

The Trap Bar: A Productive Alternative

By Matt Brzycki

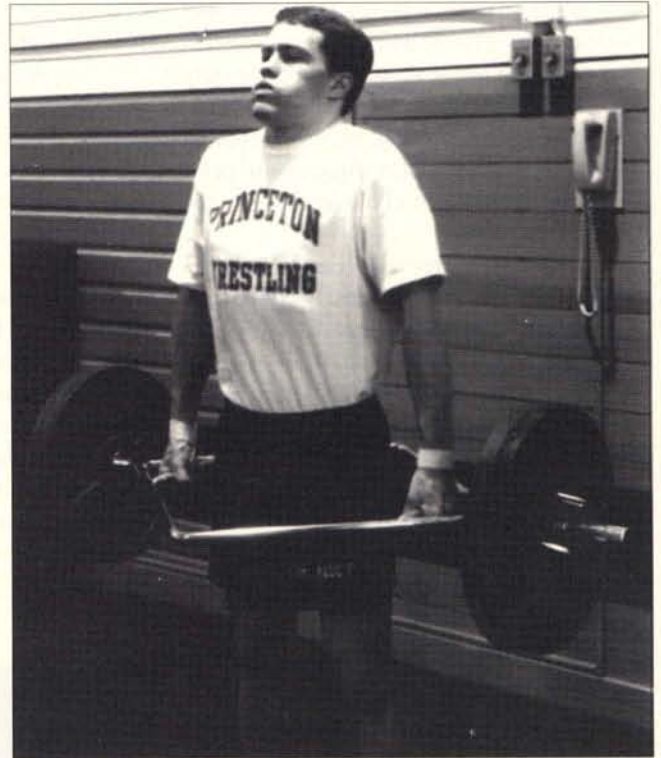
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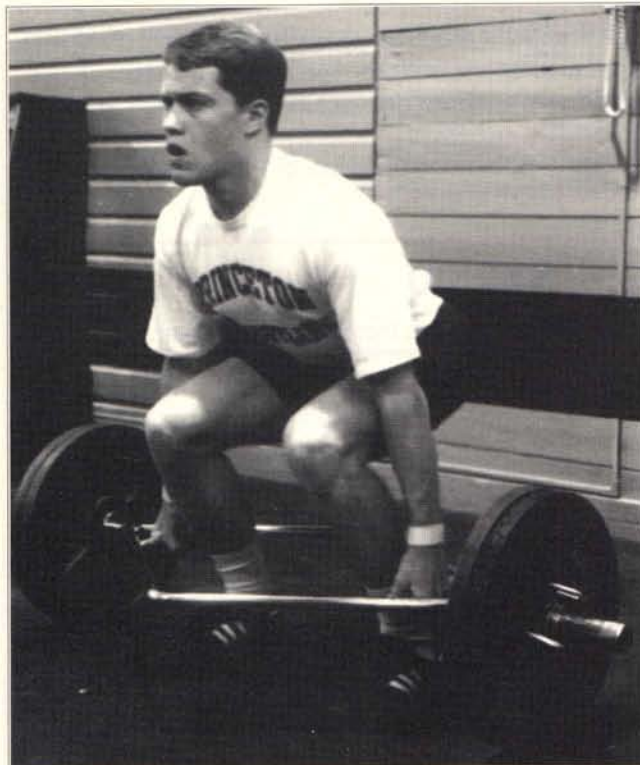
What in blazes is a trap bar? Well, a trap bar has an open, diamond-shaped center that allows the lifter to perform exercises from within the bar's opening. In a sense, the lifter is inside the bar. As the name suggests, the trap bar is primarily used to exercise the trapezius or "traps." However, there are other muscle groups that can be exercised with this piece of equipment as well.

Shrugs

A shoulder shrug is the best exercise for isolating the trapezius. I've been training my traps with shrugs on a regular basis for years — sometimes using dumbbells and other times using the bench press station of a Universal Gym. I make it a practice not to write or talk about specific weights and reps that I use when I train, but in this case it's important here to make a later comparison. At a bodyweight of about 175 pounds, I've done shrugs with 100 pound dumbbells for as many as 17 reps and with 315 pounds on the Universal for 9 reps. I really don't like to do shrugs with a barbell for several reasons. First of all, the bar rubs against my upper thighs creating additional friction and discomfort. Secondly, holding the bar in front of me and pulling with "round shoulders" feels awkward. Finally, the angle of pull doesn't seem desirable for hitting my traps the right way. I feel that shrugging with the weight at my sides — as when using dumbbells or a Universal — makes the movement infinitely more comfortable and gives me a much better angle of pull that is more effective for exercising the traps. However, after years of doing shrugs this way it was time for a change. I was bored with doing them on the Universal and dumbbells over



Trap Bar Shrugs



Trap Bar Deadlifts

100 pounds are usually hard to find. Recently, I obtained a trap bar for our fitness center here at the university. Since I had never used the bar before, I wasn't sure of how much weight to use. After a little trial and error, I ended up doing 15 reps-to-failure with 135 pounds. Yet, despite this seemingly light weight, I woke up the next morning and every square inch of my traps was extremely sore — from the base of my skull across to the rear delts and all the way down to my seventh lumbar! Hey, I'd have to say that the trap bar passed the litmus test. It's an excellent tool for training the trapezius in a safe, productive and comfortable manner.

Squats

Those who know my opinion about barbell squats are usually quite surprised to learn that I actually used to do that particular movement all the time. In fact, I had competed for several years as a powerlifter in the Marine Corps and later for the Penn State powerlifting team. In a 1982 sanctioned powerlifting meet, I managed to squat 410 pounds (and deadlift 440) at a bodyweight of 162. That may not sound like a lot of weight, but it wasn't too bad considering that I was at a distinct biomechanical disadvantage for the sport: I was almost 5'11" tall! Anybody who knows anything about powerlifting will tell you that the best squatters generally have short legs, a short torso, wide hips and a thick midsection. Needless to say, I was not your prototypical squatter.

On May 10, 1983, I decided to stop doing barbell squats. The main reason was that after years of squatting (and deadlifting) with heavy weights for low reps, my right hip flexor was so inflamed that I couldn't even squat 135 pounds without experiencing a searing pain in my frontal hip area. My

knees and low back didn't feel too swift, either. Not to change the subject, but knee wraps don't really protect the knees. Knee wraps are used to create an artificial rebound effect out of the bottom position of the squat — similar to compressing a spring — to enable someone to lift more weight. Anyway, my buddies used to laugh at me because my knees made the same sounds as when you pour milk on Rice Krispies. I was 25 years old. (To this day, my knees still go snap-crackle-pop and I can't stay in a crouched position for more than a few seconds because of the pain.) I also didn't like the idea that after a competition, my lumbar area was literally black and blue for days and so stiff that I couldn't even bend over to tie my sneakers. There are those who claim that the barbell squat is the be-all and end-all in lifting and that anybody who doesn't squat is basically a geek. Well, the fact is that barbell squats compress the spinal column and create excessive shearing forces in the knee joint. Anyone who doesn't believe that should take a physics class or read a good biomechanics book. Sure, there's a few wide-bodied mesomorphs that can do barbell squats in a relatively safe fashion but most of us regular types have no business doing barbell squats. Period. Except for a few times when I demonstrated proper technique for a beginner powerlifter, over the last 10 years I can remember squatting with a barbell exactly twice. In both instances, I just wanted to see how it felt to squat with a barbell again. My joints remembered real quick.

Since 1983, I've been training my hips mostly with various leg presses (both plateloading and selectorized), a hip and back machine (dare I say "Nautilus"?), a hip abduction machine and a Safe Squat machine. Incidentally, the Safe Squat is a highly innovative machine in which a person squats with the weightload on the hips — not the shoulders — which essentially eliminates spinal compression. A person can also position his lower leg so that it is roughly perpendicular to the ground thereby reducing the shear forces in the knee joint. With no exception, training to failure on the Safe Squat is the nastiest, most demanding exercise I've ever done in my life. It's downright brutal. After one set-to-failure followed by a few additional forced reps from a training

partner, my glutes would throb so bad that I thought they were gonna explode off my pelvis. Not only that, but I was huffin and puffin like I just ran a half mile with a proverbial piano on my back. It's one tough exercise but very few facilities have one because... well, because it's one tough exercise!

But get this: If you place the trap bar on the floor and stand inside the opening, you can perform deadlifts/hack squats. With the weights at your sides, it's a lot easier to do the movement with proper technique, the bar doesn't rub up and down your body and there's no weight on your shoulders to smooch your vertebrae together. Indeed, the trap bar provides a safe, productive alternative to barbell squats.

Shoulder Press

The third movement that can be

done with the trap bar is a shoulder press. The unique design of the bar enables you to perform this movement with a parallel grip that is similar to that used with dumbbells. You'll need two spotters to give you the bar, however. Some people find that this particular grip (i.e. palms facing each other) is more comfortable and doesn't "pinch" the shoulders like a behind-the-neck shoulder press.

Overtime

The trap bar is limited in the number of exercises that can be done with it. Still, the few exercises that can be performed with this bar are as effective and productive as those done with a standard Olympic bar while providing a higher level of safety and comfort. Truly, the trap bar supplies a productive alternative to several traditional exercises. ○

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