

The AJAC Guide to the Squat Bench and Deadlift

Part 2
Bench Press



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Contents

The Bench Press.....	5
12 Reasons Why You (and Most everyone else) Sucks at the Bench Press.....	7
1. You have No pectoral muscle at all.....	7
2. The Bench press is a poor pec builder, and you cannot accept it.....	7
3. You have long arms and a shallow torso	8
4. You are not shoulder dominant enough.....	9
5. You are not Triceps Dominant enough	9
6. You Have a Weak Back and no Posterior Delts	10
7. You Bench Press like a Powerlifter	11
8. Your Rotator Cuff is weak and unstable.....	11
9. You max out constantly.....	12
10. You Only Use Low Reps.....	12
11. You always have a spotter/helper	13
12. You are Terrible at Pushups and Dips	14
Top 5 Exercises for Beginners to Improve their Bench Press	15
1. Pushups.....	15
2. Flyes	15
3. Incline DB Press	16
4. Close Grip Incline Benches	16
5. Rows:	16
The NUMBER ONE Lesson To Increasing Your Bench Press.....	17
What's to be done?	17
Bench Press Technique and Muscle Development - Bodybuilding v.s. Powerlifting.....	18
Powerlifting Technique	19
The Margin of Missing.....	21
Enter Bodybuilding.....	21
Bodybuilding Suggested Exercises	22
Wrist strength	22
Arm strength	22

Upper back and lat strength.....	23
Shoulder strength	24
Pec strength	25
Pec Strength Primary Day	25
Pec Strength Secondary Day	26
Get to Work.....	27
The Bench Press and Rotator Cuff Health.....	27
10 common reasons people have rotator cuff issues	28
1. Not enough rowing.....	28
2. Too much pressing.....	28
3. No posterior delt or trap training-I don't just means shrugs.	28
4. Improper technique	29
5. Kyphotic posture	29
6. An overall lack of movement.....	29
7. Taking rotator cuff exercises to failure.....	29
8. Barbell bench press.....	30
9. Not traing the shoulders at all	30
10. Ignoring Pain	30

The AJAC Guide to the Squat Bench and Deadlift - Part 2

The Bench Press

The Bench press is considered the premiere gym exercise, and it's probably the ONE movement that almost anyone born in the last 50 years has some cursory familiarity with. Even if you don't lift, the image of a man on a bench pushing weight off his chest, it's easy to remember.

The Bench press was not always so popular. Up until about 1960, the overhead press was considered the “test of strength” exercise for lifters.

This was because there was NO SUCH THING AS A BENCH PRESS.

Think about how specific a bench press is as a piece of equipment. Its a bench with a rack welded to it specifically for unracking and racking the bar. Its purpose is singular.

Up until about 1950, if you wanted to train chest, you did dips, pushups, flat DB press, and “floor presses”, which is lying on the floor and rolling the bar over yourself, and then pressing it.

The floor press was considered the “heavy” exercise you could do for chest, and you'd do it by rolling the bar over yourself, and then pressing it. The ROM was partial, but it could be done heavy.

It was never a popular lift because it was a somewhat awkward movement, and besides that, why would it be useful to lay down on your back and press weight off your chest? When in life did you ever do that?

In the 1940s the “bench press” station started to emerge, but it was not a common piece of equipment, and dips and DB pressing were still the go to movements for chest. It wouldn't be until the 1970s that it became THE lift to do.

For historical context, you must also consider that up to this point in human history, manual labor jobs employed much of the working class of society, and being able to lift heavy objects was an essential skill. The clean and press was considered the premiere movement because it was functionally the most relative demonstration of strength that applied to real life. Bench pressing was considered functionally worthless, and the idea of having massive pecs was also unheard of.

Having big SHOULDERS was what identified a powerful physique, not chest. Being able to lay down and press weight was a novelty, but had no carryover to the real world.

It wasn't until the 1950s that the bench press started to get popular. There was one bodybuilder in particular, Reg Park from South Africa, he came to specialize in the bench press and specifically was able to train for it.

Along with a bodybuilder and powerlifter named Doug Hepburn, they were the first two men to Bench press 500 lbs. Their upper bodies were particularly massive, especially in the chest, and they ushered in an era of bodybuilders placing far more attention on their chest and front delts, versus the prior emphasis on big shoulders and shoulder width.

Eventually when Arnold became popular in the 1970s, he was well noted for his massive pec development and his love of the bench press. He was the great popularizer that made the bench press being the most well-known barbell movement, and to this day “how much ya bench” is still the bro question every serious lifter gets asked at some point or another.

All this said, Why is Your Bench Press Pitiful?

A bunch of reasons.

12 Reasons Why You (and Most everyone else) Sucks at the Bench Press

1. You have No pectoral muscle at all

As I've said before, MUSCLE is what produces force and MOVES weight. Being strong means being muscular. This is somehow lost on people, who never get any stronger, and completely fail to make the connection that they've experienced no muscle growth in years and that their training is subsequently ineffective and wasted.

If you are weak at any given lift, it almost always comes down to two basic reasons:

1. Technique
2. No muscle (which may be related to your pisspoor technique)

Unless you have extraordinary genetics for the bench press, short arms, barrel chest, super dense shoulders, you are NOT going to be benching heavy unless you build your pectorals.

That means training them properly, which brings us to point 2.

2. The Bench press is a poor pec builder, and you cannot accept it

Everyone has that one friend in high school or college that could bench 3 or 4 plates. I have friends that can bench 5 and 6 plates though and hold world records in powerlifting, and they are smarter and stronger than your friend.

Their “secret” to benching 500 lbs.?

1. Genetics, #1
2. They build muscle in their chest, arms, shoulders. Hallelujah!!!

That said, the bench press only works as an optimal pec builder for about 20% of people. For those people, they do it, their chest grows, they get stronger, and why would they question it if it works?

For the other 80% its anywhere from very effective (but aggravating) to moderately effective (and very aggravating) to ineffective (it simply does not work well at building chest much at all, and causes shoulder joint issues)

If the bench press is not working for you as a pec builder, you perform other variations instead. DBs are often FAR more effective than the barbell when it comes to pec development. Getting stronger on flat DB pressing and incline pressing can be the means to build your bench press.

3. You have long arms and a shallow torso

The longer your arms, the more mechanically disadvantaged you are at benching.

A shallow torso refers to the depth of your sternum to your spine. This is the barrel chest I was talking about. The best benchers have a deep chest wall (as it's sometimes called), and they have a slightly sloped sternum angle (then Arnold, his pecs had a slant to them), and they have Type 1 acromioclavicular joints (their arm bone sits very centralized stable in the shoulder socket), and added up together, benching pressing works for them (Arnold was unusual in that he was tall, but he's got a very well structured chest for pec development)

Now, if you DON'T have the above genetically blessed physical structure, bench press might not be your thing. And if you've got long arms (like myself) a shallow chest wall (i'm wide from the front, but ribcage is shallow from the side) and you've got not so excellent shoulder structure (my left shoulder is a type 3 joint with congenital impingement), then bench press DEFINITELY won't work well for you.

Solution? [Build muscle, and use effective exercises that work for YOUR body](#), not dogmatic ones.

4. You are not shoulder dominant enough

I have always found this ironic, as “bros” in the gym will complain that they only feel bench in their front delt, and you should feel it in your chest

So they try to find some way of pre exhausting or going to failure to make their chest work more, and their bench press strength never improves.

And yet they already determined the solution to the problem.

GET THE FRONT DELTS BIGGER.

Is your goal a bigger bench or a bigger chest? PICK ONE, because they might not be the same thing. Maybe not mutually exclusive, but not the same thing. If you are not blessed in the structure department, and bench pressing feels like a shoulder exercises, THEN IT DOES.

So develop your shoulders as much as you can, especially through the front, as having massively developed front delts will absolutely make you stronger at bench pressing.

This does not mean you neglect training your pecs, but recognize that the bench press is NOT the movement that is going to do that for you.

5. You are not Triceps Dominant enough

Something I learned from Matt Wenning, a world record powerlifter and strength coach (who also benched 580lbs in competition), and I paraphrase

“The best bench pressers are ARM dominant. That's how you stay healthy”

Matt made the point that getting brutally strong at bench while protecting your shoulders requires massive tricep strength, along with strong wrists and a strong grip. You will never see someone with muscular triceps that’s “bad” at pressing.

The stronger your triceps are, the less work your delts and pecs do, and the SAFER it is for you to press. A strong triceps muscle also equates to a healthy shoulder joint, as the tricep crosses the shoulder joint and overlaps with the lat muscles.

Along with strong forearms and biceps to support the load and grip, it this equals out to pressing power.

You don't see big benchers then with skinny forearms and no biceps or triceps. Big benchers always have Big arms.

This is why weighted dips can work so well for bench press strength, they build up your triceps, and front delts as well. Add in hammer curls and front delt raises, and you can increase your pressing power before you've ever actually worked your pecs.

Additionally, by becoming an "arm dominant" presser, you'll spare your shoulder joints and pec tendon a great deal of wear and tear.

6. You Have a Weak Back and no Posterior Delts

The best bench pressers in the world do NOT do the bench press as "Pec lift". I know that seems to contradict everything we just talked about, but follow along

Moving heavy weight is NOT a situation of specifically targeted one muscle, it's a situation of creating maximal force and leverage to move that load as easily as possible.

The best bench pressers do not fucking care about feeling their 500lb bench press in their pecs. Their goal is to lower the weight and then drive it off the chest and lock it out.

How do they do that?

Aside from tricep strength, they use their BACK. When they grip the bar, they are not dropping it down towards their chest. They actively try to be “bend” it centrate the weight through the lats and larger back muscles.

Having a massively muscled back quite literally gives your body a solid platform to press from. It keeps your shoulder blades stable, it allows you to anchor yourself into the bench, and it keep your shoulder joint healthy by reinforcing and stabilizing it.

7. You Bench Press like a Powerlifter

This is going to sound paradoxical, as I just listed the technique for bench pressing in the previous point. But there is a major difference between using the bench press for building the Pecs, versus using the bench press to move a maximal amount of weight.

A bodybuilder bench press is done with wider grip, the feet can be OFF the floor, and you lower the weight closer higher on the chest (sometimes almost the throat) to achieve a bigger pec stretch. The weight on the bar is entirely secondary

A powerlifter bench press, you bench with the elbows tucked in, back is arched as possible, feet on stable and planted, and you short the ROM.

One is for building muscle, the other is for maximal leveraging of weight. They are NOT the same movement.

8. Your Rotator Cuff is weak and unstable

The more stable the humerus is in the socket, the stronger your shoulders and chest are going to be. If your rotator cuff is weak, your strength is compromised.

Training your rotator cuff does not mean doing that standing movement

with the DB where you turn your arm in and out and try to go heavy as possible because you hate your shoulders and want to grind the rotator cuff down to dust and bone.

THAT DOES NOT TRAIN THE ROTATOR CUFF, STOP DOING THAT.

To work the rotator cuff properly, do the following

[John Rusins Shoulder Warm Up.](#)

9. You max out constantly

Maxing out does not build muscle. Maxing out is a test of strength, it is not a builder of strength. If your idea of getting stronger is hitting a 1RM every single time you are in the gym, and that if your 1RM goes down one week then you got weaker, you've demonstrated a complete and total ignorance of everything regarding exercise, biology, how training works, and removed all doubt that you are not an idiot.

Don't be that idiot that maxes out every week. Seriously, just DON'T.

10. You Only Use Low Reps

So you read starting strength and now you fervently believe that anything more than 5 reps is cardio.

Good job, you've now fallen into another ignorance and stupidity trap.

[Muscle, as I've said many many many times, its built through REPETITION.](#)

Lower reps are inferior for muscle growth, higher reps work better. To fully effectivize your training, you should be doing ALL the rep ranges, and at appropriate times.

For the chest especially, some peoples pecs and shoulders DO NOT respond well to low reps. In fact, the worse your chest genetics seemingly are, the HIGHER you need to go in the rep ranges. I've encountered natural bodybuilders who train their chest with almost nothing but isolation movements, and they never go less than 10 reps. One gentleman sticks with 15-20 reps for almost every exercise.

Outlier example, but it makes a point, 5 reps is not the end all be all of training.

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11. You always have a spotter/helper

And that means you haven't done an honest rep in your life.

I don't train with a training partner. When I am struggling on a rep, I lock it out, rack the weight, and then I stop my set. The idea of having a spotter there to help you struggle through piss poor quality reps and weight you're not even capable of lifting is bullshit.

Unless you are testing a 1RM, there is no need for your training partner to have his hands on the bar doing an upright row every time you press. He is there to help you safely rack and unrack and remind you of your **TECHNIQUE**.

Spotted reps never ever count for strength. **EVER**.

12. You are Terrible at Pushups and Dips

Read this very carefully: being strong as pushups and dips does not guarantee a massive bench press. That said, for a foundational level of strength, developing strength in these movements **WILL** create the strength that allows you to bench press with proper technique and maximize the exercise

For some bizarre reason, people constantly separate bodyweight training and lifting weights, as if you only do one or the other. You do **BOTH**, and should be equally skilled in both.

I've seen an elite level raw bench press specialist that was not also brutally strong at **EVERY OTHER KIND OF PRESSING**, including bodyweight.

I have seen endless endless endless male recreational lifters, who struggle to do dips, are subpar on pullups, and then wonder why their bench is stuck as bodyweight.

Focusing on bench press strength while neglecting bodyweight strength is putting the cart before the horse.

If you are guilty of this, **FIX IT**.

Pushups, dips, be able to do them, **LOTS** of them. 50 and 30 are my rules. As a man, you should be able do 50 pushups unbroken, and 30 dips unbroken at any given time, no warmup. If you cannot do that, start there.

Let say you are brand new to the gym, you want to bench press obviously, and you are wondering what do you start with?

For beginners, it's a fairly simply process. You don't need to be doing tons of movements to make your bench press improve. These are the 5 you should focus on.

Top 5 Exercises for Beginners to Improve their Bench Press

1. Pushups

Yes, pushups. This is one of the best exercises you can do. A pushup utilizes just about all of your muscles and if you do them well, you smash your abs. I do not say core. Those who know me know my politically incorrect opinion on the term and since Dave will yell at me if I list it, let's just say I hate when people say core.

Pushups can be made incredibly difficult by adding chains across your back, elevating your hands or feet on a bench or box, using [Blast Straps](#) or a TRX and also by adding in reactive pushups.

They are an easy way to accrue a ton of volume which build strength and size without straining your CNS.

2. Flyes

Nope, flys are not stupid.

You use your pecs in a RAW bench right?

Shouldn't you get some pec swole going on to get bigger and stronger?

I like using [bands](#) and [chains](#) for these.

Band Flyes are great for a pump and Chain Flyes allow you to really overload the top without jacking up your shoulders.

Josh Bryant recently reminded me of these after I stopped doing them years ago.

3. Incline DB Press

These work the coveted upper chest and front delt area, and they are an all-around great muscle builder. Getting strong on incline DB pressing guarantees you'll have pressing strength on flat bench.

You can use these as the main lift in a workout, or as an assistance lift after you bench. If you desire, you can also make the incline bench the main lift, and flat DB pressing the second.

4. Close Grip Incline Benches

I LOVE these.

They smash your pecs and triceps, two of the biggies in a bench press.

I really LOVE these when using the [Shoulder Saver Bar or Pad](#).

5. Rows:

What?

Rows?

Really?

Yes, rows.

Your lats play a huge role in the bench and if you can add in inch to your back you just took an inch off your stroke.

That translates into less distance to press, which translates into more weight moved.

Getting a huge and strong back will build your bench.

The NUMBER ONE Lesson To Increasing Your Bench Press

In the pursuit of a bigger bench press, there is one lesson above all that I emphasize; the need to gain muscle in order for this happen. This point, while a seemingly simple one, is something that is largely overlooked by people.

Of the big three lifts, the bench press is universally the weakest lift for almost everybody. The reasons for this aren't mysterious at all. Your legs have more muscle and are bigger joints than your chest and shoulders. Pressing, whether it's a bench press or overhead press, is always a weak pattern at the onset of training.

What's to be done?

Nothing earth shattering. You have to build muscle. While I am a menace for technique, Technique is only half the problem. Without muscle, no amount of proper technique in the world will make you strong. Muscle is what supports the integrity and consistency of your technique in the first place. As Muscle is ultimately what reinforces your technical execution of any one lift, the development of it is priority number one. People get overly obsessive with their technical execution and fail to recognize that their strength isn't limited by how they move the bar but the muscle, or lack thereof, that they're moving the bar with.

Is technique not important then?

It absolutely is, but there are certain logical gaps that people overlook when building their lifts. The bench press is a prime example. Have you ever seen a big raw bencher with skinny triceps, no pecs and no shoulder development? I never have, yet this reasoning is readily applied to the squat, with people taking pride in having muscular thighs and moving weight.

But then this doesn't get applied to bench pressing for whatever reason. The bench press is a constant struggle, with the necessity for mass seemingly overlooked in the pursuit of a perfect technical setup and execution and the belief that doing nothing but lows reps is somehow going to build a massive bench press. That is not how this works.

Bench Press Technique and Muscle Development - Bodybuilding v.s. Powerlifting

Of all the big lifts, the bench press has the most contrast in how it can be performed. Unlike other lifts, where using heavier loads corresponds with increased muscle, the bench press is somewhat different. While not mutually exclusive, the connection between heavy, maximal weights and muscular development is not as strong at the bench press.

How can this be? Doesn't getting stronger usually mean bigger muscles?

In most instances, yes, but for the bench press, the **TECHNIQUE** between using the bench press to stimulate muscle growth, versus trying to move maximal weight, it is so dramatically different that you cannot equalize them.

You can build very impressive chest and shoulders and never lift that particularly heavy. You also can be a decent bench presser, and not have particularly impressive chest and shoulder development.

How so? Read on.

Powerlifting Technique

The best powerlifters in the world do NOT care about feeling the bench press in their chest or what their pecs particularly look like. Their goal is to move the bar from point A to point B. Powerlifting technique is a world apart from bodybuilding technique.

When benching like a powerlifter, all you care about is how much weight you can move. Because of that, the technique is entirely predicated on maximizing leverage, shortening the distance of the bar path, and using the WHOLE BODY to move the bar, not only the pecs and shoulders.

Powerlifting technique starts with learning how to brace the whole entire body to handle the weight of the bar.

- You get underneath the barbell by gripping it equally with both hands, and using your LATS to pull yourself underneath it.
- You drive your shoulders blades together, retracting the scapula as much as possible.
- You grip the bar with a super strong grip, applying torque and get the elbows perfectly aligned underneath it.
- You plant your feet HARD into the floor, engaging the glutes and externally rotating the femur.
- You drive your upper traps HARD into the bench. You should be pressing yourself so hard into the bench that you feel as though you'd slide backwards if you weren't holding onto the barbell.
- You arch your low back as much you can, and squeeze your lats as tight as you can. Your low back should be HURTING, that is how hard you are arching.
- You breathe big into the chest, trying to puff your chest and gut up, and

shorten the distance the bar has to travel as much as humanly possible.

- You unrack using your lats, and when the bar is aligned over your groove, you lower it using your back muscles.
- While lowering it, you are pressing your feet even harder into the floor.
- When you touch the bar, you use leg drive and total body explosion to drive it off your chest off.
- If performed correctly, your back should be cramping and you should be red faced and feeling out of the breath.

That is how powerlifters bench press. Bodybuilders though? It is DIFFERENT.

- You get under the bar and get your ass on the bench, but the emphasis is CHEST, so you're not trying to shorten the ROM.
- You unrack the same, but you WANT to feel the weight across your chest and shoulders.
- As the focus is constant tension, most bodybuilders DONT touch the bar to the chest, but stop a few inches above the pecs.
- As you're doing more reps, the technique is continuous tension, not pausing.
- Putting your feet up on the bench, or spreading them out and NOT using your lower body for power, this DOES increase the demand on the pecs. Bodybuilders not nearly use their lowerbody's as much as powerlifters.
- Assuming you have the structure for it, the bench press works your chest and shoulders massively.

The Margin of Missing

This is something of a personal concept that I've come up with. It basically means, "What's the margin of error that you can screw up a high percentage/heavy lift and still get the bar up?"

The less muscle you have, the smaller your margin of being able to screw up technically and still save your lift. Muscle enables you to grind, struggle and gut a lift out. A lack of muscle means that you get pinned. Simple concept.

With the bench press, unless you are naturally gifted with immense ability to "grind" on the lift, the margin of missing is fairly low. If you miss the groove, the bar won't go anywhere and you pin yourself. If you do not start in the proper position, you miss the lift. If you rush the descent, you miss the lift. If you get out of alignment, you miss the lift. It's very obvious when the weight on the bar is too heavy, IT DOES NOT MOVE. Again, you need upper body mass. So fully accepting the idea that you need upper body mass, how do you go about building it?

Enter Bodybuilding

You must focus on five integral areas to develop the pressing power for a strong bench press.

- Wrists
- Arms (bis and tris)
- Shoulders
- Pecs
- Back

Bodybuilding Suggested Exercises

You'll notice immediately that all the suggested set/rep schemes are geared toward muscular hypertrophy. These aren't movements for hitting one-rep maxes.

Wrist strength

This is something that gets overlooked. If you have skinny wrists, you need to strengthen your wrists, as that is what is supporting the weight of the bar. Women can have very petite wrists and their ability to grip the bar and stabilize it is heavily impacted by wrist forearm strength. A slight shift in wrist positioning at the bottom of the lift can be the difference between making or missing a lift. All my clients always do direct forearm work, regardless of whether they want to excel at the bench press or not. Strong forearms help everything.

- Dumbbell hammer curls.
- Pronated cable forearm curls.

I suggest 2–3 sets/ reps with fairly high rep ranges of 10–30. High reps develop strength endurance as well as hypertrophy.

Arm strength

Bis and tris, baby. While triceps are without question the more integral muscle in pressing, bicep strength and grip strength both tie together as well. Your ability to handle heavy weights will be compromised if your triceps development is lacking.

- Close grip push-ups
- Push-downs, reverse grip pushdowns
- Dips
- Close grip bench press

Dips and push-ups can be “max effort” movements for completely untrained

men and women. In such cases, I suggest using a regression, either with a hands elevated push-up or a counter weighted dip. The long-term goal is full range of motion body weight performance and eventually adding weight as well.

For close grip bench, this can be a main movement at times, or a secondary movement. I've known lifters that close grip bench press exclusively, as it still builds their chest while protecting their shoulders, and obviously it can develop immensely strong triceps,

For pushdowns, I favor using a weight stack and counting rep/weight goals. Reps should be in the 10–25 range with over 2–3 working sets. While I wouldn't consider this a "PR" to keep track of, it's of benefit to get stronger over time at push-down movements. It's one of the few isolation movements that I consider to have recognizable transfer to compound pressing movements. Bodybuilders are notably infamous for their usage of push-downs, and their triceps development and flat pressing strength are readily equal to powerlifters.

Upper back and lat strength

This has to be prioritized. "Use your lats" is a common coaching, but your lats aren't the whole of the platform that you press from. Your traps, rhomboids and posterior delts and teres major and minor are. Having powerful upper back musculature creates excellent stability against the bench and enforces the bar path during the eccentric. Rows and chins are your friends and you probably need to do a lot of them.

- Chest supported rows (dumbbells, T-bar, machine...just pick one)
- Seated rows
- Chin-ups
- Pulldowns

Each person will find that a particular style of rows suits them best based on their anthropometrics. Rowing and upper back work should be worked hard and worked often. I don't think that 10+ working sets in a workout are

unreasonable for horizontal rows, with reps ranges from as high as 20 to as low as six. I'm favorable to including at least one movement for the upper back on any upper body pressing day and more on back centric days. The volume can readily be pushed on both.

I'll commonly have clients do upwards of 20 working sets a week for the upper back. This also provides indirect bicep stimulus and builds the grip somewhat as well (depending on how frequently straps are used).

For the lats, chinups and pullups can be aggravating on the shoulder, so pulldowns can be a main movement used. My favorite is 5 sets of 8-15 reps. Done twice weekly, with two different grips, that will build lats on on the skinniest of frames in no time.

Shoulder strength

The "front delts" may contribute the most to the bench press, but fully developed shoulders make for strong pressing in direction. Having strong shoulders simply make pressing that much easier. You'll never see someone with built shoulders whose "weak" at pressing. The best front delt movements

- Dips and push-ups again (you really ought to be doing these)
- Incline dumbbell pressing
- Shoulder presses (standing or seated, machine or free weight)
- Front, lateral and rear delt raises

I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel here and none of these exercises are anything unique. One thing to be cognizant of for shoulders though is that most people have poor scapular mobility and posture, so you'll likely need to address that first before trying to target the shoulders with higher volume. Especially for women, they simply don't have steel reinforced shoulders and hyper mobility is common.

Perform movements with purely a muscle focus with the weight being secondary. Shoulders often respond better to higher rep ranges as well. Sets of 20-30 reps on isolation movements are very effective.

Pec strength

Big pecs equal a big bench. You need direct pec work.

- Flat dumbbell press
- Wide grip bench press
- Dips and push-ups again (because they work)

I'll assume that the contribution of the pecs to the bench press is fairly obvious. The rep range for these can be 6–15 (more than that for the body weight movements) with 2–5 sets, depending on how the exercise is sequenced.

As Swede Burns says, this isn't the science of rockets. All that I've outlined above is an argument that training the entirety of your upper body is important. Yet many fail to commit to do this. If your current training has a lack of direct muscle work and your bench press is impoverished, a change is in order. One of the current trends in powerlifting is to have the fourth training day of the week be a “pump” day. This can be an effective solution and provides a complete training session to work on the above areas.

While I can't offer a “program” without knowing the needs and history of an individual, the following is an operative example from a current client of a primary and secondary day.

Pec Strength Primary Day

- A. Bench presses, 5 X 3 at 70%
- B. Pull-ups, 5 X 6–10
- C. Dips (weighted), 3 X 8–12
- D. Incline Dumbbell presses, 3 X 10–20
- E1. Zottman curls, 2 X 15
- E2. Incline dumbbell flyes, 2 X 15–20

The initial exercise is for technical practice and it works submaximal

strength. The client hasn't been benching very long, and I'm prioritizing their technique before loading. From there, the pecs/shoulders are being worked from flat, decline and inclined angles for complete development. Pull-ups are done to strengthen the lats/upper back, and Zottman curls provide some direct forearm/wrist/biceps work. Lastly, the flies finish off the pecs with some stretching for ROM and innervation work.

Pec Strength Secondary Day

- A. Machine shoulder presses, 5 X 8–10
- B. Inverted Rows, 4 X 20, 15, 12, 10
- C. Front, lateral and rear delt raises, 3 X 25, 20, 15 reps
- D1. Reverse grip pushdowns, 2 X 12–20
- D2. Pronated push-downs, 2 X 12–20
- E1. Face pulls, 2 X 20–25
- E2. Diamond push-ups, 2 sets to failure

On this training day, we're expressly focusing on shoulder and triceps hypertrophy.

The rep ranges should be indicative of the desired effect. The shoulder press is the primary compound movement and is done for moderate reps. The back and shoulder superset utilizes much higher rep ranges and develops hypertrophy and work capacity to a degree.

Working weights will be fairly light due to the prolonged time under tension. The pump is what is being felt here. The back work also acts as a counterbalance to the pressing. Because the superset is fairly intense, it's followed by an isolation movement for recuperation, which in this case is triceps isolation work. This is then incorporated into the final superset of push-ups and face pulls, which is a much shorter superset to finish the workout with.

Again, the above isn't a suggested "program" to follow but is simply an example of what muscle-centric programming can look like in action. For

those individuals who are interested in becoming powerlifters and want to know how to program more effectively for this, I strongly suggest [Swedes' 5th Set for Powerlifting ebook](#).

Get to Work

Hopefully, this has made you reconsider some aspects of your own training. A lack of muscle will make any exercise that requires the usage of that muscle difficult to perform.

Beyond that basic premise, keep in mind that sometimes the most obvious observation is where the solution to the problem lies.

The Bench Press and Rotator Cuff Health

I was asked recently about rotator cuffs, and what to do about them.

This is not a question I can give a straight answer for. There are three major factors that affect shoulder health.

- Shoulder structure
- Your "posture" lifestyle
- Your past and current training
- Past and current pains and injuries.

On top of this, you also have the factors of

- Muscular development of the entire shoulder girdle.
- Muscular "imbalances" between parts of the shoulder girdle and the back muscles.
- Current coordination patterns with pressing and pulling.

Taking all this into account, and the fact that I'm a personal trainer, not a physical therapist, it's pretty much impossible for me to be truly prescriptive.

Much of the time when someone has shoulder pain I have to refer to them to

an orthopedic specialist, and the other times their shoulder pain is general, non chronic, they cant specific what makes it “hurt”, and it resolves itself within a few weeks of training.

10 common reasons people have rotator cuff issues

1. Not enough rowing.

The upp back is largely neglected in most peoples training programs. Pulldowns, seated rows, and thats about it. This is detrimental to both muscular development and joint health. The upper back and the rotator cuff are synergistic, if the back is underdeveloped the rotator cuff wont function properly, and will bear more stress than necessary. Try the Back Specialization Program to bring up your back strength.

2. Too much pressing

A lot of men tend to prioritize chest arms, abs, over back, core, and legs. Subsequently, if you spend 3 days a week training your “front” and only one day on lower body, you are going to create your own issues. Not every program has to be “balanced”, but if your back development is something you’ve neglected, I’d strongly suggest addressing it.

3. No posterior delt or trap training-I don’t just means shrugs.

The posterior deltoid muscles and the mid and low trapezius both anchor and move the shoulder blades, and improve the overall stability of the shoulder joint as a whole. If your upper back lacks muscles, your shoulders are going to pay the price.

4. Improper technique

This is as easy one. If you lift wrong, expect to get injured. I see this very often with guys benching and the bar is totally asymmetrical. That is a pec tear or rotator cuff tear waiting to happen. Technical movement should be symmetrical and precise.

5. Kyphotic posture

If you have forward head, a rounded upper back, slouched shoulders, and you try to press or pull, your technique is going to be completely compromised. There are no “bad” exercises, but if you are doing movements that you are not prepared to do, you are setting yourself up for issues and injury.

6. An overall lack of movement

If all you ever do for shoulders is bench press and some lateral raises, your shoulder ROM will be compromised. Your shoulders have an enormous ROM, and can press and pull from 0 to 180 degrees of angles. The ROM that you don't use, you will LOSE. Training the different angles of motion needs to be a part of your training

7. Taking rotator cuff exercises to failure

This is one of the worst I see. Rotator cuff movements are activation exercises that are meant to prepare your shoulders for pressing or pulling. They are NOT “take them to failure and do as much weight as you can”. These movements are meant to be done very controlled, with slow precision. The way most people do them, they are bastardized arm twists.

8. Barbell bench press

Typically I wouldn't single out an exercise, but the bench press wrecks so many people that it must be said. If you are going to bench press

- Learn proper technique
- Do not go to failure
- Always have spotter for heavy attempts
- Do not bounce off the chest
- Do not attempt to press through pain
- Do not "Grind" reps constantly in training

9. Not training the shoulders at all

This is commonly a female issue. Many women do not train their upper body at all, and then when their posture declines, their arms are flabby, their hands are weak, and they can barely carry a purse, they wonder "why did this happen??"

Because you have no upper body muscle. Hence, expect things to HURT.

General rule of living.

Where you have muscle, you can keep moving

Where you don't have muscle, you will HURT.

10. Ignoring Pain

You're an idiot if you do this. Some discomfort, and what I call "sorting out pain" is normal when you first start lifting and learning a new movement. Your body is unaccustomed to the exercise, or exercising, and it's reasonable that not everything is going to feel nice. That said, if shoulder pain persists day after day, week after week, month after month, it's entirely your fault when that pain becomes catastrophic. I am no longer surprised when I talk to people about their training, and they INSIST on doing movements that hurt, and then INSIST that the pain they are in and the exercise they are

doing are not connected.

What you ignore will unmake you in due time.

So implement, or account for the 10 factors above, and your shoulder and rotator cuff shouldn't be an issue.