

More Big Benches

By: Louie Simmons

I was proud to write the article "Three of a Kind", which reported that Westside had three 600-pound benchers. Only a few years later we have eight 600-pound benchers, six of which bench 650 or more, with four others ready to join the club.

How did three become eight? Its evolution of training methods. We are constantly searching for better ways. In the early 1990s, we had seven men who could bench 500, including Matt Dimel's 575. Jesse Kellum suggested that we do floor presses, board presses, and rack lock-outs. This enabled three of our lifters, all Juniors, to increase to 600.

Let's look at the training of Jimmy Ritchie, who recently benched 650. Years ago, Jimmy had benched 500, after about 2 years of training. But, with the lure of fast bikes and women, he left the gym for 6 years. When he left we were training our bench on speed day at 72%. I had just made 530 while training with 365 for 8 sets of 3 reps. When Jimmy returned, we had him use 50% of a contest bench or 60% of a shirtless bench max. Within a year, Jimmy benched 600, and that was in a full meet, where he became our 46th Elite lifter. He recently benched 650, as did Rob Fusner. How did they do it?

Let's start with the dynamic (speed) day. The weight at chest level is 300 pounds (46%), consisting of 255 pounds on the bar and 45 pounds of tension from Flex bands. The bands contribute an extra 110 pounds at the top to equal 365 (56%). This weight is used for several weeks leading up to a contest. Seven weeks outside a meet, Jimmy adds a second band to the bar. It supplies extra tension only for the last 8 inches at the top. The total weight at the chest must remain 50% of a shirt-assisted bench press.

Jimmy will lower the bar very fast, almost dropping it, and he catches it 1-3 inches off his chest. This is ballistic bench pressing. He will press it up as fast as possible, keeping the motionless period as short as possible. The time to complete 3 reps is roughly 3 seconds, the same amount of time as max of 650 pounds.

The second band is used for 5 weeks. Then a 2-week downloading period must occur: this develops more bar speed. Here, 295 pounds is on the bar with 40 pounds of chains, instead of bands.

He will add a small amount of weight to the bar for some of the sets, 20-30 pounds at the most. This addition of weight is done for 10% of all sets throughout the cycle. This is to check bar speed. If a small jump causes you to slow down, use less weight.

After benching, Jimmy hits the triceps. Some of his favorite exercises are the following. Two-arm dumbbell extensions can be done on the floor or on a decline, incline, or flat bench. When done on the floor, the muscle tension can be released by resting the dumbbell on the floor; this really helps starting strength. Do 8-12 reps. J.M presses are done for a max triple. Straight bar extensions can be done for a 5-rep max. Five-board presses can be done for a 3- or 5-rep max, with 150 pounds of tension added to the bar. Jimmy also does a lot of lat work and finally delt raises and hammer curls.

Let's look back at the dynamic day. The ballistic benching is a supermaximal method and is not plyometric. Do not pause. The stretch reflex will last up to 2 seconds. The triceps are the most important muscle; do extensions. The lats are next in importance. They are responsible for placing the bar correctly on the chest. Over developed pecs take over the role of stabilizing the bar, thus resulting in more muscle tears. There is a need for some pec strength, but the lats and triceps must be the strongest. If your elbows turn out when you bench, placing most of the stress on the pecs, your lats are being removed from the lift and a minimax, or sticking point, occurs. This is where you miss the lift or a pec injury occurs. Also work the delts, with raises to the front, side, and rear, and do hammer curls for the forearms.

On speed day, use chains for the most part. When the bar is on the chest, all the chain should be on the floor. At lockout, half the chain is off the floor. Do 8-10 triples with your hands inside the power rings on all sets, including touching the smooth part of the bar. Do 20 lifts out of 200 with slightly heavier weight to test the bar speed. Occasionally use bands instead of the chains; bands cannot be used year-round because they are so hard on your body.

Three days later is the max effort day. Max effort means maxing out (but not in the regular bench press) with 1-3 reps in various exercises. One of Jimmy's favorite exercises is the floor press with 200 pounds of chain over the bar. He also does regular benches with a set weight of 335 or 365; he will do singles with one chain, then two, and so forth, until he misses. Jimmy will board press with two, three, or four boards with regular weight or with different amounts of band resistance, ranging from 100 to 300 pounds. Dumbbell presses on the stability ball are also done, for 3 sets to failure with heavy weights, 125-175 pounds. Incline, decline, and seated press are other core exercises Jimmy rotates. Each week he rotates to a new exercise that suits his purposes. Everyone in the gym may use a different core lift as meet time approaches.

After the core lift, it's straight to triceps, lats, delts, and hammer curls. The amount of triceps work (volume and intensity) that you will be able to do on this day is always less because of the nature of maxing out: it's very hard on the triceps.

We now have 25 men benching 550 or more who have used this method. Think about this: Jimmy made a 500 bench 7 years ago doing 8 sets of 3 reps with 365. He now benches 650 using 300 pounds for 8 sets of 3 reps. The two keys are this: be explosive on dynamic day and max out on max effort day, which should be three days later. The ones who fail train too heavy or slow on speed day and not heavy enough on max effort day.

Jimmy goes straight to the meet off of this training. He does not work heavier as the meet approaches. This would be a mistake. You will be maxing out each week on this program. There is a process known as time under tension, which means that if you push or pull or squat concentrically and eccentrically in the same amount of time it takes to do the classical lift, you have accomplished the same thing as the actual lifts, but by using a core exercise such as floor press, rack press, and bench-ing with bands or chains.

I must congratulate Bob Hicky and Dave Barns, members of the same club, for both making a 700 pound bench press. It was my dream for Westside to do it first, but a dream is sometimes just a dream.