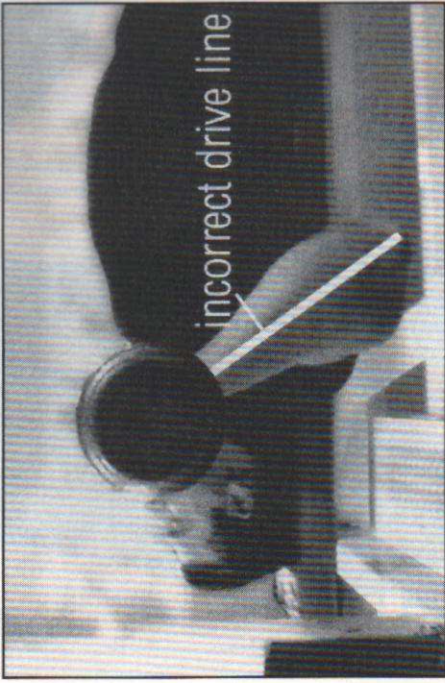


I designed this program to build shoulder strength for stabilization, not for shoulder power to boost the bench directly. This will have an indirect effect of keeping the shoulders tighter and thereby helping you create a cleaner drive line with less waste of power due to wobble. It will build some bulk to the shoulder which will have an inherent tendency to stabilize. It will also place an adaptive stress on the connective tissues (fascia, tendon, and some ligament) that don't

see as much tension in the flat bench, causing them to become denser and thicker. This may have a protective effect and help you avoid injury (this can't be proven, but it sure can't hurt!). There are 4 core exercises. Bench press, and Reverse-grip 1/2 press. Each is done 4 sets of 20 reps. Think of it as bodybuilding for your bench press! Again, this is not training to directly increase your benching power. This will increase your shoulder stabil-



Bench to Neck Exercise: the arms are at a 90 degree angle to the body



Bench to Neck Exercise: the elbows are directly under the hands



Bench to Neck Exercise: the elbows are not in the proper position.

TRAINING

Eight Week Off Season Shoulder Program as told to Powerlifting USA by J.M. Blakley

ity, internal strength and overall shoulder joint health.

Exercise One: Bench-to-neck - This exercise places direct stress on the anterior joint capsule and frontal deltoids. If not done properly, this exercise could do more harm than good. Having poor form on this movement will counteract every reason for doing it in the first place. Be very deliberate and disciplined when performing this exercise. There is your warning. If you don't feel you can exhibit the control necessary to perform this lift safely as described, PASS ON IT! It's not worth the risk. You come to the gym to get strong, not to get hurt. Don't let your concentration go on this one, please.

Take an Olympic bar in competition grip or slightly wider. Keep the weight light. (I only use between 135-185 lbs). Put your elbows out at 90 degrees straight out to the sides. Bring the bar down to your Adam's Apple on your neck. Let it touch and remain there for a "one" count. Keep the elbows up toward the ears. Don't let them fall down toward the stomach. They stay at 90 degrees. When you push the bar up try not to use any pec or tricep strength. Concentrate on only flexing the deltoids. Squeeze the bar up with your shoulders. Don't let your triceps help out near the top. Just keep thinking 'shoulders!' all the way. This is exactly what you avoid in the competition bench press movement with the heavy loads, and that's why we purposefully pinpoint it here with light weight. It is important to keep this a linear movement. At the bottom near your neck, you will have a tendency to want to let the elbows "roll under". This will put strain on the internal rotator cuff muscles and is to be avoided. If you can't touch your neck without letting your elbows move away from your head, try a wider grip. This won't give you as much stretch, but it will be easier on the rotators. The bar moves straight up and straight down. The elbows move straight out (90 degrees) and straight in, no rotation. This is a very "square" movement.

There is a great stretch on the shoulder, especially at first. Don't over do it. If you can't seem to get all the way down even with a wide grip, be

Keep the weight light enough to feel the work.

A word of caution: be extra careful not to pinch your fingers in the rack! Your grip spacing may be right where the uprights are! In this case use a lift off man and start with a competition grip to take the bar out of the rack then with the support of the helper, slowly slide your grip out to Ultra-Wide position. This is awkward at first, but the weight is light enough that it poses no real risk. After you finish your reps reverse the process and move your grip back in while the weight is held stable by a helper. Have the helper guide you back into the rack. I never advise taking wide grips back to the rack yourself, especially after fatiguing yourself. It's just too easy to mis-rack and catch a pinky. Let someone help you.

This exercise should be done in the same drive line as your competition press. The only difference is how short the movement is and how exclusive the work is to the shoulders. This will really help stabilize your press.

Exercise Three: Rainbow Press - This is a traditional exercise done in a non-traditional manner. Set up a military press station so that you can achieve about 10-15 degrees of backward lean. If all you have is a straight-back military pad, then shift your hips forward on the seat to allow a slight angle backward (15 degrees). Perform the exercise just as you normally would with only one exception: lower the bar down in front to a point just past your chin then press up ONLY high enough to clear the top of your head. At this point move the bar behind your head and lower it to the base of your neck. Again, press up ONLY high enough to clear your head and bring the bar back down in front of your face to your chin and repeat. Thus the bar is arcing (making the bar up in a similar style as outlined behind your head. You never extend the arms to full overhead lockout position. This has the effect of keeping the triceps out of the exercise and keeps the load on the delts the entire time. This is another partial movement that focuses on the shoulders.

When you take the bar from the spotter, cock your wrist back and let the bar settle into your hands. This will take some practice to get accustomed to. Always wrap your thumbs. This exercise is a bit risky because of the reverse grip itself, and there is no need to increase the risk by using a thumbless grip. Hold on firmly. The bar should rest deeply in your palms if you have your wrists cocked, but don't let that persuade you to loosen your



Rainbow Press Exercise: only push high enough to clear your head.

Once you try it (a set of 20 is 10 front alternated with 10 behind) you will immediately feel how it will benefit you in strengthening and stabilizing your shoulder joint.

By eliminating the top half of the movement the work is effectively limited to the delts. The triceps are not allowed to share any of the load as they do in the full military press. Besides, you'll train triceps later. This is an exercise specifically for your shoulders. The bottom portion of the movement is where they get all their work anyway. So we just throw out the triceps portion and put all the effort into the delt portion!

As before, think of flexing out the reps, keeping tight in the shoulders, not just lifting and lowering - but squeezing. The style and rep count will necessitate a light weight.

Exercise Four: Reverse Grip 1/2 Press - Here's another partial movement that attempts to focus on deltoid work while limiting triceps involvement. Take an underhand (reverse) grip on an Olympic bar at or slightly wider than competition grip. Put your pinkies where your index fingers usually go. Turn the hand so that the fingers point out at an angle away from the body not straight down toward the feet. This just takes some strain off the wrists but is not crucial to the exercise. It is difficult to take out the bar yourself with a reverse grip so, as usual, I highly recommend a spotter to lift it out to you. The grip should feel wide, even though you positioned yourself at competition width. This is because the index fingers are switched around and you will sense this distance. That's normal. It should feel wide.

Lower the bar to your normal touch point. This will be a very short stroke. It may only be a few inches. That's OK. The range that it does hit will effectively train the deltoids. Press above, by flexing only the delts and limiting the pecs and tris. Concentrate all the work in the front of your shoulders, that's what this exercise is all about! Squeeze the bar up by flexing across the delts. At lockout, which comes very soon, be sure to keep the tris from taking over.

You may use a slightly higher load on this exercise than on the previous movement, but not much more. Keep the weight light enough that you can maintain your concentration on your form through all the reps with quality. If the weight is too heavy, you will fatigue and not be able to feel the muscles working on the last reps, and that's not focused effort. Sure there is a burn and lots of fatigue, but make sure you're not just counting reps off and that each rep is a purposeful movement: make every rep important!

Keep it slow and controlled. Keep the work in the shoulder. Keep the grip as wide as your wrists will allow.



Reverse Grip 1/2 Press Exercise: don't involve the triceps. (all photographs by Will Homan). Always use spotters in these movements

grip. Don't become lazy! If the bar ever does roll out you'll wish you'd kept a tight grip. (Even 135# can knock out a few teeth!) Don't slack! Take the bar down to a very low point on your lower ribcage/upper abdomen. This movement is not performed anywhere near your groove. Touch the bar lightly and, as usual, flex your way out of the bottom with only shoulder strength. Only push about 1/2 of the way up. Any more than 6-7 inches is too far. Above this point the triceps engage and the benefit switches away from deltoids. Return the bar back to the low ribcage point and repeat. You only perform the bottom portion of the movement. This concentrates the work on the shoulders and never gives the triceps a chance to take over. That doesn't mean you can't use the tris plenty in the movement, if you're not careful. You must still concentrate on using only deltoids and shutting down the arm drive.

The elbows are kept in, close to the body. This creates a strange stretch in the deep shoulder. Try not to let the elbows drift out too wide. Keep the movement strict and tight. On the last rep do a full lockout and have an assistant aid you in racking the bar. You should feel this on the outside of your shoulders and a bit down low near the insertion on the humerus beside the biceps. Remember to limit the pecs and certainly the triceps. Focus on the deltoids. The weight will be a bit heavier than the other lifts outlined here, but keep your mind on technique and tightness rather than big strength increases.

My own experience with these exercises has been spectacular. I did just a 6 week cycle at first and noticed such an increase in stability that I put 5 trainees on a full 8 week program to see if they would show similar results. Without exception, everyone showed vastly improved control over the bar path when we began to bench again. I could have spent eons shouting "stay tighter!" trying to get more control from them, but in only 8 weeks they

finally began to exhibit the kind of strict, firm bar control we wanted. All the encouragement and shouting in the world could never have taught them that. They learned how to fix and flex their shoulders so that the tension stayed throughout the whole rep. Their line was cleaner and the wobble exhibited on their max lifts was almost negligible! All this after only one cycle of these lifts!

Now I make it a point to do at least one cycle of this shoulder program every year. It's a great break from heavy benching, builds stability, lessens the likelihood of injury (I believe), works muscles in a way that they don't often get used, and provides a mental break from the heavy loads as well while providing an excellent challenge that relates back to competition indirectly. After 8 weeks you will be rested, and mentally charged to get it on with the Big Iron again. And your shoulders will love you for it!

If you have trouble with stability or shoulder strength, I would even recommend 2 cycles per year. This is that effective!

That is my own off season program. I do no actual flat benching during this time. I let my joints rest from the big loads, I focus on muscle work and give the joints a break.

This builds a deep down shoulder strength that feels solid all the way to the bone! If that kind of support sounds good to you, set aside 8 weeks and work through this rep program. Your bench will benefit and you'll be a long way ahead on resisting those pesky aches and little nagging injuries. Be sure to keep the weight light (20 reps sees to that!) and smoothly control the movements. These exercises do place a great deal of stress directly on the shoulder. If done too violently or too heavy an overuse inflammation is likely. Keep it light and super strict and the shoulder will toughen. Too aggressive and the shoulder will rebel!

Good lifting, J.M.