, there is always a bit of variance. This is good for the muscle and good for the mental state of the lifter, keeping things a little fresh and interesting.

For shoulders, we primarily train the rear delts only. We use the pec dec for the rear delts and will occasionally use bent over raises. I stopped using dumbbells because of an old injury that doing the raises seems to aggravate, but I do not get the pain from using the machine. We generally will avoid training the front or anterior head of the delts to prevent overtraining. All the pressing hits this area pretty hard, but we will occasionally do what I have labeled lying cable front raises.

With the biceps, the only movement we use is the hammer curl. We do not pronate or supinate or otherwise, just the typical hammer curl. We do both arms together, teaching all the muscles to work together simultaneously.



This is the lock out position. Note that Wes has allowed the shoulders to "open" up a bit, or roll out somewhat. This is something we strive to correct. Again, tucking the elbows in and really putting pressure on the lats is important, which will make pressing power the significant issue.

Shrugging, in my opinion, is one of the most important issues to address with bench pressing. On bench days, we will use dumbbells, a cambered bar or the Hammer Strength Shrug machine. We always use a moderately heavy weight and do static holds for a count of 2 at the top of the shrug. The idea with this type of shrug is to shrug like you want the top of the traps to touch the bottom of the ears. That is when you know you are high enough.

We finish up each session with 100 reps of abs, whatever type of movements you like. Again, no triceps isolation. The close grip decline provides all triceps stimulation. Your triceps will be trashed from the pressing. Anything more, and you will simply overtrain them. This also keeps a lot of the little nagging pains and injuries from occurring once press-downs and skull

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This illustrates touching low. We want the shortest stroke, from touch to finish. Note that the grip is 'pinky on the rings' (photographs courtesy of Wade Johnson)

crushers are eliminated. As it was told to me, "You can overtrain the triceps by pumping air into a bicycle tire". Most importantly, training in this manner allows consistency and injury free sessions over the long term. This is where the real progress is made, over the long-term instead of the risky "right now" theories. As you get older, this becomes even more crucial.

In the off-season, we will change the ratio of decline bench sessions to flat bench sessions 2-1 and even 3-1. This saves the shoulders, but allows us to handle a decent amount of weight. For me, as I approach turning 40 in the next several months, this method has been a Godsend for my shoulder and elbow health without the constant pressure of flat benching all the time.

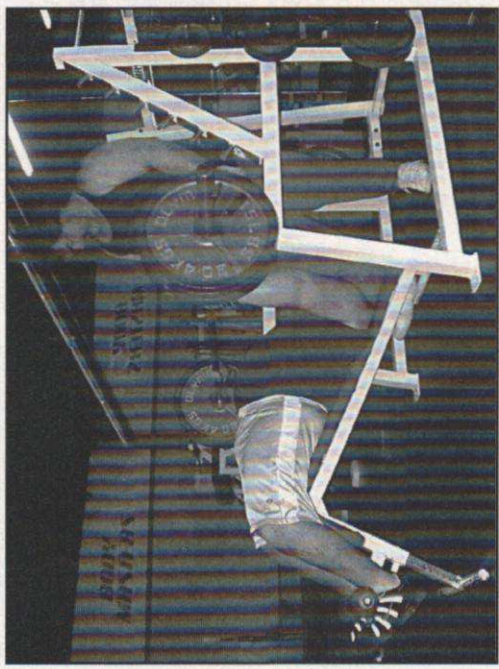
A pal of mine, Joe Ladner, uses the declines mostly as an assistance movement and we all know of Joe's success and benching prowess. When I asked Joe, this is what he had to say about the decline press.

"Declines are the most superior assistance exercise you can do for increasing the bench press one rep max. By tucking your elbows and bringing the bar down low on your stomach, then exploding upward to lockout over your head is the perfect groove for maximum power. It utilizes every muscle group in your upper body, emulating POWER!!" I use it as my primary movement in one of my weekly bench sessions, but you can see the importance of the decline in a wide spread of applications.

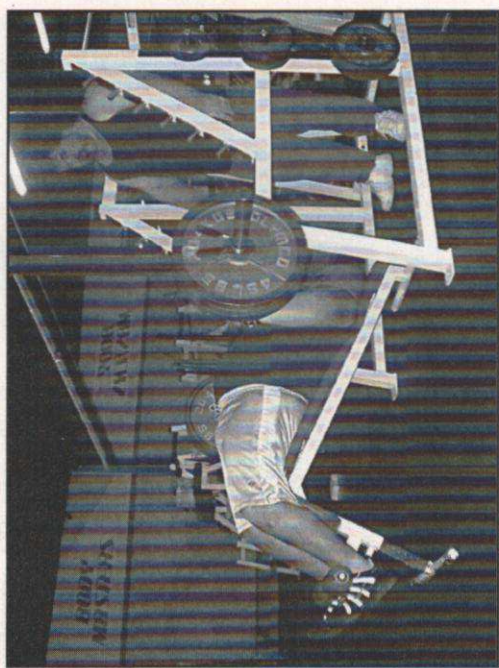
Next time, I will cover the assistance movements with some pictures to give you a better idea of what we have found to be successful. Also, I will add some pictures and descriptions on some set-ups for those of you who train at gyms or at home, where you may not have a decline bench or a power rack.

Many of you on the Internet and the forums I frequent are already seeing success with this program. For those of you that have not yet tried it, give it a shot and be honest with yourself. If it is time for a change in your routine, give the declines a shot.

Until next time-train heavy, lift smart & eat more pizza.
Wade



This is Wes, 17 years old, showing us the starting point, locked out. The idea is to get the bar out in front, as far as you can and still maintain control. Straight down and straight back is the method



This photograph illustrates where the bar should touch. We bring the bar down to touch just above the belly button and then push it straight back up. Tucking the elbows is a crucial element.