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BENCH PRESS

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The bench press is perhaps the most popular exercise done in the weight room. What follows are some of the most common questions that coaches and athletes ask about this movement.

Q: Is the bench press a good exercise?

A: The bench press is a very good exercise for the chest, shoulders and triceps. But it's not necessarily more valuable than other movements. Unfortunately, many athletes often spend far too much time performing the bench press while neglecting other important exercises.

Q: How many sets should I have my wrestlers do?

A: Ask five different strength coaches and you're likely to get five different answers. Understand that more isn't necessarily better. If more were better, then the best program would have athletes train 24 hours a day. A 1983 study by Stowers and his colleagues compared 3 groups who trained with either 1 set, 3 sets or 3 - 5 sets. After 7 weeks of training, all 3 groups increased their 1-repetition maximum (1-RM) bench press significantly. In addition, there were no significant differences between the 3 groups. In effect, the multiple-set groups performed at least 3 times as many sets (or 200% more) that the 1-set group without obtaining a significantly greater increase in their 1-RM bench press.

A program will be productive as long as it is based upon the Overload Principle. There are two main ways that wrestlers can overload their muscles in an exercise: (1) Use more weight than the previous workout and (2) do more repetitions than the previous workout.

Q: How many repetitions should my wrestlers do?

A: A variety of repetition ranges can be used to increase strength in the bench press (as well as other exercises). In the aforementioned study, the 3 groups trained with

as few as 3 repetitions and as many as 12. Remember that performing low repetition sets increases the risk of injury.

Q: A few of my wrestlers say that their shoulder joints hurt when they do the bench press. Is it okay for them to keep doing the exercise?

A: No, all they're doing is aggravating the condition. You must distinguish between muscle pain and joint pain. Generally speaking, muscle pain is okay. It's simply a sign that high intensity efforts are being done. On the other hand, joint pain is not okay. It is an indication of probable orthopedic problems. If any of your wrestlers experience pain in their shoulder joints during the bench press, they should modify the exercise. One option is to use a lighter weight and to perform the movement slower than usual. Another possibility is to do the bench press with dumbbells using a parallel grip (in which the palms face each other). If the bench press cannot be done in a pain-free fashion, then it should not be included in the workout. In

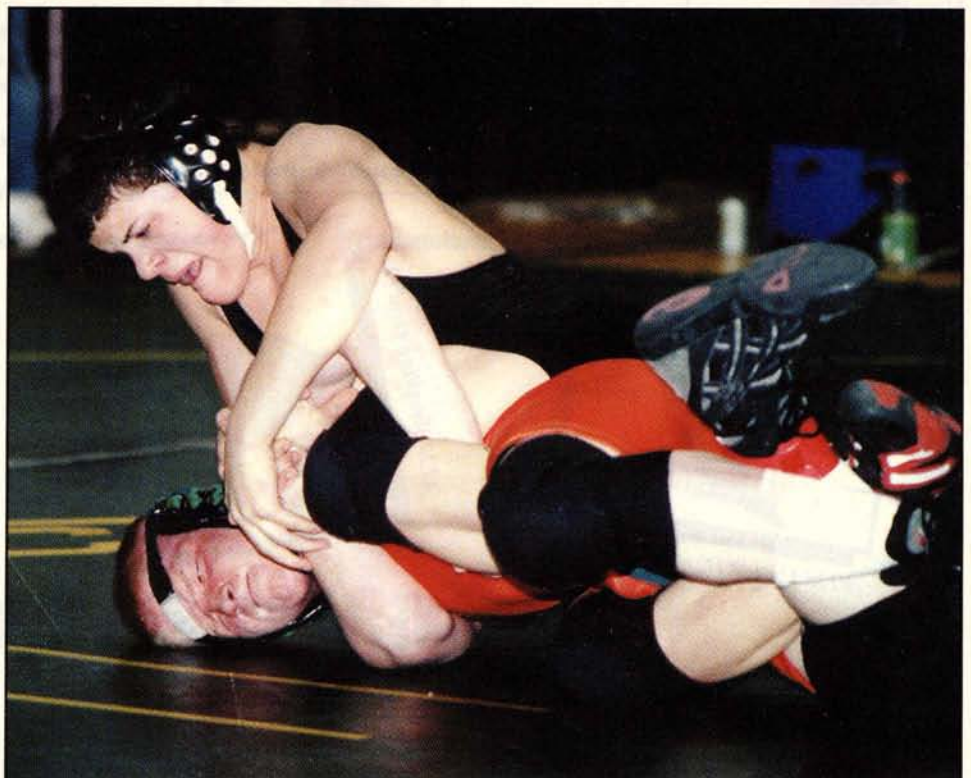
this case, have your wrestlers do an alternative exercise that addresses the same muscles such as the incline press or decline press.

Q: I can bench press X pounds. Is that good?

A: Unless you're a competitive powerlifter, who cares? Your ability to bench press has absolutely nothing to do with your ability as a wrestler — except if you happen to also compete as a powerlifter. Besides, your ability to bench press is based upon several factors — most of which you simply cannot control. The most obvious factors are the length of your arms and the thickness of your chest. Everything else being equal, an athlete with short arms and a thick chest will be able to bench press more than an athlete with longer arms and a thinner chest.

Q: Is it okay for me to raise my hips when doing the bench press?

A: No it's not. By raising your hips, you're essentially shortening the distance that the



Morris Open Wrestling Tournament. Matt Jacobson, Sidney, Illinois, vs. Paul Geiss, Minooka. Jacobson won the match 2-0. Jacobson went on to win second place. Photo by Bob Case.

bar must travel to your chest. While this may allow you to lift more weight, it doesn't mean that you increased your strength. In fact, look at it this way: Suppose that when you keep your hips down, you can bench press 200 pounds a distance of 18 inches — or 3,600 inch-pounds of work [200 pounds x 18 inches]. If you raise your chest to the point where the bar now travels a distance of 15 inches, you'd have to bench press 240 pounds just to perform the same amount of work [3,600 inch-pounds ÷ 15 inches = 240 pounds].

Q: Should my wrestlers use a wide grip or a narrow grip?

A: Take an empty bar and hold it at shoulder level with your hands spaced far apart. While standing in front of a mirror, press it overhead. Note the distance that the bar traveled vertically. Move your hands closer to your shoulders and try it again. You'll find that the narrower grip allowed the bar to travel a greater distance. Being able to move the bar a greater distance means that you had a greater range of motion (ROM) around your shoulder and elbow joints. The greater ROM translates into a greater involvement of your muscle mass. The grip in the bench press should be slightly wider

than shoulder width apart.

Q: Should I lock my elbows between repetitions?

A: Nope. There's two reasons why you shouldn't "lock" or completely extend your elbows. First of all, it unloads your muscles. Second, you increase your risk of hyperextending your elbow joints.

Q: My wrestlers can lift more weight when they bounce the bar off their chests. Is that okay?

A: No! Bouncing the bar off their chests means that they can bounce more weight, not lift more weight. Dropping a barbell onto the chest causes compression. When the musculoskeletal structure "rebounds" or returns to normal, it helps raise the weight. The more you drop the weight, the more rebound you get; the more rebound you get, the less your muscles work; the less you increase your strength. Forcefully dropping the bar on the chest also increases the risk of injury to the sternum (breastbone).

Q: What's the difference between a bench press with a barbell and a bench press with a machine?

A: In terms of your response, not much. The bench press - whether done with free weights or machines — addresses the same major muscles: the chest, shoulders and triceps. Although balancing free weights requires a greater involvement of synergistic muscles, it does not appear as if this results in a significantly greater response. Indeed, studies have shown that there are no significant differences in strength development when comparing groups who used free weights and groups who used machines. The bottom line is that your muscles do not have eyes, brains or cognitive ability. Therefore, they cannot possibly know whether the source of resistance is a barbell, dumbbells, a selectorized machine, a plate-loaded machine or another human being. The sole factors that determine your response from weight training are your genetic makeup and your level of effort — not the equipment that is used.

Matt Brzycki is the Coordinator of Health Fitness, Strength and Conditioning Programs at Princeton University. He has designed and administered strength and conditioning programs for collegiate wrestlers since 1980.

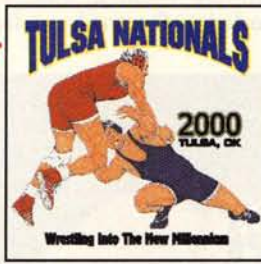
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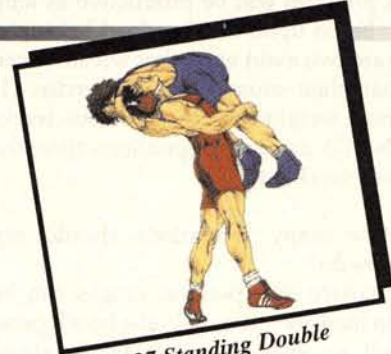
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