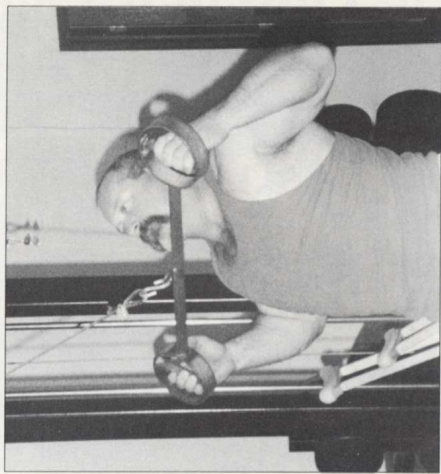


THE BENCH

So, You Want To BENCH PRESS!! as told to PL USA by Louie Simmons



LOUIE SIMMONS performing lat pulls to the face for the rear delts

My goal was always to be a great bench presser. (I consider 550 great.) I was always impressed by Larry Pacifico. In 1972 in the Cincinnati Open, I saw him bench 530 at 198. Six weeks later he did 590 at 228 in Dayton. What a feat - especially without a bench shirt! Larry said triceps were 75% of his bench press. He had amazingly strong arms. He could do 300 for reps in the triceps extension.

A man who really helped turn my bench around was Bill Seno. He held the 198 bench press record at 435 in 1967. He also won several best chest awards in the Mr. America bodybuilding contests. I asked Bill what would help my bench press, which was a meager 360 at 181 in 1972. He told me to do extremely wide benches outside the rings. He said to work up to a 6 rep max in a few weeks, then to do 8 reps for a while until I maxed out, then 10 reps for a max. I was then to go back to 6 reps and start over. I thought he was either a genius or he was trying to pull the wool over my eyes, because he was so massive and bunched close - just the opposite of what he told me. It eventually took my bench from 360 to 480 at 220.

After talking to these two great lifters, I became very observant of great bench press technique and body type. I asked a lot of questions then, and I'd like to relate what I learned.

Why are some lifters better bench pressers than others? Body type plays a big role. A long torso and short arms are optimal - just the opposite for the deadlift. You seldom see a great bench presser with a good deadlift. Lamar Gant may argue this, having held world records at press and deadlift world records at the same time, but, Lamar is the exception, not the rule.

It's important to position yourself correctly on the bench. The most common method is to keep your feet flat on the floor, arch the back to elevate your chest, clench your knees to the sides of the bench, pull your shoulder blades together, bring in lots of air, and hold your breath before taking a handout until the press is completed. Don't experiment with a different grip or let strangers change your form at a moment's notice.

Where do you place the bar on the chest? This must be determined individually. The elbows must be under the bar at all times. As Mike Brimley said, the forearms should remain vertical. For example, someone with long upper arms will place the bar well below the chest. This would be wrong for a lifter with short arms, because the elbows would be closer to the face than the

can't lock out a bar, it's not always due to weak triceps. I could be that the shoulders are unable to keep the bar in the groove. There are many good shoulder exercises such as front plate raises, front bar raises with straight arms, and side raises standing, seated, or lying on your side. Don't forget rear delts - inverted flies or stand up and pull a lat bar to your face. I also do Bradford presses. These are like military presses, except you never extend the arms fully. Press the weight just over the head, down behind the neck, over the head to the front shoulders and repeat. This keeps the triceps out of this exercise, so the delts do all the work. Behind the neck presses get a lot of attention because of great lifters like Ted Arcidi. However, I know a lot of lifters who are great at behind the neck presses, but can't bench press well. I believe muscles other than the shoulders are doing the work. Anyone you do pressing, your triceps could be doing a lot of the work. Raises of all types are better at working the shoulders, because only the delts are used. Reverse grip bench presses work well. The delts don't rotate with this exercise. I recommend using just 2 or 3 exercises for front delts at one time. Then, switch to 2 or 3 others after a few weeks.

The side delts are also important for a big bench press. When bench pressing, the sticking point occurs when the elbows turn out. A wide grip bench presser turns them at the beginning of the press. That's where it will be hardest without a shirt. Of course, a close-grip bench stalls near the top. His elbows turn out late. I use a cable device for side delts. Also, I lie on my side on a bench and do side raises with a dumbbell. Make the movement with a straight arm in the largest circle possible. I use a pec deck in reverse for rear delts. I also do standing pulls to my face on a lat machine, pulling the arms outward.

Dumbbells are a must. I like high reps, heavy weight on a slight incline and slight decline. I've done 125 lbs. for 20 reps in the incline. I believe high reps are best because dumbbells should be used to build connective tissue as well as muscle. This can't be done with 3 to 5 or even 8 reps. I keep my elbows turned inward to simulate more bench press style and to use more muscles in unison.

My main triceps exercise is extensions with a straight bar to the chin or throat. I prefer bringing the bar to my throat because more elbow rotation is needed, and, of course, the elbow is what extends the arm. I do them lying down in the same fashion as a French press. I

roll the elbows backward and upward. This is how you put stress on the triceps around the elbow. Once the bar touches the throat, press straight up. Most lifters watch do triceps extensions incorrectly. They don't move the elbows on the way down, but cheat by lowering the weight down toward the chest before pressing it back up. It becomes a modified press and not an extension. I also do regular seated French press with a cable. Larry Pacifico and former Mr. USA, Jim Setzler, did a lot of hand stand push-ups. However, you need a partner with these, and there's no way to add weight. Use a similar method where I elevate my feet and place a bar across the bottom of a power rack to do push-ups. Have someone place a weight on your upper back. I have done 58 reps with a 100-lb plate. It works like an incline press. Try a cambered bar, too. I have had great success with using the cambered bar in a power rack where I lower it to pins 2 inches below chest level. My thumbs are inside the curved part of the bar. There are no guard for triceps. And there's no strain on the shoulders.

I also do rack work at three different levels. First I take the bar off the supports and lower it to a pin 6 inches off my chest, pause with it out relaxing, and press it back up. Work up to a certain weight. Lower the pin to 4 inches off the chest and do a reduced weight. Lower the pin 2 inches and the weight accordingly, pause, and do a single rep. Then lower the pin to chest level, reduce the weight, pause, and do a single rep. Establish a max off each pin level. This workout is harder than you think on shoulders and arms because your body can't help press the bar.

To increase the concentric portion (ascent) of the bench, I do isokinetic bench presses. They're great for explosion and compensatory acceleration. The machine has a force meter to gauge your force output, which should increase at the top. If it doesn't, you're not using compensatory acceleration - the descent of a big lift of any type. Fred Hatfield discussed the value of isokinetics with me years ago.

The descent is very important to a good lifter. A controlled descent is best. Naturally the faster you lower a weight, the greater its downward force. For example, you may be able to walk on thin ice, but you better not jump on it. Jumping magnifies your weight.

As far as the pause, or static portion of the lift, just hold your breath from the time you take the bar off the rack until you finish the set. (I hold my breath for 5 reps.) I thought this was common know-



Nothing Stops Louie From Training... even when his leg is in a cast. (photographs courtesy of Louie)

edge, but after watching people at meets, I found I was wrong. Larry Pacifico told me about holding my breath in 1973. I first saw it stated in *Powerlifting USA* in March '91 in an article by Alan Zeilin. This is an example of something so simple, but overlooked by so many.

Chest work is popular among powerlifters. You see some with massive pecs and others with hardly any. I don't believe a great chest is necessary, but I'm sure it can't hurt. Wide grip benches for reps will build the chest. I found by doing 40% of my max for 2 or 3 sets of 25 reps 4 times a week, I could really build my chest. A cambered bar works fine, if you're not restricted by tight shoulders. Remember, incline works the upper chest and decline works the lower. Don't do either too steep.

Biceps and forearms have some effect on lowering a bench press. I tore my right biceps in 1979 and never had it repaired. Now, I regret it because the right side of my upper body is smaller than the left. The reason is probably the limited resistance I have on that side when lowering and pulling weights. Forearms are apparently very important. They act as stabilizing muscles for a controlled descent. I have also noticed that when my grip is weak, I can't bench as well. I've never seen a great bench presser with small forearms. Have you?

To train the assistance bench day, I choose only 2 main exercises at the dumb, such as incline and decline dumbbells. I stay with them 3 or 4 weeks or until I burn out

the group up. I used to watch a great lifter train by himself. He claimed he didn't need a partner. Well, he eventually burned out. He had to psyche up so much just to do a workout, he went from being on top of the world to watching from the sidelines. Or, by training alone, you could find yourself never pushing hard enough to make progress. Don't let this happen to you.

Have patience. It takes years to master anything worthwhile, especially the bench press. I've seen many lifters overestimate themselves and when things got tough, they quit. Think about your goals as often as possible. I see lifters who only think about lifting when they're in the gym. It must occupy your mind full time. Make small goals and you will probably succeed. Look at men like Ernie Frantz, John Ware, and a handful of others. They look like they do and lift what they lift because of perseverance. They are dedicated to a single goal - their ultimate strength.

Watch lifters with good form. There are many methods and exercises from which to discover which will work for you. Eighteen years ago, Bill Seno told me it takes about 7 years to learn how to bench. It's been 25 years, and I'm still learning. I want to thank everyone who took the time to teach me what I know today and others for what I will learn tomorrow. (Look for my comprehensive bench press video, coming soon.)

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