

Westside's Top Benchers

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I receive many calls asking how our top benchers train. We have 17 benching over 700: one has done 830 (Mike Wolf), in addition to two 198's who have done a 683 (George Halbert) and a 655 (Jayson Fry), and a 181 (Fred Boldt) who has done 628 and is an Arnold Classic winner. Then there's Nick Winters, who made 650 raw at the New England Strength Spectacular.

In 1993 I wrote an article entitled "Three of a Kind". We had three guys benching 600, one of whom (Kenn Patterson) went on to become the youngest to bench 700, at 22. His actual lift was 728, a world record at 275. Then along came Mike Brown. At 19 years old, he made 735 at 308 and totaled 2300.

Here are some of the routines and exercises they use.

First, everyone does speed work. This is known as the dynamic method. This alone will not make you strong, but rather build a fast rate of force development. Research shows that 154 pounds can develop 264 pounds of force with maximal acceleration.

Nine sets are performed: 3 sets with the index finger on the smooth part of the bar, 3 sets with a 2 inch wider grip, and 3 sets with the little finger on the power ring.

After speed bench, using about 40% of a 1-rep max on the floor press, they do 2 sets to near failure with one of three dumbbell weights. Fred uses either 155, 125, or 100 pound dumbbells. Sometimes a barbell is used. Fred's weights are 365, 315, or 275. Remember, they go to near failure. Then it's triceps, lats, upper back, and rear and side delts. Some hammer curls finish the workout.

Speed work can be varied by using 2 sets of 5/8 inch chains to accommodate resistance or mini-bands, which add 45 pounds in the bottom and 85 pounds at the top of the lift. A monster mini provides 110 pounds at the top and 50 pounds in the bottom. Speed benching can be done off rack pins, in the floor press, or with a cambered bar.

Now let's look at what some of Westside's top benchers do.

Jay Fry has made incredible progress in a short time, going from 530 to 650 at 181 in less than 18 months, plus 655 at a body weight of 193. Jay has become quite a student of the game while working with George Halbert. To raise absolute strength, he uses heavy assistance work such as kettle bell triceps extensions and J. M. presses. This teaches him to fire the correct muscles at the right time. Using chains or bands or hanging kettle bells from the bar not only allows the muscles to become stronger but develops muscle coordination for benching. Jay feels this is far more important than just throwing heavy weight around.

To test his strength, Jay uses full-range band presses, floor presses with chains or bands, or just weight. These records are dependent on the special exercises that were mentioned above. Jay does a lot of upper body sled work. This makes him stronger and raises his GPP. The sky is the limit for Jay. His potential is very high, and with his drive, only time will tell.

Jay's teammate Fred Boldt has been at Westside for close to 5 years. Fred's bench went from 400 at 165 to 556 at 165, placing him second to the great Marcus Schick. He then won the 2005 WPO semifinals with a 628, over Jay's 622, in Chicago. He went on to winning the Arnold Classic in 2006 with 628. It's not easy to win the Arnold with all the chaos that goes along with it.

How does Fred do it? To test his bench press max, he tries a max off the floor press with 5 sets of chains weighing 200 pounds on the bar. His best is 345 with his little fingers on the power ring on the bar. A second strength test is a full-range bench with light Jump-Stretch bands that add 100 pounds in the bottom and 200 pounds at lock-out. His best is 370. This is what Jay has also done, and their bench presses are very close.

Of course, like all Westsiders, Fred uses the conjugate method. He will rotate from 4 or 5 boards with bands to a steep incline with a barbell. Fred uses a cambered bar on boards to reduce the camber to 1 inch.

For hypertrophy work, Fred likes dumbbell presses. His 1-set record is 34 reps with 100 pounds. He rotates three dumbbell weights: 100, 125, and 155 pounds. His best 3-set record is 14, 12, and 9 reps with 155's. He also has done 104 push-ups with his feet elevated 12 inches.

Fred's speed work is done with 185 or 205 plus mini-bands that add 85 pounds at lock-out or with 2 sets of 5/8 inch chain that when locked out is roughly 60 pounds.

For special work, straight bar extensions and kettle bell extensions are his mainstay. He does lots of lat and upper back work and rear and side delt work.

Fred never misses a workout (nor does anyone at Westside). Fred's motivation is his desire to destroy Jay. I'm sure you will see Fred for a long time to come.

Mike Wolf made rapid progress after coming to Westside. His 585 soon became 825 and then 830. Mike is huge, about 405 pounds. George started working with Mike, finding his weaknesses. First George had Mike push up the triceps work and board press with lots of bands, up to 400 pounds of bands, plus weight. Mike also did full-range band presses--flat, incline, and decline. At Westside, we do a lot of triceps extension: straight bar, dumbbells with palms facing in, roll back style, dumbbells with elbows out to the sides, J.M. presses, and kettle bell extensions. Mike also does a lot of benches with kettle bells hanging from the bar with doubled up mini-bands. Mike found his floor press well below our average for his shirt bench. So he pushed it up to 515 with 200 pounds of chain, and this raised his bench considerably. Lots of lat work, pull-downs, bar rows, and dumbbell rows have made it possible for Mike to control the bar placement on his chest.

Last is speed work. A fast rate of force development is essential to lift heavy weights fast. Let's see if Mike can give Westside its first 900 bench.

George Halbert is our most decorated bencher: 11 all-time world records in three different weight classes. George's views on benching are as follows. Speed work is most important. George knows that if you miss a heavy lift, it was not too heavy, but was not lifted fast enough. His speed work consists of chains, bands, and hanging kettle bells from the bar.

For max effort work, it's heavy band presses at all angles. This sometimes includes benching almost upside down; reverse or lightened band presses--flat, incline, or decline; board presses (without shirt); and lots of dumbbells. He also does the repetition method to near failure for 15 reps with hanging kettle bells.

George is very innovative in his training. His bench methods are responsible for much of Westside's benching success. He does many workouts a week, just lats or delts or prehab work. He is one of only a few men, who have made world records in three weight classes, and he's got more up his sleeve than just triceps.