

# FIXING THE LOCKOUT

## as told to Powerlifting USA by J.M. Blakley

**FIXING THE LOCKOUT**  
Let's face it, most benches fail just slightly past the "sticking point" - somewhere between 60-90% of the way up. It is rare to see a bar fall below 30% or on the chest, unless the lifter has delusions of grandeur and has seriously miscalculated their strength. On occasion, the bar will stop at the traditional sticking point, but curiously many a lifter will clear this supposed toughest of spots only to stall short of lockout on max attempts. There are mechanical and physical reasons for this, but without a long-winded discourse on the subject, let's just deal with it. We've all seen it or felt it at one time or another. What can we do about it?

**Target: Triceps**  
The main problem deals with triceps drive. And there are two answers. Train the triceps to be stronger, and change the timing of the triceps drive to engage earlier. Practical Lockout Exercises

Any triceps exercise will help with lockout strength, but to really see a dramatic change you should do specific lockout work. Here's a list of top shelf lockout drills to really make finishing your strong suit. Included is a template for sets and reps which can be modified to your needs.

One major warning, though: be careful not to overtrain! Lockout work tends to be heavier than normal bench work due to the abbreviated nature of the stroke. It's easy to get carried away and overdo it. The rewards come fast and moving the big poundages is addicting. Heavy lockout work should be limited to 4-6 weeks. The joints will need the rest after a good cycle. You can return to it in as soon as 6-8 weeks and drive the finishing strength even higher. Just keep an eye on inflammation and general soreness in the shoulder and elbow joints.

**Traditional Rack Lockouts**  
Set up in a power rack so that the bar rests on the cross pins and will allow you a three inch movement to full extension. This distance can be lengthened (5 inches+) but not made any shorter. Assume a competition grip and take a normal lift-off. NEVER pick the bar off the rack yourself for the first rep. It is difficult

driven back to arms length). Weights are loaded to the bar in normal fashion to about 60-80% of the total load. This percentage can vary with application for either strength or speed work but the principle is the same.

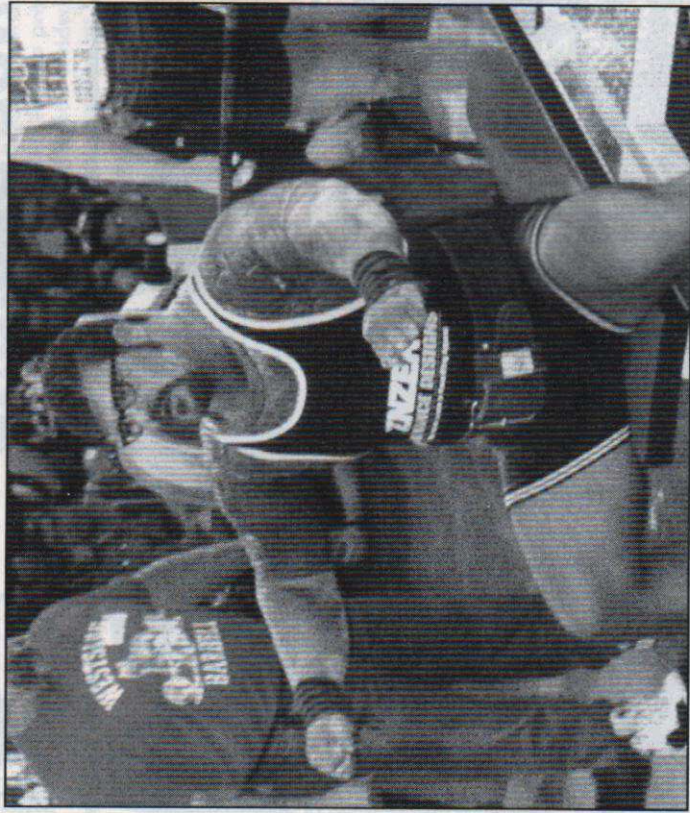
The remaining weight is added by draping heavy steel chains over the ends of the barbell on the outside of the plates. They should just barely touch the floor at the top of the movement. As the bar descends toward the chest, the chain links begin to pile up on the floor. At the bottom of the motion the total bar weight is reduced by virtue of the fact that now half the weight from the chains is sitting on the floor and adding no weight to the bar! As the bar is driven upward, every link that is picked up now adds weight steadily to the bar. Every inch higher the bar travels, the more it weighs, because more chain is now hanging from it!

This makes the lockout phase the heaviest portion of the movement. The bottom is light, the top is heavy. This places more work on the triceps and is a great specific overloader of the lockout.

This is done in either competition grip or narrow grip as outlined above. For the most specific help to your lockout, use a competition grip. For massive triceps development and power production, a narrow grip can be employed. I have no favorite grip width on this one, they both work great.

Triples again seem to work best. Six reps are just too fatiguing with the big weights used. Triples are quick and clean and you tend not to get sloppy on the last reps. I think that despite the higher loads, triples are safer. Four sets is the max.

Chain work can also be used for speed enhancement, but that issue will not be discussed here. This article deals with strength development, but bear in mind that the chains have many uses. Lou Simmons has written plenty on this subject already.



Calm in the storm... J.M. Blakley at the 1998 Arnold Classic. (Photograph by J. Alkire).

total number of working sets to only 3 (not counting warm-ups).

A variation on the competition 3 inch lockout (which I feel has the most benefit) is a close grip 3 inch lockout. This is performed as above, but with a narrow grip (8-14 inches between hands). It emphasizes the triceps even more but changes the angle of the lockout from that of a normal bench press lockout. Although not my favorite, it has merit and should be explored. Of course, there are all the grip widths in between too. These are a compromise of either of the methods (competition or close) and are lukewarm, in my opinion. Stick with either a bench-specific lockout or a close grip. They will do the job just fine.

**Chain Work**  
The use of chains was introduced to me by George Halbert and Lou Simmons on my very first visit to the famous Westside Barbell Club. It's an unorthodox method to be sure, but ingenious all the same. Let me explain how it works.

The barbell is set up in a power rack to do floor presses (for those who are not familiar, a floor press is a bench press without the bench! Lying on the floor the bar is brought toward the chest until the elbows come in contact with the ground. Then the bar is

### Board Presses

These are really not high on my personal list, but have worked so well for so many that I felt I needed to mention them.

Board presses are performed by placing several 2x4s on the chest and lowering the bar to them and returning to an arms-extended position. The boards can be 2, 4, or 6 inches tall and shorten the bar stroke by the coinciding distance.

This is a partial movement, similar to rack work from pins. The bottom of the motion is avoided and the stroke is limited to the top or lockout portion.

There are advantages and disadvantages to doing board presses. The major advantage (over setting up pins in a rack to corresponding heights as the board stacks) is that it is a more natural "feel" to the press. Pressing off rack pins is awkward and difficult to balance both sides evenly. With board presses, the bar touches at only one point in the center of the body as opposed to two points on the rack pins. The board presses feel more like a "real" bench press.

The disadvantage is not in the exercise itself, but rather in the performing of the exercise. Cheating runs rampant! I have rarely seen this exercise done with good form! The two main methods of cheating are literally bouncing the weight off the boards (which is so common I think that it has become part of the standard exercise description nowadays) and sinking the bar and boards down into the chest and heaving up like a bucking bronco! Worst of all is a combination of both.

In my own experience, I found it very difficult to refrain from employing these cheating advantages myself. Nonetheless, the exercise works in principle and in the gym. Even lifters with atrocious form seem to benefit some! But beware! Many lifters fake progress in this exercise by beginning with good form and then getting sloppy and sloppier and keep lifting it by bouncing more and more! They're no stronger, they're just better at cheating.

There is no reason why this can not be a fine lockout developer if kept in reasonable strictness. Stay tight, touch light, and never heave. Four sets of 3-6 reps will be sufficient.

### Timing

This exercise works the lockout in a slightly different way. Sure, it builds triceps, but it also does something else. It helps enhance the neuromuscular link to aid the timing of the

### triceps drive.

Have you ever seen a lifter who blows the weight off their chest and you're sure it's going to go through the roof, but then the weight seems to abruptly stall and even fade before the lifter recovers and grinds the weight slowly up to the top? Well, that's timing. They had the strength to lift the weight, but there was a lapse in the explosion of the chest drive and the initiation of the triceps drive. It looks like a two-stroke movement. One-two and it's finished. The triceps are late and the chest drive's momentum runs out. The bar stalls and must be re-started by triceps alone. That's the hard way!

Every effort must be made to make the press only one movement from bottom to top involving all the muscles synchronized together and performing optimally. This timing usually involves teaching the trainee to fire the triceps earlier. There is no better exercise for that than unloading.

**Unloading Presses**  
This exercise was taught to me by Lou Simmons just prior to my moving to Los Angeles. I liked it so much, I purchased my own bands (Jump Stretch rubber bands) to continue my work with it in California.

The bands are suspended from the top of a power rack. They are attached to the outside of an Olympic bar on the sleeve. The bar is now also suspended from the top of the rack. Place a bench in the rack and add weight to the bar until it stretches to your chest level if you were in competition pressing position. This amount will vary on the band strength and the height of the rack. Modifications should be made so that the amount on the suspended bar at your chest level is 150-225 lbs. That means the bar is hanging from the rack by the bands with 225 lbs on it just at your chest. The bar weight is effectively zero here even though 225 lbs. are on the bar (modifying this takes a bit of creativity, but get as close as you can to this by elevating the bench or fastening the bands in a different configuration).

As you lift the bar in normal form, the bands begin to go slack and at the top of the lift you are now supporting nearly all the weight (200 or so pounds). As the bar descends the bands begin to stretch and get taught thereby supporting more and more of the weight as it is lowered. By the time the bar is on your chest, it weighs practically nothing and is suspended by the bands almost in full.

This again works the lockout portion of the lift exclusively. The

bottom is easy and the top is hard (the bands go slack and you're left holding the bar up!). Training the timing is accomplished by adding weight to the bar so that you can get only 6 reps. If you have 425 pounds on the bar, remember that the bottom only weighs 200! The top feels all of 425, but the bottom is light!

This teaches you to accelerate through the easy portion and build power as you extend. If you wait to build momentum on the bar until the bands go slack, you'll get stuck! You have to carry through the whole movement. By accelerating the bottom and thinking to kick in the triceps as early as possible, the weight rides the wave to the top. If you wait with the triceps drive, it will be too late, and the help from the bands will be gone and you and your triceps will be staring at a still bar 3/4 of the way up.

The whole idea is to use everything: bands, chest, and triceps to accelerate the bar and glide through the sticking point and continue to accelerate all the way to the top! This training technique is especially helpful when applying this to using a bench shirt, which performs a similar function as the bands, helping the bottom of the motion more than the top.

It is amazing how much this exercise helps you understand the timing principle. Get some bands! This exercise also has speed work applications as well as I'm sure you can imagine. Again, those are best left to another article and author.

Four sets of 6 is recommended. In summary, try to add one of these lockout builders to your routine once a week. Never do this kind of extra heavy work more frequently, as over-training is a risk. These exercises are similar and doing more than one of them in a cycle may be redundant. Pick one and go at it like hell for 6 weeks. Take a break and return and try another. There are plenty of other exercises for lockout development, but there are none better. If you already have a favorite,

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work a few of these into your rotation. Chains can be cumbersome and expensive. If you do not have access to them buy some bands. They can be used to simulate the chains by securing them beneath the bench and over the bar. As you press up the bands tighten and provide more resistance at the top. They are smooth and quieter than the chains, too. Chains are superior, in my opinion, as they add inertia and momentum factors which the bands do not. Both methods will work for you, though.

Good lifting, J.M. (Questions? Send to: The Seventh Level, c/o J.M. Blakley, 782 Brittingham Ct., Columbus, Ohio, 43214)

**"NEVER pick the bar off the rack yourself for the first rep."**