

BFS POSITION PAPER

Bench Press and Variations

The BFS perspective on these important upper body exercises

Unquestionably, the bench press has become the most popular weight training exercise ever. Sure, the squat is rightfully called the king of lifts and will do more for athletic performance than any upper body exercise. And certainly you can't beat the power clean or other Olympic lifting movements for developing power. But the standard that everyone seems to use to measure the strength of an athlete is the bench press; thus the perennial question "*How much can you bench?*"



At BFS we recognize that the bench press can be a valuable exercise. Want stronger arms, chest and shoulders? The bench press is a must. And although there are bodybuilders who have gotten away with not performing the traditional bench press or have reached such levels of muscle that they need to focus on other exercises, the bench press is great for building size. At BFS, we have a little different perspective.

The BFS program is not a workout designed for powerlifters but rather for athletes who compete in multiple sports. Certainly we encourage making steady improvements in this lift, but not at the expense of other exercises. To perform a dozen or more sets of bench presses several times a week,

as is often the case with competitive powerlifters, would detract from working on other lifts or additional aspects of athletic conditioning such as agility or speed. Plus, focusing on just one exercise performed in the same manner increases the risk of overuse injuries. Besides, any athlete who wants to be strong at all angles needs a larger selection of pressing exercises.

The technique of properly performing the bench press is described and shown in our instructional video series, but several points need to be made. First, a thumbless grip is often used by top powerlifters. Such a grip positions the bar more in line with the lower arm bone, and the improved leverage is believed to help one lift more weight. The downside is that this

grip carries with it a higher risk, as the bar can easily slip off the hands. That's why we cannot recommend a thumbless grip in a high school environment.

Secondly, in an attempt to lift more weight, athletes often will use a wider grip, bounce the bar off their chest or use an extreme arch in their lower back. All these techniques carry a higher risk of injury, and as such we



The incline press is a great variation of the bench press. From L to R: Melissa Leakehe, Taulaai Maea, Shanece Leausa, Coach Heather Sonne.

discourage their use. And although we do recommend a slight arch in the lower back, athletes with back pain or a history of back pain may have to perform the exercise with the back in a more neutral position with minimal arch.

Next, we are aware that thanks in part to assistive gear such as bench press shirts, enormous poundages have been lifted in this exercise – at the time of this writing several men have lifted over 1,000 pounds and two women have benched over 500. However, we see little reason, other than possibly to accommodate an injury that is being treated, to use such equipment, as it is not making the athletes stronger or improving their technique. Plus, the time it takes to use such equipment

makes it impractical in the high school environment.

It must be stressed that the bench press is the most dangerous exercise that can be performed in the weightroom – in fact, many individuals have died performing the lift. Serious injuries can result when spotters are not used or if they are improperly trained or are simply not paying attention.

A strength coach should not assume that an athlete knows how to spot – coaches should have all athletes demonstrate to their coaches the proper spotting techniques before they are allowed to lift. Although a single spotter is usually sufficient, BFS recommends three spotters (one behind the lifter and one on each

side) whenever possible, especially when very heavy weights are used.

If an athlete is lifting by himself or herself, which we do not recommend, then the exercise should be performed inside a power rack with safety pins set at an appropriate height to catch the weight in case the athlete loses control of the lift or cannot complete a repetition. Again, we do not recommend an athlete perform this lift without a properly trained spotter.

Equipment should have firm upholstery to prevent the athlete from slipping, and the supports should have a wide yoke so the bar can be easily returned to the support upon completion. If an athlete is of a height that does not allow their feet to touch the floor without excessive arching, then

weight plates or some other small platform should be placed under the feet so that the body is stable during the lift. Also, the barbell should have sufficient knurling to allow a firm grip, and chalk should be made available to prevent slipping.

Dumbbells can be used instead of a barbell for most bench press exercises. The advantages are a greater range of motion and the fact that the muscles that stabilize the shoulder must work harder. Also, because the dumbbells allow the hands to rotate during the lifts, there may be less stress on the shoulder (such as by rotating the hands so that at the bottom of the exercise they are in a neutral position: hands facing each other). However, this instability also means that less weight can be used; therefore, the effect on strength and muscle development is decreased.

Bench Press Variations

At BFS we believe that an athlete should use a variety of bench pressing types of exercises, including the towel bench press, incline bench press, decline bench press and unilateral bench press. Using these variations helps prevent overuse injuries by stressing the joints at different angles, and also can provide resistance in positions that more closely approximate those that occur in a specific sport.

Towel Bench Press. One of the criticisms of the bench press is that placing the bar on the chest places high levels of stress on the connective tissues of the shoulder, especially if performed several times a week. By limiting the range of motion of the lift by placing a rolled-up towel under the shirt, or using a round towel bench pad, the stress is minimized. As such, the lift can be performed more frequently – in the BFS off-season pro-

gram one common workout design is to perform the standard bench press on Monday and the towel bench press on Friday; another advantage is this sequence can often be performed year-round. Further, as with the restricted range of motion of the box squat, the lift places less stress on the recovery ability and thus you could perform it the day before or even the day of a competition without adverse effects.

Incline and Decline Bench Press. An incline press can be specific for putting the shot, and the decline press can be specific for certain swimming strokes. Because more weight can be used in the decline press than in the incline press and the conventional bench press, performing the decline press can build confidence. It's important, however, when using the decline press that the bench be designed with an anchoring apparatus for the legs so that the athlete does not slide during the lift.

Close-Grip and Reverse-Grip Bench Press. Moving in the grip when performing the bench press focuses more on development of the triceps. The reverse-grip bench press involves performing the lift with the palms facing the athlete (supinated grip). Made popular by Anthony Clark, a super heavyweight powerlifter who broke the world record with this style, the reverse grip focuses more on development of the triceps. When an athlete performs this style, it is especially important for the spotters to be careful about removing the barbell from the supports and returning it, because the change in leverage makes it difficult for the athlete to do this by himself or herself.

Unilateral Press. This type of bench press, popular among football players, is performed on a special



The BFS Olympic 4-in-1 bench enables this valuable exercise to be safely performed from three angles.

apparatus that enables the exercise to be performed from a standing position and also with one arm at a time. Because the shoulder blades are not pinned against the bench, the motion is more natural and places less stress on the upper body. And because it is performed from a standing position, more muscle groups are involved.

The bench press is a great upper body exercise to develop the chest, shoulders and triceps. The risk of injury and accidents can be minimized by paying special attention to using correct form, proper equipment and well-trained and alert spotters. **BFS**