

Bench Press vs. Incline Press

Bill Starr: 2005

A Better Angle on Strength and Size

Recently, I've received a number of letters from readers concerning my belief that the incline-bench press was more beneficial to athletes than the flat-bench press. They all wanted to know why I used the flat bench in the Big Three if I thought the incline was a better upper-body exercise.

Fair question.

As I've mentioned previously, the program dubbed the Big Three in *The Strongest Shall Survive* was a result of my collaboration with Tommy Suggs when we worked together at the York Barbell Company in the late 1960s. We were anxious to spread the gospel of strength training to the coaches and athletes in the area, as well as to the entire country through the pages of *Strength & Health*, which we edited. We began attending coaches' conventions within driving range and putting on clinics and exhibitions at high schools.

At the time a large majority of sports coaches thought that lifting weights would be detrimental to their athletes. The idea was that weight training, particularly with heavy weights, would slow them down and hinder agility and flexibility.

Armed with plenty of research, we set about converting the unbelievers. At the conventions and high schools we did the Olympic lifts and sometimes benches and squats. Once the coaches saw us do split or squat snatches and clean and jerks with impressive poundages, all notions that weightlifting limited range of motion or restricted coordination, agility or foot speed vanished. We started getting bombarded with requests for programs.

The Big Three evolved after Tommy and I had talked with hundreds of coaches and visited countless high schools. The program we came up with could be done with a minimum of equipment, in a small space and in a short amount of time. One exercise for each of the three major muscle groups—shoulder girdle, back and hips and legs—would be enough.

The flat-bench press became our primary upper-body exercise by default. While we both felt that the incline was a more beneficial shoulder girdle exercise than the flat bench, there was a major problem. No incline benches were available for the high school coaches to use. I mean zero. We never saw a single incline bench in any high school weight room we inspected. In fact, there was a severe lack of inclines, period. Most commercial gyms didn't have them, and the gym at York had only one, the type that you stand up in with your feet on metal plates. That may seem rather strange because now any fitness facility worth its salt has a row of inclines, but at the time the overhead press was the primary exercise used to build upper-body strength for all athletes, and it was still part of official Olympic-lifting competitions.

Which raises the question, Why didn't we use the overhead press in the Big Three? We did consider it, of course, since we were both Olympic lifters, but there were drawbacks, the biggest one being the fact that the press was under fire from athletic trainers and sports medicine authorities who claimed that it was unduly stressful to the lower back and especially harmful to young athletes.

We already had one highly controversial exercise in the program—the full squat—and didn't want another. Another factor was the technique involved in the overhead or military press. Contrary to popular belief, the press is a difficult lift to master. I can teach athletes proper form on the bench or incline in one-fourth the time it takes them to learn to do an overhead press correctly. After weighing the pros and cons, we selected the flat bench. When done right, it's safe, easy to teach and works the upper body well. It was gaining in popularity because of the new sport of powerlifting. Plus, more weight could be handled on the flat bench than on any other upper-body exercise, and young athletes liked that.

Most important for our purposes, the high school weight rooms did have benches of some shape or form. True, most were crude, often fashioned from wood, and others were shaky, but nevertheless they were available. A few coaches even improvised and used the benches from the locker rooms. Certainly not ideal, but where there's a will, there's a way, and it got the job done.

I should also point out that our program was geared toward football more than any other sport because football was the first to wholeheartedly embrace strength training. The bench press is more useful to football players than it is to any other athletes. All things taken into account, the bench press fit the needs of the high school coaches in those early days of strength training more than any other shoulder girdle exercise could have done. Had there been an abundance of incline benches at the disposal of those high school coaches, however, the incline rather than the flat bench would be a part of the Big Three.

Here's why. The incline puts more emphasis on the shoulders than the chest, and shoulders are used in every sport; the chest isn't. Inclines do work the chest, the upper portion that helps stabilize the shoulder joints—a definite plus because the shoulders are much more fragile than most imagine. The deltoids and triceps play a greater role in the performance of the incline bench than they do during a flat bench. They're involved in every physical activity, from driving a golf ball to spiking a volleyball, shooting a basketball, blocking the opposing lineman or hitting a baseball.

The motion of the incline-bench press is much closer to a wide range of athletic movements than the flat-bench counterpart. Offensive and defensive linemen in football use the straightforward move with their arms, but few others do. This means that the strength gained in the incline is more transferable to the swimmer, lacrosse player or tennis enthusiast, as well as the shot-putter, javelin thrower and pole vaulter.

One of the reasons I prefer the incline over the flat bench is that the incline is a pure strength exercise. It's almost impossible to cheat on the incline, while various forms of cheating are the norm on the flat bench. Rebounding the bar off the chest is common practice in almost every gym, except those frequented by competitive powerlifters, who have to pause at the chest; for them, rebounding is taboo. In high school and collegiate weight rooms, however, the flat bench often resembles an act of contortion rather than a feat of strength. The lifter rebounds the bar off his chest, then raises his hips up off the bench to help move the bar through the sticking point.

Both forms of cheating can have dire consequences. The rebounding damages the muscles of the chest, as well as the shoulders and elbows. Bridging is also quite stressful to the elbows and shoulders and eventually results in problems in the offended joints. In addition, when a lifter rebounds the bar off his chest, he is neglecting the muscles and attachments responsible for performing that job. The same holds true for bridging. Instead of learning how to grind the bar through the sticking point, the lifter opts for bridging it through. That's why it's called cheating—you're not cheating others, only yourself.

It's impossible to cheat on the incline—almost. I've seen a rare few who managed to bridge, and it was ugly. Rebounding doesn't help on the incline. The bar always runs forward, and once it's away from the precise line, the game is over. That's why the incline builds such functional shoulder power. All the groups that need to be worked are worked.

The first thing you discover when you do an incline-bench press is that the form is quite different from the one used in the flat bench. In the flat bench the bar touches the chest right about where the breastbone (sternum) ends, with some variations due to arm length and shoulder width. In the incline the bar touches the chest much higher, right at the point where the collarbones (clavicles) meet the breastbone. No variations at all. It's the exact same spot for anyone—male, female, big or small.

In the flat bench the bar moves off the chest and glides backward slightly so it ends up over your face. The incline moves up and down in a perfectly straight line. It's a little like working in a Smith machine. The difference takes a bit of getting used to before you can feel comfortable doing inclines. Rank beginners, as many of my female athletes were, learn the technique much faster than those who have been benching for a long time.

Let's now go over some basics of the incline-bench press. Your grip is largely determined by your arm length. It will be wider than the grip you use on the flat bench unless you employ an extrawide grip on that lift. The grip I recommend on the flat bench is to extend your thumbs so that they can just touch the smooth center of the Olympic bar, The grip for the incline is another thumb width wider.

While that's a pretty good guideline, the conclusive way to determine the correct grip for you is to make sure that your forearms stay in the vertical position throughout the lift. Your elbows are always directly under your wrists. If your grip is too wide, you're putting a great deal of stress on your shoulders where they attach to your pecs. If it's too narrow, you're not going to be able to lower it all the way to your chest.

Never use a false grip on the incline; make certain that your thumbs are wrapped around the bar. Some contend that the false grip, with thumbs under the bar, lets them apply more pressure to the bar. Maybe—although I doubt it—but using a false grip is just too dangerous. With the bar traveling over your face, maintaining a secure grip is essential. One slip, and you've got serious problems. It just isn't worth the risk.

In addition to the safety factor, which is major, the false grip encourages you to cock your wrists. That is a form mistake. The wrists must stay locked. When you twist or cock them, you're diluting power. Any movement of the wrists during the lift is also quite stressful to those small joints. So learn to use the secure grip from the very beginning. If you find that you have a tendency to move your wrists, even a little, start taping them. That serves a couple of purposes. It helps to support your wrists and is a reminder to keep them straight.

That takes care of your hands. Now for your feet. Many lifters merely sit on an incline bench and let their feet dangle or lightly touch the floor. To handle heavy weights on the incline, you must establish a solid foundation on the bench and that starts with your feet. Don't just place your feet on the floor. Drive them forcefully into the floor. Sit back on the bench and tighten your legs, glutes, back and shoulders. Squeeze down into the bench and become part of it.

When the heavy weights stick, you can bring power up from your feet through your body and into the reluctant bar, but it's possible only if you have a firm base.

A spotter is necessary for this exercise because the bar is over your face and throat the entire time. On many benches the uprights are behind the lifter's head, making it nearly impossible for him to take the bar off them without assistance. The spotter needs to be alert at the two highest-risk points, when the bar is taken from the uprights and when it's being racked after the set.

Make sure you're in sync with your spotter. After you've locked into position on the bench and gripped the bar, count one, two, three, and press against the bar as he helps you remove it from the uprights. Don't let him do all the work. When he releases the weight, it will feel extra heavy and not in the proper position. When you complete your set, be absolutely positive that he has control of the weight before you reduce the pressure on the bar or let go of it. Never throw the bar backward into the uprights. It can rebound out before even the quickest spotter can grab it.

The lifter and spotter must communicate and not assume. When the spotter hands you the bar and you have it locked out, tell him to let go. When you know that a difficult rep is your last, even though you planned on doing more, tell him to take the bar. Once he has the weight secured, the spotter should say, "I've got it."

The spotter has helped you take the weight from the uprights and you have it locked out overhead and are ready to do your first rep. Instead of just holding the bar in a passive manner, push up against it and make sure it's in the correct starting position before you start the movement. Staying rigidly tight, pull the bar downward to the point on your chest where your collarbones meet your breastbone. When you think about pulling the bar into position rather than just lowering it, you'll maintain much better control of it. The bar must be lowered in a correct line in order for the upward line to be accurate.

If you've done only flat benches, you'll have to practice touching the bar at the higher position. At first it will feel quite strange, but stay with it because you'll never be able to handle heavy weights unless you set the bar high on your chest.

Pull the bar to the right place on your chest, pause a brief moment and then drive it upward in a straight course. It should pass close to your chin and forehead. Throughout the lift your elbows will stay down and out, away from your body. They never tuck in close to your body, as they do when you do flat benches.

As you accept the bar from your spotter, take a deep breath and hold it until you've pressed the bar through the sticking point. I've said it many times before, but I'll say it again: If you exhale or inhale during the execution of any pressing exercise, you're diminishing your power base. The up-and-down movement takes only a few seconds, so there's no risk of running out of air.

Lock the bar out at the finish, breathe, hold it and do the next rep. Again, I caution you not to rebound the bar off your chest. If you try to, the bar will run forward, and with heavy weights there's no way to pull it back in the proper line. If you pause on your chest from the very beginning, you'll always be able to maintain that form, even with the heaviest weights.

While learning this lift, your initial move off your chest should be deliberate and not too fast. After a few weeks you can start exploding the bar off your chest, making certain you drive it in the correct line. The dynamic start will get the bar moving with more speed and should carry it to the top of your head. That's the sticking point for most. What typically happens is that lifters are concentrating so much on a powerful start, they forget about the middle. As soon as you drive the bar off your chest, follow through immediately so that there's no hesitation at all. If you learn how to propel the bar off your chest and instantly continue with a dynamic middle, the bar will sail through the sticking point and the finish will take care of itself.

Start with the basic five sets of five. Once you master the technique, change your set-and-rep sequence each time. Do five sets of five with a back-off set of 10; three sets of five followed by two or three sets of three and a back-off set of 10; and three sets of three followed by three singles with a back-off set of 10. That's for those who want to do inclines only once a week. Many of my lacrosse players at Hopkins worked inclines twice and the flat bench once a week. If that's what you do, use the formula I just laid out on your heavy day, and do five sets of eight at the second incline session of the week.

Should you be fortunate enough to have an adjustable incline bench, alter the angle regularly. For Olympic lifters, shot-putters and basket-ball and volleyball players, the steeper you can set the incline, the better.

I also like doing inclines with dumbbells. They add another dimension to training the shoulders because they require more control than a bar. That means the attachments are involved more, and that's desirable for every athlete, since tendons and ligaments are what secure the joints.

I use dumbbell inclines as an auxiliary exercise and generally include them on the bench press or overhead press days. I use higher reps for two to three sets and adhere as closely as possible to the 40-rep rule. This equals two sets of 20, three sets of 12 or 15.

The technique for handling dumbbells is quite different from the one you use on the bar, though you still want to plant your feet and squeeze into the bench. Drive the 'bells close to your head, and don't let them wander out to the sides, which is what they always try to do. They also enjoy running forward. Concentrate on pressing them in a straight line until they move past your head. Then guide them toward each other so that they touch at the finish.

Lower them back to your shoulders in a controlled manner. Lowering them out of control will result in some dinged shoulders, and that action will throw them out of position for the next rep. As I suggested for inclines done with a bar, change the angle on the bench at regular intervals.

Strong shoulders and arms are valuable for any athlete, and the incline-bench press is the very best exercise for helping you achieve that goal and for becoming a more proficient athlete. If you've never done inclines, you're in for a pleasant surprise.