

Efficient control of the barbell can translate into bigger lifts and reduced chance of injury. A great way of improving your ability to control a barbell is through the use of dumbbells, but the benefits of dumbbells don't stop there. In this article I'd like to discuss the pros and cons of dumbbells for powerlifting and a few effective dumbbell exercises for powerlifters.

The major difference between lifting with barbells and dumbbells is the increased effort required for stabilizing the dumbbells. Additional stabilizing muscles are needed to control the dumbbells because they are held separately in each hand. A barbell, of course, is a single object, lifted and supported with both hands. Logically speaking, if your ability to control a weight can be enhanced, you can direct more energy and power toward driving the weight to completion. The degree of difference in control required going between a barbell and a dumbbell is similar to the degree of difference from going from a machine to a barbell. Most machines only require the lifter to push or pull with the weight supported on a track of some sort. Since little control or stabilization is required, little stabilization strength is developed.

Increased range of motion is a benefit of lifting with dumbbells. In a barbell bench press, you can not lower the weight past where the barbell hits the chest (this excludes cambered bench bars). Dumbbells allow you to lower the weights past the chest. This extended exercise range can be translated into a bigger barbell bench press with the benching muscles being worked more completely over a greater range of motion. Dumbbell shrugs can be performed by holding them at the sides of your body. This allows a more direct pulling motion from the traps. One strong word of caution about using extended range of motion is to work into it slowly. Going too far or too heavy too soon can result in an injury like a muscle pull. Take your time and ease into increased ranges of motion on any exercise. Extreme range of motion should be avoided, as this can cause muscle tears or pulls. Exercise over a comfortable range.

Moving the dumbbell during execution of an exercise is also possible. For curls, the dumbbells can be rotated or supinated from the bottom to the top for extra bicep work. You can refer to

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DUMBBELLS

as told to Powerlifting USA by Doug Daniels

a previous article I wrote on biceps for more info on dumbbell curls. Dumbbell presses can replace overhead barbell presses with rotational 'Arnold' presses, though regular dumbbell presses work well also. One arm dumbbell rows are great for the lats, rear delts and biceps. At the bottom of the exercise, the dumbbell should be perpendicular to your torso. As the dumbbell is pulled up, rotate it outward so at the top the dumbbell is parallel to your torso. This allows a better stretch at the bottom and as well as a better contraction at the top.

When performing a traditional

barbell lift like the bench, one side of your body may actually be lifting more than 50% of the weight. By using dumbbells, each limb or body side must lift the same amount of weight. This can help address any possible strength imbalance you may have due to genetic flaw, bad training practices, or injury. Continuing to train with one limb doing more than 50% of the lifting will further compound the problem and the imbalance will increase which could result in lower lifts and, again, possible injury.

There are many exercises that can only be performed with dumbbells such as delt laterals or

chest flies. Though these are not the best exercises for a powerlifter, they can be of value during the off season. You can also lift each dumbbell alternately or lift one at a time for even more exercise variety.

Due to the extra balance required to lift dumbbells, you will not be able to use the same amount of total weight as you can with a barbell in a similar exercise. For example, if you can barbell bench press 250 pounds for 10 reps, you will not be able to bench press two 125 pound dumbbells for 10 reps. 100 pound dumbbells may be your maximum for 10 reps in this instance.

A drawback for stronger lifters may be that few gyms have dumbbells heavy enough to challenge them. In that case, perform higher reps or use dumbbells after your regular barbell work when your strength level has been reduced through fatigue.

I have to re-emphasize that due to the increased balance required in using dumbbells, start off light until you get accustomed to the movement and then increase the weights gradually. Also as I mentioned earlier, do not increase to an extended range of movement too quickly. Place increased attention to spotting and safety. You may need help to get the dumbbells into position to start the set and putting the dumbbells down after finishing the set. Dropping the dumbbells recklessly can damage the dumbbells, nearby gym equipment, other lifters or yourself.

Fitting dumbbells into your routine is my final topic. I am by no means suggesting you drop all your barbell work for dumbbell substitutes, but a few productive dumbbell exercises can be worked immediately, for example, on light bench day finish with 3-4 sets of dumbbell bench presses. On deadlift or back day include one arm dumbbell rows and dumbbell shrugs. Dumbbell curls should be a main staple in your workout as should overhead dumbbell presses for delt work. As the meet nears, decrease or eliminate most dumbbell assistance work to avoid overtraining.

Dumbbells can be invaluable to your powerlifting training. The benefits of dumbbells include strengthening stabilizing muscles, increased power over your range of motion, single limb strength balancing as well as greater exercise variety. The barbell still remains your main strength building tool, but dumbbell training can make a positive impact on your results.



IPF World Champion Ron Collins used dumbbells in his training routine.