

I'm sure you have all been exposed to the Louie Simmons concept of training the bench by percents. And I'll bet you have a definite opinion on the subject! For some, this training method has been an answer to prayer. For others, it's a befuddling quagmire of strange ideas that make absolutely no sense whatsoever. Still others insist that the concepts will only work when used with drugs. This article is dedicated to those lifters (especially drug free) who have tried the bench program, but have not gotten it to work. My goal is to help you make it work. After trying this routine on many drug free lifters, we've found ways to expedite the results and reduce the time it takes to see meaningful gains. Example: while it initially took me 38 months to put 95 lbs on my bench using this routine, we were able to put 120 lbs. on training partner Dale Benton's bench in the same amount of time by using what we learned. We then took that information and used it to put 210 lbs. on training partner Roy Curtis' best bench in 29 months. Learning more as time went on, we were able to help Dave Schleich put 87 lbs. on his best bench in only 12 months. The important fact here is that we're all drug free. I think we have some percent training troubleshooting tips that just may help you out.

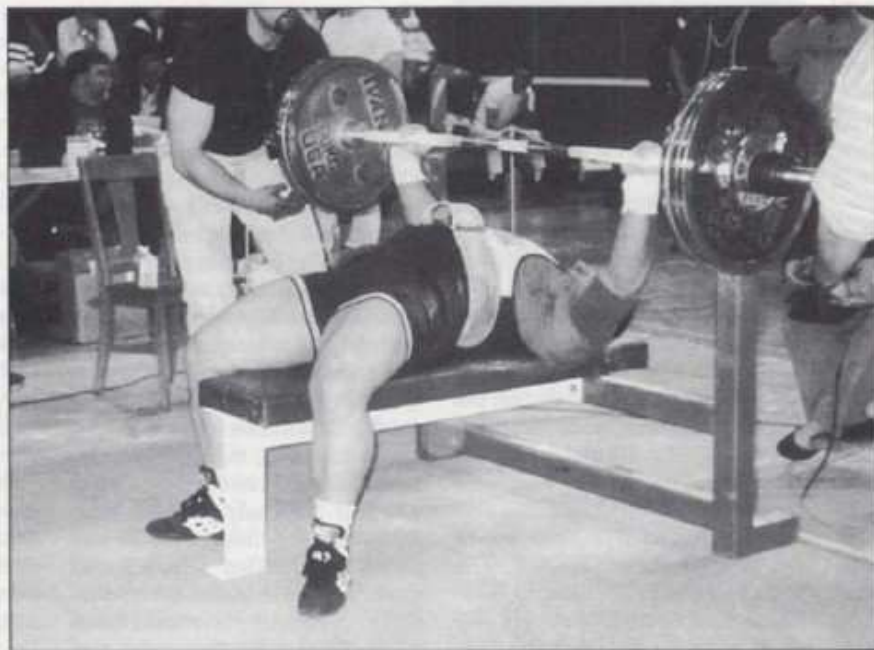
In order to troubleshoot this training strategy, you first have to understand it.

Training by percents, in simplest terms, addresses three basic strength concerns - explosiveness (velocity), absolute strength (force) and weak point remediation. Explosiveness is addressed through the 8 to 10 sets of triples in the bench press itself, using no more than 60% of your 1 rep max as attained with a shirt (or no more than 70%, if you bench without a shirt), with each rep pushed at max speed. This training session is done once a week, and is followed by specific tricep and upper back work. Absolute strength is developed most effectively by using partial movement variants of the bench press, usually worked for heavy singles. This training session is also done once a week, usually 3 days after percent benches, and is followed by specific tricep and upper back work. Weak points are remedied through the careful selection of whatever special exercises you choose to strengthen the weak point in question. The grip widths you use when percent benching, the type of absolute strength exer-

# WORKOUT of the Month

## Not So Basic Benching III TROUBLESHOOTING TIPS

as told to POWERLIFTING USA by Dave Caster



Dave Schleich at the ADFPA PA States, benching 402, an 87 lb. increase in 1 year.

cises you choose, and wise choice of the specific tricep and upper back exercises are all important here. Now that we have a general idea of what percent training is, let's zero in on the areas that can help you shine the apple.

### Percent Benches

You don't need a lot of weight to get great results out of percent benches. Less is more here. I watched Kenny Patterson use 315 and 365 for his triples on 10/28/95, followed by two singles with 500 and 545, and he benched 728.5 on 11/11/95. Break out your calculators - that's 43.2% and 50.1%, folks. Keep in mind that the grips used for the workout ranged between 20-26", with the two singles taken at 24" (while he uses a 32" max grip at meets). Dave Schleich moved his bench from 315 to 402 in 1 year (4/94 - 4/95). Dave uses 185 and 205 for his percent sets. That's 46% and 50.9%. That's all. Even though his bench is going up,

he keeps the training weight the same. At this point in time, increasing Dave's percent benches to 225 is counter productive, as this slows him down enough to impede progress. Notice the correlation between the percents used by Patterson and the percents used by Schleich. While Patterson is world-class and Dave is just average, both lifters use the same percents, and both lifters experience ongoing gains. Very interesting.

When percent benching, don't use your strong grip, and never use a shirt in training. Don't pause, either. Now, this is not a license to bounce the snot out of the bar. Bring it down under control, kiss the chest gently, then shove the hell out of it to arm's length. Don't rest all day, either. Never more than 2 minutes between sets. We like 1 minute. Although we use a 32" grip at meets, we train between 18 - 26" most (95%) of the time, rotating the grips in the following fashion: 18 - 20 - 22 - 24 - 26 - 18 - 20 - 22 - 24 - 26. When we get the itch to single

out, we do it, but with a 22" or 24" grip, and without using a shirt. We do so once every 4 to 5 weeks (no more than that, or it will negatively affect your assistance day poundages), sometimes after our 8-10 sets, sometimes instead of them. Shirts? Save them for the meet. If you have, say, a 350 max bench with a 22" grip and no shirt, and you normally bench 400 in meet conditions with a wider grip and a shirt, you will find that as you bump up that close grip max to 360 or 365, your contest bench will go up too. Try this - it works. And it leaves you very excited for meet day, as it adds to your psyche once you actually

get to use a shirt and take a weight! The shirt becomes a treat rather than a chore in this instance, and you also aren't going week in and week out performing very heavy shirt reps prior to the meet. For a drug free lifter, that practice will insure staleness and reinforce sticking points. Shirts are for meets. Period. Fact: you have to stay fresh and explosive in training if you want to be fresh and explosive at meets. Overuse of shirts can thwart this.

### TRICEPS

It's common knowledge that a superior bench shirt requires superior tricep strength to get it to work. So your attack on the triceps has to be well thought-out. Movements that are compound (multi-joint) in nature work best. That's why close grip benches work so well. That means can the useless movements (like pushdowns), especially if you are drug free. See, the drug free lifter must do high quality work. Drug free guys also have to know what constitutes good training, and what constitutes overtraining. Everything you do must make sense, and pay off. My partners and I have a rule - no more than 100 work reps of specific tricep work per week, and no less than 60 reps. We do our 60-100 work reps over two sessions, following our percent benches and special exercises. We usually will pick one or two good exercises per session, and do 30 work reps each session the first week, 40 reps per session the next week, 50 the next, then switch exercises and start back at 30. We'll vary the set-rep scheme, 30 work reps can be done in 2 sets of 15, 3 sets of 10, 6 sets of 5 or in whatever fashion will work best for the exercise(s) being used. If we do useful tricep exercises (lying

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dumbbell extensions, lying paused barbell or dumbbell extensions, Dicks presses, Dicks floor presses, Dicks presses with a cambered bar in a power rack with a 2" drop, decline barbell extensions, etc.), our benches go up. And switching our specific tricep exercises every three weeks keeps the body guessing. Just about the time we maximize work capacity, we switch gears and throw our bodies a curve. This keeps the muscles worked and shocked!

Some folks can do more work and benefit. Good. Do it, if that's you. Some need less, or they will burn out. Experiment around, and find out which category you fall into. Knowing yourself is the real key to all of this! Just because Louie says that one of his boys does X amount of tricep work does not mean that you should too. You should if you can, and still experience gains! Keep in mind that his guys have steadily increased work capacity over many years. The ideal is to do as much as you can in order to keep gains coming. Don't mindlessly follow anyone's advice - experiment!

### Cycling

The Westside Barbell folks, as you know, train for absolute strength in the bench by using Special Exercises on their assistance bench day,

which is done three days after the percent bench day. They have found that Special Exercises that do not have a full range of motion, and are similar to the bench, that are worked for heavy singles, work best. Why? First of all, partial movements are easier to recover from when doing singles. Secondly, you can zero in on sticking points with partial movements (isolation), or you can do very abbreviated lockouts (overload) that will simply teach you how to strain (a skill most younger lifters lack). And thirdly, you can get brutally strong from doing singles this way, and this strength gain mixes real well with percent benching, tricep training and bench shirts. It's the mix that produces the results at contest time. Get it? It's not just the "light benching," it's not just the "heavy partial singles" and it's not just the "Special Exercises." It's the mix. Remember that.

Now, a simple rotation for the Special Exercises may be rack lockouts for 3 weeks with a specific (closer) grip, worked for singles at a certain height, followed by floor presses for 3 weeks with a specific (closer) grip worked for singles, followed by board presses at varying heights and grips worked for singles for 3 more weeks. And you can

simply finish up your cycle with whatever movement does the most for you, right before your meet. This works well. However, this cycle eats some drug free lifters alive, especially those with poor levers (keep in mind that your levers have a lot to do with how much work you can take). Here's a nice assistance bench day alternative for the slower-recovering drug free lifter: For weeks 1-3, do 2 sets of 15 reps on a slight incline dumbbell press, and 2 sets of 15 reps on a slight decline dumbbell press, or 2 sets of maximum reps (at least 20 per set) in the elevated foot push-up, placing weights on the back. For weeks 4-6, do power rack lockouts for heavy singles at a fixed pin position (where the weight is pushed 3" - 6"), using a grip usually closer than your contest grip. Try to break your single PR each workout. Remember, singles only! And for weeks 7-8, do 3 to 5 sets of Weight Release singles, lowering 85% of your shirt max slowly, and exploding up 55% of your shirt max as fast as it will go. Follow each of these workouts with appropriate tricep and upper back work. Week 9 will be meet week. On your last assistance day, 3 or 4 days before the meet, just do some heavy singles in a 2" power rack lockout and call it a day. This will keep you in touch with the feel of heavy weight, yet leave you fresh enough for a PR performance on Saturday or Sunday.

This cycle builds a good muscular hypertrophy base during weeks 1-3, builds absolute strength during weeks 4-6, sharpens speed strength during weeks 7-8 in a way that does not diminish absolute strength, and gives the lifter one last feel of heavy weight before he hits the platform 3-4 days later. One quick word about having to bench heavy in training in order to bench heavy in a meet - this is true! Why do you think we do so many partial singles? We're benching at around 90% - 110% of max year-round, without shirts, except for during the occasional hypertrophy cycle! Progressive overloaders cannot say that.

### Squats

Want to get your bench up? Squat! Even if you specialize in the bench, you will get more out of squatting than you will out of most bench assistance exercises. Try it. I don't care if you only use 135. That's better than nothing. You'll be surprised how much more spring-loaded you'll feel. And you drug free guys need all the help you can get from a testosterone production enhancement standpoint. Louie says that Kenny Patterson was stuck at a 551 bench at around 225 body-

weight. He hit the box squats. The result? A 728.5 bench at 275, 18 months later! The significant change in his routine was the addition of squats! Notice both the gain in body weight, and the gain in bench poundage. Also notice that his pound-for-pound strength increased. At 225, he benched 2.45 times bodyweight. At 275, this increased to 2.65 times. Squatting twice a week works best, if you're squatting to feed your bench. Read Louie's articles on box squatting and get to it! Dave Schleich's bench went nuts when he got on the box. The boxes didn't hurt his squat either, as it went from 661 to 744 in 16 months.

### Back

Upper back strength plays a part in benching. But does that mean doing real heavy lat work for low reps is the key? While that can help from time to time, you may find that you'll get a bigger bang for your buck out of lighter rep work aimed at the upper middle back. Lat machine pulls to the face with a parallel grip attachment for 2 to 4 sets of 20 will set the upper back on fire. So will sitting backwards on a pec deck machine, and pulling your elbows back to contract the upper back for the same number of sets and reps. So will seated power cleans, when performed for 2 to 4 sets of 20 reps. Doing two of these three movements (with one good lat exercise thrown in as well - chin ups, torso supported rows or lat pulldowns all work well for 3-5 sets of 10) two or three times a week will pay great dividends, and will give you the kind of upper back structure that will translate into a bigger bench. Like the tricep exercises, be sure to rotate these exercises in and out of your program to prevent staleness. These movements also work the rear delts, an often neglected muscle group. Lack of rear delt strength causes the kind of shoulder development imbalances that lead to injury.

### Tying it all together

Now you know what to do, so do it! On your percent bench day, do 8 to 10 sets of three reps in the bench, not exceeding 60% of your shirt max. Sunday is our percent bench day. I recommend trying 50%, and using closer grips than you are accustomed to. Explode those reps! And do not single out with your close grip more often than once every 4 weeks, or you will slow down the progress experienced on your assistance bench day. Follow your percent benching with one or two good tricep exercises, with the total number of work reps ranging

from 30 to 50 (do more if you benefit from it). Finish off with two upper back movements and one lat movement, and get the hell out of the gym. If this takes you more than 45 minutes, you'd better pick up the pace.

Three days after your percent bench workout, get back in the gym and attack those Special Exercises. We train these on Wednesday. Remember, partial movement singles work best of all. Check out Louie's newest Bench Video for form clarification. Remember, don't do any one Special Exercise for more than 3 weeks. And if the constant singling leaves you flat, try doing higher rep movements for 3 weeks, followed by heavy partial singles for the next 3, Weight Release singles for the next 2 and one final lockout session. Tricep work comes after your Special Exercise, once again done for 30 to 50 work reps. Finish off with upper back work once again, like you did after your percent benches. And you should be all done in less than an hour. Shoot to be done in 45 minutes.

Now, don't forget to squat! We box squat twice a week, as a rule. We do 12 sets of 2 on a slightly below parallel box on Fridays, usually followed by reverse hypers and weighted abs. We also do 6 to 8 sets of 3 on a box that is 3" below parallel on Mondays, or we do some heavy low rep Manta Ray squats above parallel, or we do some higher rep Manta Ray work on a low box. Once again, we finish off with reverse hypers and weighted abs. The important thing is that we do some form of squatting, twice a week. Those of us who lift in 3 lift meets will occasionally throw in some deadlift related movements on Mondays, while those who specialize in the bench always do some form of squat on Mondays.

There's nothing fancy about this routine, and it works for anyone who knows how to use it. It is very short and sweet, but it requires a mixture of hard work, patience, intelligence and ego control. If you keep singling out on your percent day, or if you work percents above 60% on a regular basis; or you keep playing with your bench shirt in training, this routine won't work. If you don't hammer triceps and upper back, it won't work. And if you don't bust a nut on the assistance day and do some seriously heavy rack work, board presses or floor presses, and faithfully switch Special Exercises every 3 weeks, it won't work either. So now you know what to do to make this routine work. Remember, the magic is in the mix, not in reliance on any one isolated component. Now, go make it work for you.