

# THE BENCH PRESS SPECIALIZATION MANUAL.



# **Triple Threat Muscle Bench Press Specialization Guide**

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**Question:** *Are there any particular tricks or approaches for adding 10-20 lbs. in one workout? Any nervous system prep or otherwise that can be done before a max effort or 5RM?*

**Answer:** The best “trick” is to learn proper form and technique. By arching your back, tucking your elbows and bringing the bar to the proper spot you can dramatically reduce the stroke length. If I bench like most average gym rats I have to press the bar 21 inches. With perfect powerlifting technique I can shorten my range down to 13 inches. Which way do you think allows me to press more weight? Obviously, the form that cuts eight whole inches off my stroke.

To get properly set for a big press you need to first slide all the way under the bar so that your shoulders are hanging off of the bench. Grab the bar with a supinated (palms facing you) grip and pull yourself up until your chest grazes it. At this point your shoulder blades should be squeezed together as tightly as possible. Now continue pulling forward until the bar is in line with the top of your head. Now jam yourself down on to the bench without allowing your feet to move. At this point you should be very uncomfortable. The only thing touching the bench should be your upper back/ trap region and your ass. You will be up on your toes and your feet will be directly under your hips.

If this position is unbearable you can slowly inch your feet forward. But DO NOT pick them up off the floor. You need to kind of just wiggle them out toward the end of the bench. It is of the utmost importance that you keep your feet in contact with the ground the entire time because you need to maintain that feeling of being “glued” to or “screwed” into the floor. This position will give you the best arch and also set you up to get the most out of your leg drive.

Grab the bar with a slightly wider than shoulder width grip and squeeze it as hard as you possibly can. For most people I suggest pinkies in the rings. This grip will shorten the stroke a bit without putting the shoulders at undue risk (meaning that a wider position than this is just too dangerous to recommend). The next thing you need to do is try to rip the bar apart from the center, like you are trying to split it in half. So pull outward on it with each arm.

When you unrack the bar it is best to have a spotter help you pull it out over your chest, about two inches above your nipple line. Starting with the bar above your eyes, like so many people do is a huge mistake. That sets you up for the wrong bar path. You want the bar to start where it is going to finish.

You do not ever want to press the bar out of the rack or off the pins. Doing that pulls your shoulder blades apart and if that happens you have no shot of benching big weight. It is imperative that you keep your shoulder blades squeezed together throughout the set. So set the rack or the pins low enough that you don't need to press it out and can instead "pull" it out with the help of a partner who should guide the bar over the center of your chest; not your eyes. If you start with the bar over your eyes you are going to be increasing the range of motion and you don't want that.

Before you begin your first rep you want to hold the bar for a second and pull down on it by pinching your shoulder blades even further back. Let the bar actually sink as far as possible while your arms are still straight. Begin the descent by tucking your elbows forty five degrees to your side. The bar should come down and touch near the bottom of your chest, right around or below your nipple line. In the bottom position your elbows should remain tucked.

When the bar touches your chest initiate the upward motion of the bar by immediately driving your feet down into the ground as hard as you can. You want to think about pushing yourself back and down into the bench at a forty five degree angle. Instead of pushing the bar away from you think about pushing yourself away from the bar. Flare your lats as much as you can without letting your shoulder blades come apart and begin pressing upward.

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line so it would make sense to press the bar straight up. The only problem with that is that you will negate the strength of your front delts and instead put them in a very stressful, disadvantageous position. What you actually want to do is press straight up out of the bottom and then at the top third of the range, start allowing your elbows to flare out to the sides slightly while pushing the bar back just a bit. If you do this correctly you will lock out the bar where it started, about one to two inches above your nipple line. When viewed from the side, the

perfect bench press rep will look like a J, instead of a straight line. If you press up in a straight line your arms will be tilted forward a few degrees, instead of perpendicular with the floor. This makes the lockout far harder than it would be if you pressed slightly back and took advantage of the strength of your front delts.

Aside from mastering perfect technique there are a few other tricks you could use to fire up the CNS before attempting a heavy bench press. Firstly, you could do some kind of dynamic or plyometric exercise right before benching. This could be few sets of plyo pushups where you propel yourself into the air or heavy throws from the same position you are going to bench in. You don't want to do anything too stressful like depth pushups on boxes; you just want enough of a stimulus to fire up the CNS but nothing too intense that may take away from your performance on the bench. If you choose the pushup option I would recommend five sets of three plyo or clap pushups done immediately before you start warming up for the bench. Simply propel yourself into the air as high as possible on each rep, catch yourself and immediately push yourself back upward as explosively as you can.

Another option would be heavy medicine ball throws. Lay down on your back with a heavy medicine ball on your chest and throw it straight up in the air as high as possible. It's best to do this with a spotter standing above your head in case the ball gets away from you. Catch the ball at arms length and as soon as it hits your hands, drop it right back down to your chest and explosively throw it back up in the air again. The only problem with this option is that you need a fairly heavy medicine ball (20-30% of your best bench weight) which probably wouldn't be found in most gyms.

The next option would be to do explosive bench press throws. The problem here is obviously, that its very dangerous. That's why I would only recommend doing these on a Smith Machine. It's also the only time I would recommend a Smith Machine. You could do five sets of three with approximately 20-30% of your best bench press weight. So if you bench 200 pounds you would just start with the bar. Throw it as high as you can, catch it and immediately launch it back upward.

Another neural trick you can use is to work up heavier than your intended starting weight. Let's say you think you can do 250 for five reps and are going to be trying to set

a new 5RM with that weight. What you would want to do in your warm ups is something like the following:

95 x 10  
135 x 6-8  
185 x 5  
205 x 5  
225 x 1  
245 x 1  
265 x 1  
250 x 5 (work set)

By doing a heavier set than your work set you fire up your nervous system and actually trick yourself into making the 250 pound set feel lighter than it would normally be because you just had 265 in your hands the set before.

This works exceptionally well with the 225 bench test. If you are going to attempt this test it is always advised to work up to a single at somewhere between 250 and 315 (depending on your strength levels) a few minutes before your set with 225.

Finally, one other trick that works quite well when working up to heavy sets is to wave the weights as you get near your top end set. For example, let's say you are trying to bench press 315 for the first time. When you near or above 90% it is often advantageous to drop the weights back down for a set, instead of continuing upward in a linear fashion.

So instead of doing this:

95 x 10  
135 x 6-8  
185 x 5  
225 x 5  
250 x 3  
275 x 3  
295 x 1

305 x 1

315 x 1

You would do this:

95 x 10

135 x 6-8

185 x 5

225 x 5

250 x 3

275 x 3

295 x 1

270 x 1

305 x 1

315 x 1

That set with 270 is what can make all the difference. When you get up to weights over 90% your form can break down and your confidence can start to waver. To combat this, we drop back down again to a more manageable weight (below 90%) that will allow perfect technique and will shoot up explosively. This boosts confidence and fires up the CNS. After that the next few sets will go up more powerfully than they would have otherwise.

**Question:** *What are the most neglected 1-3 exercises for improving the bench and why?*

**Answer:** To answer that question lets look at the important muscles involved in a big bench press. First of all you need a big, strong upper back to support your weight on and to be sure you can keep your shoulder blades squeezed together throughout the set. When pushing the weight up out of the bottom position the first muscle group involved is the lats, followed immediately by the pecs. To keep the bar in the perfect path and get it moving toward lockout you need strong shoulders. And finally, to complete the lockout you need strong triceps.

Most people train their pecs enough so I am not going to worry about that. And, in most cases, if you can get the weight two thirds of the way up you should be able to lock it

out. It's only if you lift in a bench shirt, which helps you out of the bottom, that you would really need to prioritize triceps strength, because you are locking out more weight than you could press out of the bottom position without the shirt.

That leaves us with the following three lifts to help bring up the bench: Rack deadlifts, military presses, and weighted, suspended pushups. Let's go through these one at a time.

**Rack deadlifts-** Some of you are probably thinking, "deadlifts to improve my bench press?!" But, like I said, you need a big, strong upper back to bench a lot of weight. The best exercise for building a big, strong upper back is the rack deadlift. No other rowing exercise can compare. When doing these with a bigger bench press in mind I recommend squeezing your shoulder blades back tightly at the beginning of the set and keeping them there throughout. This will limit the amount of weight you can use but it will make it more specific to your goals. A few sets of 5-8 reps from knee height, once per week, will fit the bill perfectly here.

**Military presses-** Nothing builds big, powerful shoulders like the military press. People neglect this exercise when working on their bench press because it's a vertical press and the bench is a horizontal press. For this reason they think it has no carryover. Nothing could be further from the truth. As your military press goes up so will your bench. Strong shoulders are crucially important to a big bench press and nothing will get you there faster than overhead pressing.

**Suspended pushups-** These can be done with TRX Straps, Blast Straps, the Jungle Gym or just chains with towels on them for "handles." The point is to be suspended in the air. What this does is makes all of your smaller stabilizer muscles of the entire rotator cuff/ shoulder region fire much harder than they do with a barbell exercise. Strengthening these often neglected muscles will add stability and pounds to your bench press. Also, anytime you move your entire body through space versus simply moving your limbs, there is a higher level of neuromuscular activation which leads to tremendous size and strength gains. The bigger your chest and shoulders are the less range of motion you have to press the bar through.



**Question:** *What are the most neglected 1-3 exercises for preventing injuries while benching and why?*

**Answer:** This goes hand in hand with the question above. Most guys do far too much pushing and not enough pulling. I've never seen someone in a public gym whose problem was not benching enough. The problem is not doing enough exercises in the opposite direction. Bench pressing pulls your shoulders into internal rotation. You need to work on correcting this and balancing things out by using exercises that pull your shoulders into external rotation. The most specific exercises that do that are rotator cuff drills, performed lying on your side with a light dumbbell or sitting upright with your elbow on your knee. This is the most basic form of prehab exercise for the shoulders and is only really necessary in the beginning stages or if someone has a glaring rotator cuff weakness or injury.

More specifically you need to work on a variety of rows. We already covered rack deadlifts so I would add in some dumbbell rows and face pulls. Dumbbell rows can be done one arm at a time, two arms together in a bent over position or face down on a bench with your chest supported. The important thing is that they get done. These will strengthen your back and help balance out your strength. While rows will work both your lats and mid back region, face pulls will specifically target the upper back musculature.

Finally, I would recommend some type of isolated move for the rear delt/ rhomboid region. This could be scarecrows, bent over lateral raises or bent over Y-raises. Two to three sets of 10-15 reps, once a week should be enough to strengthen this area and help prevent injuries.

**Question:** *If you wanted to get someone with a 200-lb 1RM to 315-lb 1RM as quickly and safely as possible, what might a program look like? The simpler the better, but it doesn't have to be simple. How quickly might this goal be accomplished, best case and most-likely case, if they follow all of the directions exactly?*

**Answer:** If a guy can only bench 200 he is weak. That guy should ideally be doing full body workouts three times per week. But once he gets to about 275 or so he will probably start to stall and may benefit from switching to an upper/lower split.

The following simple cycle will be used three times throughout the year, which is at least as long as it will take to add 115 pounds to your bench. Although I have seen it happen faster if your nutrition and recovery are spot on. For others it may take closer to two years. It really depends.

Each week you will work up to a heavy, top end set. It's not a true rep max where you would allow the last rep to turn into a death set grinder. Actually, let me rephrase that. It's what I personally call a rep max but others might not. Whereas most people would add another twenty pounds to the bar, I like to cut guys off when they are still getting the weight up with perfect form. There can be absolutely no breakdown in technique whatsoever. If you are using a weight that causes you to flare your elbows too early or let the bar travel out of it's intended path you have chose a weight that is too heavy.

Over the course of 4-8 warm up sets you will work up to one heavy set on the bench each day. After your top end set you will do another down/ back off set with 90% of your best set for the day. So if you worked up to 200 pounds for eight, you would take 180, after a three minute rest period and do one more set with that.

Each week, for three weeks straight, the reps will drop by two. On the fourth week you will deload, not by decreasing the weight, but by not benching at all. Benching fifty two weeks per year can be hard on your shoulders, so we combat this by taking the bar out of your hands one week out of every month.

The key is to be patient and make slow, small, consistent jumps. If you go up too fast and add weight to the bar too rapidly you will stall out and start to regress before you realize your potential. This is especially important on week one of every new four week cycle. Always leave something in the tank and don't push it too far.

### **Month One**

Week 1- One top set of 8 followed by one at 90% of that

Week 2- One top set of 6 followed by one at 90% of that

Week 3- One top set of 4 followed by one at 90% of that

Week 4- Deload. Do not bench at all this week

Since you now understand that I want the top end sets to be very heavy but done with perfect form, I will now use RM to save space.

### **Month Two**

Week 1- 7RM + 1 back off set @ 90%

Week 2- 5RM + 1 back off set @ 90%

Week 3- 3RM + 1 back off set @ 90%

Week 4- Deload

### **Month Three**

Week 1- 6RM + 1 back off set @ 90%

Week 2- 4RM + 1 back off set @ 90%

Week 3- 2RM + 1 back off set @ 90%

Week 4- Deload

### **Month Four**

Week 1- 5RM + 1 back off set @ 90%

Week 2- 3RM + 1 back off set @ 90%

Week 3- 1RM + 1 back off set @ 90%

Week 4- Deload

After going through the whole cycle start over and repeat. Go through this three times in twelve months. Be sure that when you start back at the beginning of the cycle you scale your weights back and go light. So if you started your first cycle with an 8RM of 200 pounds don't start with more than 210 on the second cycle even if you think you could do 225. Take it slow and build up gradually over the course of 16 weeks.

The workouts would look something like this:

### **Day 1- Monday**

1) Bench- one top end set and one back off set at 90%

2a) Row- 3-4 x 6-8 x 90

2b) Pushup or dumbbell press- 3-4 x 6-8 x 90

3) Upper back work (seated dumbbell clean, face pull, etc.)- 2-3 x 8-12 x 90

4) Biceps (incline curl, hammer curl, alternate dumbbell curl, etc.)- 2-3 x 6-10 x 90

### **Day 2- Wednesday**

1) Squat or Deadlift variation- heavy

2a) Glute ham, Romanian Dead Lift, good morning, hypers, etc. – 3-5 x 6-12 x 90

2b) Abs (rollouts, hanging leg raise, suitcase deadlift holds, etc.)- 3-5 x 8-20 x 90

3) Calves/ Grip/ Shrugs/ Neck, whatever

### **Day 3- Friday**

1a) Chin Up- 3 x 8-10 x 90

1b) Military press- 3 x 8-10 x 90

2) Bent Over Y-Raise- 3 x 10-15 x 90

3a) Barbell Curl- 2-3 x 8-12 x 60

3b) Dead Stop EZ Triceps Extension- 2-3 x 10-15 x 60

### **Day 4- Saturday**

Off or sprints or lower body assistance strength work...

1) Single leg exercise (step up, split squat, sled drag, etc.)- 2-4 x 8-12 x 90

2a) Posterior chain exercise- 2- 4 x 8-12 x 90

2b) Abs- 2-4 x 8-20 x 90

3a) Shrugs- 2-4 x 8-10 x 60

3b) Calves- 2- 4 x 8-20 x 60