TRAINING

PREPARE TO BENCH

as told to Powerlifting USA by Louie Simmons

The lifters at Westside are constantly going to meets. Many of the meets are small and mostly in Ohio. We like to represent Ohio. Top lifters should lift in their respective states to entice new talent into the sport. We also attend the biggest meets: APF Senior Nationals, IPA Nationals, IPA World Cup, WPO Bash for Cash, WPO Show of Strength, and the WPO Finals at the Arnold Classic in Columbus, Ohio, our home base.

While the squat used to be a crap shoot, it's now the bench that causes the most bomb-outs of late. Sometimes the shirt is too strong. Sometimes the lifter is too weak. Confidence will make you a champ; overconfidence will make you a chump. We must come to grips with the fact that bench shirts are here to stay. Some prefer to lift "raw". If one has. a sense of history and remembers names such as Mike MacDonald, Larry Pacifico, Jeff Magruder, and -- of course -- Jim Williams (675 in 1972 at SHW), the truth is that what people think is good raw benching today is mostly pretty sad. But what does it take to bench a personal record at contest time? Many things come to mind. The first is methods of training. There are three standard methods of training.

> *"... to do nothing is worthless"*
>
> Miyamoto Mushashi

Dynamic Method

Here, one uses submaximal weights with maximum speed. This method teaches the lifter to display explosive strength and to improve the rate of force development.

Mike MacDonald *was trying and succeeding with over 600 lbs. in the bench press,wearing nothing more than a standard t-shirt, as a light 242 pounder over 20 years ago. (this photograph taken by Mike Lambert)*

Maximum Effort Method

This is defined by lifting the heaviest weight possible for 1 rep with no time limit, or without a large emotional stress, meaning a training max, not a contest max. At Westside, the above two methods occur 72 hours apart.

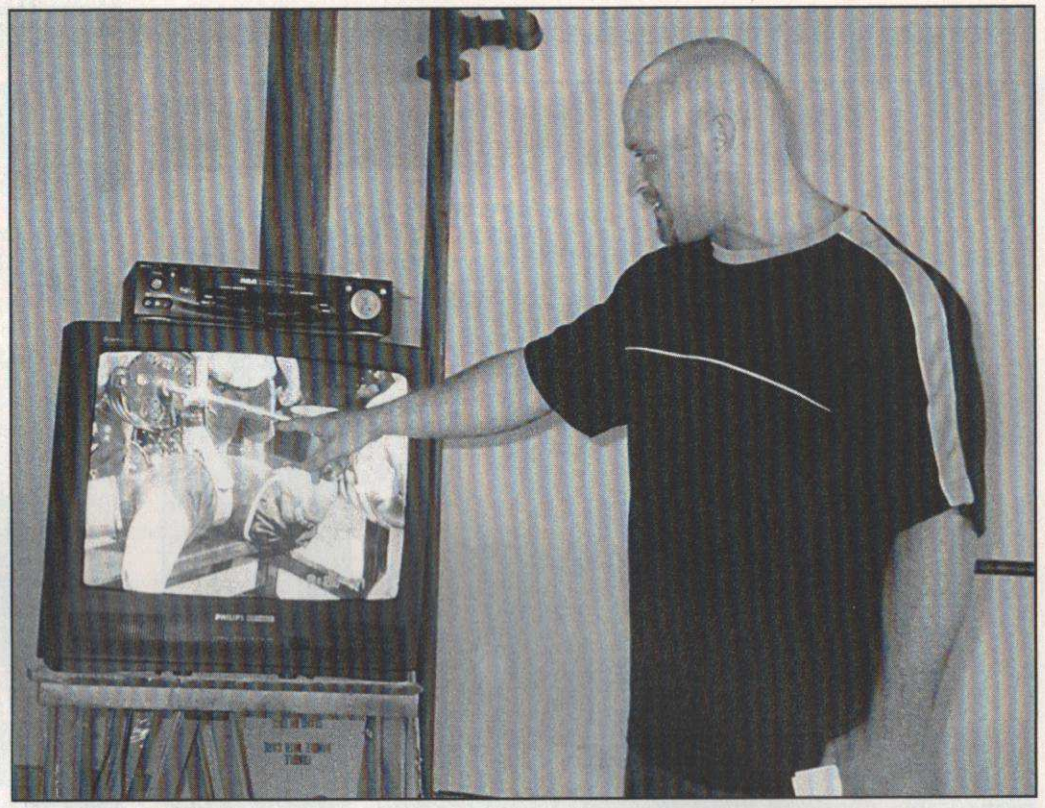
Repetition to Near Failure

Westside lives on special exercises, but reps are done to near failure for triceps, lats, and delts, basically the muscle groups that are used in the three lifts. The problem today is the popularity of bench shirts and their ability to raise one's bench considerably. There are some who will only do shirt work, that is, doing band pressing with a bench shirt. The lifter will set the shirt to barely touch three boards, then adjust it to touch two boards, and finally crank the shirt to maximally work on one board. In our gym, George Halbert's group did just this for months, only to discover that it did not work. They became very good on board pressing with a shirt, only to find that they had no groove or, even worse, the ability to touch their chest. This resulted in a lot of bomb-outs.

At our gym, 20 feet away from George's group, a second group tried the same routine, also coming to the same conclusion. This time, four top lifters had miserable results. Only one out of four made a bench, and it was 70 pounds under his best. Why? Using a bench shirt is not max effort work. The shirt is doing the work, not the lifter. Remember the three main methods of training? The shirt work replaced max effort work, but not really. All of a sudden, they couldn't lock out weights that were easy before. Some did not do speed work.

The dynamic method is not intended to raise maximal strength, but to teach you to display explosive strength and to improve the rate of force development. Zatsiorsky explains this in Science and Practice of Strength Training. I have heard many say that speed is not important. This is wrong thinking. A particular lifter has only so long to complete a max lift. You will fail to lift more weight when your muscles are contracted for a given time limit. The sprinter can only sprint so far before decelerating. The top sprinters accelerate a longer distance than a novice sprinter. The stronger a man or woman is, the shorter period he or she can exert maximal force. This is why speed and acceleration are so important.

When using a shirt in training, it takes a long time to work up to a max. Remember, your testosterone will drop rapidly after 45 minutes. This is why dense training is a must. Dense training refers to how much training is done in a particular time limit versus how much rest is taken during the same time limit. When putting a shirt on and taking it off, actual training time is limited. This results in little time for exercises for the triceps, delts, pecs, and lats to be done. One must learn to use a shirt, but one must learn to touch the chest. Bill Crawford says that you must touch the chest. I suggest, instead of board pressing with a bench shirt, have a shirt that you can touch 450 and establish a max record in that shirt, let's say 510. Next use a shirt that allows you to touch 500 and possibly a max of 570, and finally a 550 shirt and find your max with that shirt, I'm guessing maybe 625. A bigger bencher would use three stronger bench shirts. A lesser bencher, say 400 max, would do the same with a weaker set of shirts.



George Halbert ... *at a bench press seminar, pointing out the form he showed on his previous all time record 733 bench in the 220 lb. class, recently benched 625 raw in the 242s. (Bumgarner photograph)*

Today anybody can achieve a big bench fast due to the perfection of bench shirts. But soon after your bench tops out, you must become physically stronger. If you don't, you will disappear from the power scene. The answer is, of course, learning to use a bench shirt, but also learning to raise your natural strength.

George Halbert has set 11 all-time world records in the bench in three weight classes, yet recently made an all-time gym personal record of 625 without a bench shirt, prior to making 746 and 766 at Kieran Kidder's Bash for Cash in Orlando in September 2004 during a hurricane. Fred Boldt, at 181, made 597 in Orlando with George. He also made a 622 world record only to have it turned down for a technicality. George and Fred both do shirt work on the chest in the gym.

As a second and more successful experiment, Joe Bayles, who had a 630 bench, made 700 pounds in a full meet and totaled 2325 at 242. Mike Brown, at 19 years old, made a 735 bench and totaled 2300 in his first meet at 295 bodyweight. Tim Harold hit a 715 bench and totaled 2455 at SHW, at 20 years old. Zach Cole went from a 575 to a 600 bench at 276. This group did shirt work off their chest. Most of the board work was done without a shirt. Joe made a 605 2-board press with no shirt prior to his 700 at the IPA Nationals in 2004.

Nowhere have I read that wearing a bench shirt is max effort work. The shirt is doing the work, not the muscular system of the lifter. In fact, your true max strength will decrease, as we found out. Recently I have seen four lifters break their arm doing a contest bench. I believe this is due to training short-cuts. As one buys a stronger bench shirt, they neglect to train harder to become stronger. Something has to give, and it is the lifter. So if you are going to spend a lot of cash for a shirt, try spending some time getting stronger. Musashi Miyamoto said, "to do nothing is worthless."

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