

Bench Pressing for Athletes

How to use bench press training to achieve athletic superiority

There are barriers in sports that, when broken, establish the athlete's name in history. In 1954 Roger Bannister of the United Kingdom was the first man to run a sub-four-minute mile, and

in 1968 Jim Hines became the first man to break the 10-second barrier in the 100 meters. In 1990 Derrick Thomas became the first and only player to score seven sacks in a single game, and in 2005 Lance Armstrong

won his seventh consecutive Tour de France. In powerlifting, one of the most significant records was made by Pat Casey, the first man to bench press 600 pounds. Casey set that iron game milestone on March 25, 1967.

Consider that when Casey did this lift, he did it without today's fancy elbow sleeves, wrist wraps, and of course bench shirts. Although several men have bench pressed over 1,000 pounds with this assistive equipment, the best official bench press without a bench shirt is 715 pounds by Scot Mendelson, which he did in 2005. Casey's best official bench press was 615, so this means that four decades later Casey's accomplishments are still world class.

In addition to his great strength for the bench press, Casey was known for other pressing feats. He could incline bench press 210-pound dumbbells for repetitions, and at a body-weight of about 300 pounds he did a parallel bar dip with 380 pounds strapped to his waist. Also, consider that Casey was strong all-around, being the first man to squat 800 pounds and total 2,000 pounds in the three powerlifts (squat, bench press and deadlift). In fact, he promised his wife that when he reached his goals of a 600-pound bench press and 2,000 total, he would retire. So what does



BFS clinician Rick Bojak teaching proper bench press technique at a BFS clinic.

this have to do with BFS?

BFS has a great deal of respect for anyone who competes in the iron game, whether it's powerlifting, weightlifting or strongman. That being said, we also believe that specialization in only one form of conditioning is not in the best interest of the multi-sport athlete.

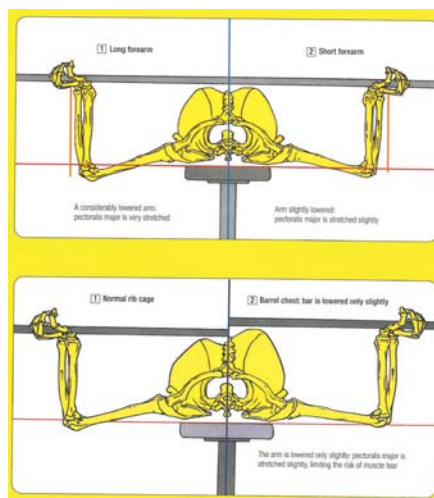
We often hear stories of high school athletes bench pressing 400 pounds, and in fact Casey could bench press this much when he was just 17! Impressive, but we have to question if such specialization negatively affects all-around athleticism. Did some high school running back with a 400-pound bench press miss out on a scholarship because he had a low vertical jump or 40 time? And for that matter, did he decide to skip the basketball season to focus on hitting that monster lift? If so, that could be another strike against him, as scouts like to recruit talented multi-sport athletes.

Yes, the bench press is in the BFS program, but it's performed only once a week, in addition to a bench press variation such as the towel bench press or the incline bench press performed on one other day of the week. That's it. And we believe that's enough, because you have to make time for the other lifts in the BFS program, as well as the plyos and the running and the stretching and the...well, you get the idea.

Bench Press Basics

The proper technique for performing the bench press is described and shown in our instructional video series, but several points need to be stressed.

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 the athlete



These illustrations from Frederic Delavier's *Strength Training Anatomy* (Human Kinetics, 2010) show how the length of the forearms and height of the rib cage can affect bench pressing ability.

lift more weight. The downside is that this grip carries with it a higher risk of injury, as the bar can easily slip off the hands.

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 can easily cause injury, and as such we 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



2009 BFS Female High School Athlete of the Year Hannah Donnerberg prepares for a heavy bench press with the help of a knowledgeable and alert spotter.

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, with the current record being 531 pounds by Shannon Pole-Summers. However, we see little reason to use such equipment, as it is not making the athletes stronger. Furthermore, the time it takes to use such equipment – it can take a powerlifter 10 minutes or longer just to put on all the assistive gear for the bench press – 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 weight-room – 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 coach should not assume that an athlete knows how to spot, and 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.

Regarding equipment, a bench press should have firm upholstery to prevent the athlete from sinking into

the bench or 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.

Finally, 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.

Pat Casey was a great bench presser and great all-around powerlifter. Although he died from cancer in 2005, his accomplishments are permanently etched in the iron game history books. What's more, the success achieved by Pat Casey and other record-breaking athletes continues to inspire us to break our own barriers. **BFS**



There are many machines that allow bench press variations to be performed safely. Shown are the BFS Lethal Weapon, the BFS Unilateral Power Press, and the BFS Leverage Bench Press and Incline Bench Press units.



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Flat



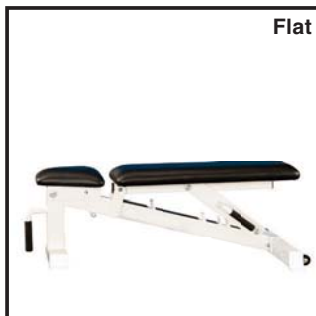
Military
(shoulder press)



Decline



Military



Flat



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