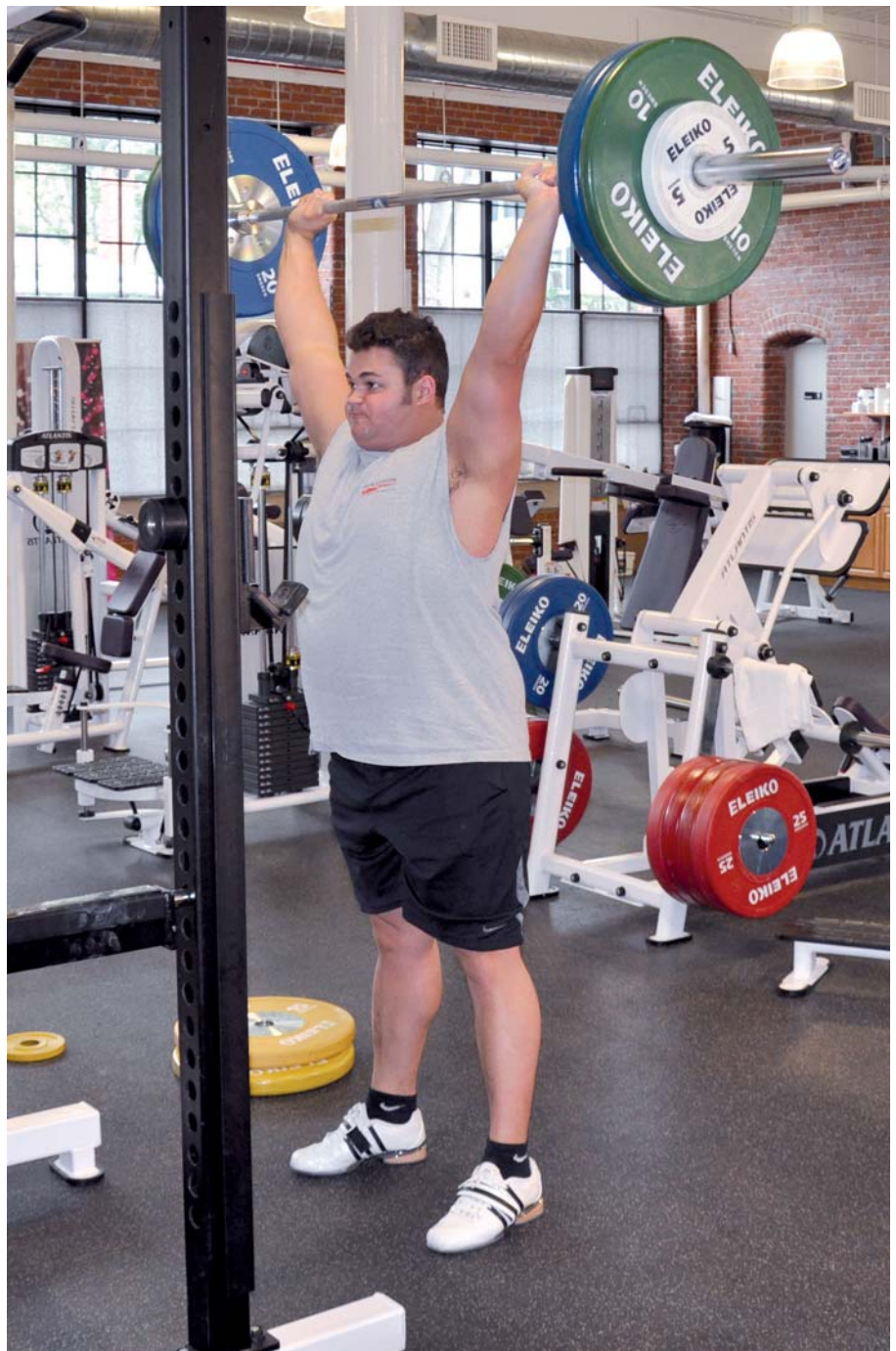


# Rediscover the Overhead Press

Why you should take a stand with upper body strength training with these important exercises

One of the events in strongman competitions is the log press, which involves hoisting a log-shaped cylinder to the shoulders and then pressing it to extended arms. The world record is 462 pounds, made by Zydrunas Savickas in 2008, which shows how far this event has progressed since 1980, when the log press was officially introduced at the World's Strongest Man competition and the best lift was 346 pounds. But various forms of overhead pressing have always been in the iron game.

Among early strongmen Doug Hepburn was an amazing overhead presser. In the 1950s he could perform a press behind-the-neck with 350 pounds and press 175 pounds overhead with just his right hand. Have you ever

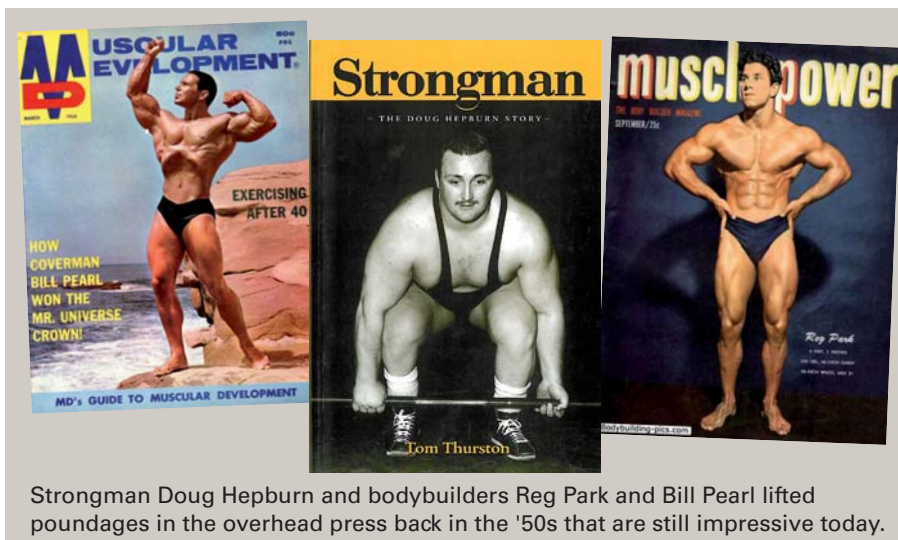


Pat Mendes uses overhead presses to condition his shoulders. Mendes is a two-time winner of the National High School Power Clean Championships and a 2012 Olympic hopeful in weightlifting.

seen anyone press 350 pounds (three big 45-pound plates on each side plus some change)?

And it wasn't just weightlifters and strongmen who could press, but also bodybuilders. Reg Park and Bill Pearl each won their first Mr. Universe title in the 1950s, Park in 1950 and

Pearl in 1953. Park could perform standing dumbbell presses with 140-pound dumbbells, a one-arm dumbbell press with 165 pounds for 2 reps, and a behind-the-neck press with 300 pounds. Pearl could perform a 310-pound seated behind-the-neck press and a 320-pound military press. Both



Strongman Doug Hepburn and bodybuilders Reg Park and Bill Pearl lifted poundages in the overhead press back in the '50s that are still impressive today.

these men – who were as strong as they looked – did these lifts nearly a half century ago!

The BFS program includes the bench press as part of its total workout program, along with many variations such as the incline bench press. In the BFS program the bench press is performed only once a week (so if your goal is to be an exceptional powerlifter, a powerlifting program would be what you'd follow). An additional benefit of increasing your overhead pressing strength is that it will have a positive transfer to your bench press performance. Says strength coach Charles Poliquin, "One of the best ways to get a great bench press is to train overhead pressing strength. Because of various inhibition mechanisms, your bench press progress is often stalled until you spend time on the overhead press."

In terms of general anatomy, the overhead press strengthens the deltoids, traps and triceps. But it's a movement that involves the entire body and requires overall strength. Poliquin points to a strong correlation between shoulder pain and lack of overhead pressing strength, and he says, "A weakness in the lower back becomes obvious during the performance of the overhead press. One could argue that

other predictors such as external rotator strength pinpoint the cause of shoulder pain, but overhead pressing strength is a better predictor." Further, he says that training only the bench press shortens the subscapularis (an upper back muscle), puts pressure on the shoulder joint and may injure the shoulder.

Poliquin has developed a testing system called structural balance, which looks at the correlation between different exercises to determine if an individual has muscle imbalances that could affect athletic performance or increase the risk of injury. One of the most common imbalances that sports medicine practitioners look at is the relationship between the strength of the hamstrings and quadriceps, but Poliquin has found it very useful to identify imbalances in many other muscle groups. For example, here are his structural balance ratios between the close-grip bench press (with hands generally about 16 inches apart for males) and two types of overhead presses to determine if there is a structural imbalance:

**Seated Dumbbell Overhead Press to Bench Press.** Poliquin says that the amount of weight that can be lifted for 8 reps in a seated dumbbell overhead press should be about 29 percent of the result in the close-grip bench press. In

other words, if you can close-grip bench press 220 pounds for 1 repetition, you should be able to do a seated overhead press with a pair of 65-pound dumbbells for 8 reps.

**Seated Behind-the-Neck Press to Bench Press.** Poliquin says that the amount of weight that can be lifted for 1 rep in the behind-the-neck press from a seated position should represent 66 percent of the weight that can be used for a 1-rep maximum in the close-grip bench press. In this type of press, the weight is lifted from a dead-stop position with the bar resting on the trapezius muscles, not from a weight handoff in the lock-out position.

## Pressing Subjects

When you grip the bar for an overhead press, make sure your index fingers are just outside your medial (side) deltoids in the start position to maximize the efficiency of the exercise. Your elbows will be slightly down so that your forearms are nearly perpendicular to the floor. And don't use your legs – you want to press the weight, not push press it.

As you press, you will have to lean back slightly to get your head out of the way and drive the bar straight up. The technique is to press straight up, lean back slightly, and then when the barbell passes your head, lean forward. Don't make the mistake of pressing the bar forward, as doing so will force you to lean back excessively to maintain your balance; that will place a lot of harmful stress on your lower back. In fact, one reason the press was eliminated from Olympic competition was due to the stress created by excessive hyperextension of the back, which was causing lower back problems.

One variation of the overhead press that minimizes stress on the lower back is to place your dominant leg about

10 to 12 inches forward of the other foot. To determine which leg is your dominant leg, simply take a step forward – the leg that moves first is your dominant leg. Also, if you sense that your lower back is weak when pressing, you should consider adding auxiliary exercises for the lower back such as glute-ham raises or back extensions.

After mastering the standing overhead press, you can perform variations such as performing the exercise with dumbbells. Another variation is to perform the overhead press with lifting chains, which adjust to the strength curve of an exercise because the resistance gets heavier as the arms are extended.

A strength curve is a mathematical model that represents how much force can be produced at specific joint angles. An “ascending” strength curve exists when you can display more force as you extend the joints; exercises such as deadlifts, squats, bench presses and military presses have ascending strength curves. Chains would be valuable for these exercises because the increased resistance during the strongest joint angles would make the exercise feel smooth through the entire movement.

For an overhead press the chains have to be long enough to remain on the floor during the entire lift or there will be a high risk of the chains swinging excessively. For a standing press, BFS chains can be lengthened by using chain extenders, each of which adds two feet to the length of the chain. Otherwise, you should perform this type of press from a seated position. Be aware that the chains will slow down the pressing portion of the lift. As such, if you usually perform 10-12 reps in the overhead press for an auxiliary exercise, you may need to perform only 8-10 reps to get the same training effect.

Another variation of the overhead



Photo: Reg Bradford

Former NFL lineman Ethan Brooks demonstrates an overhead press performed with dumbbells.

press is the press behind the neck. Make sure the hands are as close as possible to each other during the initial setup so the range of motion is maximal. Start the exercise from the bottom position. If you don't have a special bench for this purpose, such as the BFS Olympic Military/Shoulder Press, you can improvise with a power rack and a flat

bench. You start by removing the barbell from pins set up for the back squat and then sit down – be certain to have a spotter to ensure proper form.

Adding overhead presses to your workouts will help develop strong, powerful shoulders. It's time to rediscover this exercise and experience these benefits for yourself. **BFS**



Photo: Reg Bradford

Because you have better leverage at the end range of motion in an overhead press, using a power rack as shown enables you to overload the muscles safely. The same effect can be achieved with lifting chains.

# POWER CENTER

The Bench is the Heart of Your Upper Body Program

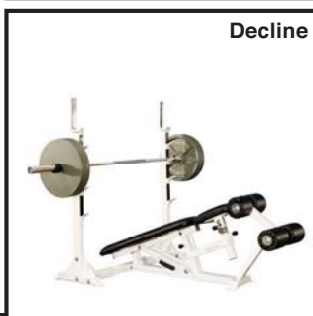


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