

Starting Strength

The bench press is the most popular exercise in the weight room. There are several reasons for this, some of them good, some of them not quite so good. The good reasons involve the incredible benefits of the exercise, and its reputation as an unequalled builder of upper body strength. The silly ones involve the exercise's tendency to make the "pecs" grow excessively when high reps are used (and many trainees' impression that these are cool), and the fact that you get to lie down while you do it.

There are few gyms left in the world that don't have a pressing bench, and for good reason: the bench press, since the 1950s, has become the most widely-recognized resistance movement in the world, the one exercise most representative in the public mind of barbell training, the exercise the vast majority of trainees are most likely to want to do, and the exercise most often asked about by most people if they are interested in how strong you are.

Many incredibly strong men have benched big weights, long before the advent of modern supportive shirts, and even good benches. Men like Doug Hepburn, Pat Casey, Mel Hennessy, Don Reinhoudt, Jim Williams (who lifted in excess of 700 lbs. in a thin, cheap, white t-shirt), and Ronnie Ray were strong back in the early days of powerlifting, although the weights they lifted would, sad to say, scarcely turn a head at a 21st century national meet. Accomplished powerlifters of the 1980s, men like Larry Pacifico, the incredible Mike McDonald, George Hechter, John Kuc, Mike Bridges, Bill Kazmaier, Rickey Dale Crain, and the great Doug Young were masters of the bench press, using all the tricks at their disposal to establish national and world records in the lift (figure 1).

The modern version of the bench press, like the squat, depends on another piece of equipment for its execution. Until the upright support bench came into widespread use in the 1950s, the bar had to be pulled into position while lying on the floor, or while lying on a flat bench pulled up from the floor over the head into position over the chest. Controversy abounded as technique was evolving, with questions about the legitimacy of assistance in getting the bar into position, the use of a heave from the belly, even the use of an arch in the lower back, causing debate among physical culturists all over the world. Nowadays, the fancy-schmancy newfangled bench-press bench is standard equipment, and only a few innovative thinkers in the powerlifting community bother with doing the exercise the old, harder, and maybe better, way. After all, the more involved the exercise, the more the exercise involves, in terms of muscle, nerve, and control.

In fact, the dumbbell version of the exercise, which actually predates the barbell version due to its less specialized equipment requirements, is probably a better exercise for most purposes other than powerlifting competition. This is especially true if the weights used are sufficiently heavy, challenging the ability of the lifter to actually finish a set. Most trainees use them as a light assistance movement, and never appreciate how hard they are or how useful they can be. They are performed on a simple flat bench, and taking the dumbbells out of the rack or off the floor, getting into position on the flat bench, and getting up with them after the set is a large part of the fun. Dumbbells – being not tied together in the hands as