Teaching Techniques #3:

The bench press

1. When instructing a proper exercise technique for the bench press weight training exercise, list some of the common technique errors observed in the beginning or novice athlete.

Baechle: 1. Improper body positioning on the bench in relationship to the uprights. Usually, the novice will position himself/herself so that the shoulders are parallel to the uprights. This, of course, creates a problem with the bar striking the uprights during the execution of the upward and downward movement phases. Typically, instructing athletes to position themselves so the bar is aligned above the eyes will create an appropriate bar-to-upright spatial relationship.

2. Uneven hand positioning commonly occurs unless the novice is acquainted with the smooth and rough (knurled) sections of the bar. Instructing the novice to assume a wider than shoulder grip is not sufficient. They must also be shown where each hand should be placed relative to the middle knurled area of the bar. This approach and the proper chest contact point should also bring about the proper elbow position with the upper arm and torso (midline) angle at approximately 70 degrees, and elbow angle at approximately 90 degrees.

3. Feet not maintaining continuous contact with the floor throughout the exercise. This is a common mistake which is characterized by one or both feet being lifted upward during the upward movement of the bar, particularly at the sticking point. The novice may also cross their ankles, or will squeeze the floor-to-bench upright with the inside of the feet. It is important to explain that a wider-than-bench, flat-footed position on the floor is important to maintain a safe and effective position on the bench. Once one or both feet lose contact with the floor, stability is adversely affected. The outcome is the same when the feet move from a wide base of support to a narrow one (feet squeezing the floor-to-bench upright). Should a sudden change in balance occur while the bar is above the chest face, an unstable position can result in injury. Appropriate foot contact is also important in acquiring the

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proper buttock to shoulder arch position.

4. Contact position at the chest is too high or low, or varies. This is a common error that results in dramatic variations in performance. While it depends on the anatomical characteristics of the athlete, typically a contact point one inch above, below or on the nipple of the chest is preferred. Should men have difficulty with this, the spotter should give them a kinesthetic cue by stroking across the chest, just below the nipple where the bar is to contact the chest. Women often find that it is comfortable to bring the bar to a contact point just below the breasts.

5. The bar’s path from the contact point to full arm extension should follow an “S” type of movement pattern from the chest to the top position. I do not, however, believe that it is important to dwell on the need to instruct the novice on how to press the bar upward and backward to a position over the shoulders at the critical point (i.e., where the wrists extend—move backward—slightly).

6. Bar is pushed to a location beyond the shoulders while acquiring the extended elbow position. The spotter should grasp the bar, not for the purpose of helping to lift it, but rather to help guide the bar along the appropriate movement path and to the point of completion (over the shoulders, not neck). This is also a good time to teach the appropriate bar velocity, and the slow-controlled elbow extension (pressout) at the top.

7. Uneven pressing movement. The uneven extension of one arm results in an unbalanced position, and potentially a dangerous situation. When one arm tends to “drag,” direct the athlete to look at that arm during the pressing movement. This results in a

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**Coach’s Checklist**

**The Bench Press**

**The Start**

- Evenly loaded bar with collars
- Lie on bench with eyes directly under bar
- Head resting on the bench
- Even pronated grip, optional width
- Make sure grip is even
- Thumbs around bar with straight wrist (locked)
- Legs to side of bench, with feet flat on ground

**The Ascent**

- Lift bar off supports under control
- Stop momentarily to stabilize bar over upper part of chest, keeping arms and wrists straight and keeping a tight grip
- Inhale and hold breath while lowering the bar
- Slowly lower the bar under control to the highest point on the chest (close to nipples)
- Stop momentarily to avoid a bounce
- Upper arm and torso (mid-line) angle should be approximately 70 degrees, and elbow angle should be approximately 90 degrees
- Drive the bar up to starting position
- Exhale slowly as the bar rises
- Keep head and hips on bench. Do not arch, twist body or move feet
- Do not relax during the exercise, stay “tight”
- Use a smooth motion, do not “jam” or accelerate the bar at the top of the motion

**The Descent**

- Return bar to the supports under control. Be sure it is racked on both sides before relaxing and releasing the grip on the bar.
slight change in position and a concentration on muscles involved that might help the dragging arm to catch up.

8. Closing the eyes during the upward pressing movement. When the eyes close, typically around the sticking point, the novice often becomes disoriented and the upward movement becomes erratic. Stress keeping the eyes open.

9. Breath holding during the upward pressing movement. As the bar is pressed upward, there is a tendency to hold the breath, which increases the likelihood of the novice becoming dizzy or blacking out. Emphasize the need to exhale during the upward pressing phase.

**Kelso:** 1. Uncontrolled bar movement, usually a result of unfamiliarity with the skill of the exercise movement. This includes inconsistency in where the bar touches the chest and uneven lockout.

2. Not touching the chest with the bar at the mid-range position.

3. Unstable base of support, primarily with the feet not placed flat on the ground.

4. The usual bouncing of the bar off the chest and arching (hips) off the bench.

**Barnes:** 1. Hands either too narrow or too wide.

2. Failure to lower the bar under control.

3. Bouncing the bar off the chest at the bottom position.

4. Failure to keep the shoulder blades and the buttocks on the bench.

5. Failure to keep the feet flat on the floor.

6. Excessive arching of the low back.

7. Failure to keep the bar in the proper groove while lowering the bar (touching the chest too low toward the abs or too high toward the neck).

8. Failure to drive the bar upward in an arc so that completion of the rep is above the throat and facial area.

9. Failure to keep the elbows slightly in front of or directly underneath the bar.

10. Failure to keep the entire body tight as the lift is performed.

2. Are there any special safety and/or spotting considerations for the beginning athlete learning the bench press training exercise?

**Kelso:** Because of the nature of the exercise, the bench press should always be done with proper supervision. This is extremely important with the novice. Due to the lack of familiarity with the skill of bench pressing, beginners should have a spotter not only for the safety aspect, but also for feedback or critique of their lifting technique.

**Barnes:** 1. Beginners must use light weights until the technique skills of the lift have been sufficiently mastered.

2. Safety check of bar and bench before beginning lift.

3. Use of collars, thereby preventing any shifting of the weights.

4. Everyone who lifts is always required to be dressed properly, i.e. shirt, shoes, socks.

5. Use of lifting chalk on the hands and bar for the purpose of getting a better grip.

6. Appropriate number of spotters, in place and alert.

7. Spotters should be aware of the following (spotters should be behind the lifter and on each side):
   a. number of repetitions to be performed;
   b. type of verbal and visual commands to be used;
   c. type of lift-off to be used;
   d. spotting of the lift. Use both hands, not just the fingers touching lightly against the bar;
   e. do not stand on equipment to spot. This will not provide a solid base;
   f. re-racking of the bar. Spotter should guide the bar back on the rack and lifter should keep hands firmly on bar until it is in place;
   g. spotter should not rest hands on the uprights during the lift.
8. Adequate instruction and supervision. Athletes should be made aware that the most dangerous lifts in the weightroom are those performed over the throat and facial area.

9. Proper warm-up and stretching routine.

**Baechle:** For the novice, there is need for only one spotter located at the head of the bench with the hands centered and about 10 inches apart. A reverse hand grip position should be used, and the hands should follow the bar path.

The spotter's stance is with the legs about hip width, and knees slightly flexed. This position will help protect the spotter's lower back should the weight of the bar need to be taken off the athlete. Do not allow the athlete to use an open grip (as opposed to a thumbs around the bar). A point of critical importance is when the bar is being re-racked. Special attention should be exercised here as sometimes the novice will let go of the bar thinking that it has reached the rack when it hasn't.

**3. Are there any prerequisite strength or skill requirements before the beginning lifter should include the bench press in their workout?**

**Barnes:** 1. Athlete should have proper flexibility program (emphasis on shoulder area, triceps, forearm and wrists).

2. Athlete should work assistance exercises such as:
   a. tricep extension;
   b. front, lateral and rear deltoid raises;
   c. dumbbell flies/presses, flat bench and incline;
   d. barbell curls and wrist curls.

3. Athletes can begin the bench press in their workout immediately, as long as the emphasis is on proper technique through a full range of motion rather than the amount of weight lifted.

**Baechle:** Not really, assuming that appropriate loads are assigned. If there is a perceived need for prerequisite training, push-ups are ideal.

**Kelso:** Not necessarily. Resistances should be used which are relative to the strength level of the trainee.

4. Are there any particular instructional methods you have found helpful when teaching the bench press to your athletes?

**Baechle:** Use the whole-part-whole approach:

Whole - demonstrate the body position and execution of the bench press.

Then break down the parts:
- bench position
- grip, and grip positioning on the bar
- starting - extended elbow position
- bar lowering under control
- contact position at chest
- elbow relationship to midline
- bar path
- full elbow extension over shoulder
- re-racking
- breathing

Whole - demonstration, giving emphasis to each point, followed by a more "formal" demonstration.

**Kelso:** In general, I instruct them to lower the bar in a controlled manner and touch the pectorals, then return it to the starting position. Some trainees lower the bar with their upper arms descending at 45 degrees to the long axis of the torso. This puts the bar at the lower part of the pectorals at the mid-range position. From here, they must push the bar in a curvilinear path to direct it back to the starting position. This is usually the case if a narrower than shoulder width grip is employed.

For those who use a wider than shoulder width grip, the bar will usually descend in a more linear path. This is facilitated by movement of the upper arms at or near right angles to the long axis of the torso. The linear path of the bar will require the trainee to simply push up on the bar to return it to the starting position. The emphasis on "up and back," which some coaches instruct, will not be effective with this type of bench pressing method.

As long as the trainee performs the
bench press through a full range of motion and uses control in moving the bar, those muscle groups which are activated throughout the movement will be enhanced. The slight differences which occur in the plane of bar movement are more of an individual matter. They are not that critical in regard to the actual benefits of the exercise.

**Barnes:** 1. Teaching of skills should be the "whole-part-whole" teaching method. The steps are as follows:

a. Show the whole movement at normal speed. (This should include each detail from addressing the bar to re-racking of the bar.)
b. Show the part explaining each detail step by step.
c. Show the whole movement again.
d. Demonstrate the parts again with less explanation.
e. Show the whole movement again.
f. The athlete does the movement part by part. Use the empty bar or light weight.
g. The athlete does the whole movement slowly.
h. The athlete does the parts more quickly, step by step.
i. The whole movement is done at normal speed.

2. Have visual pictures of each step posted in your weightroom.

3. Use older more experienced lifters as teaching models.

4. Develop appropriate terminology so that by saying a key word the proper response will be triggered by the athlete.

**Kelso:** No.

**Barnes:** 1. Use of videotape showing proper technique.

2. Use of slide film showing technique step by step.

3. Use of posters describing technique step by step as well as the particular muscle groups exercised by the lift.

**Baechle:** This exercise is a simple one for most to master, however, the preferred bar path groove from the contact point at the chest to the top elbow position over the shoulders may create some difficulty. The NSCA's videotape, "Techniques for Free Weight Training," provides an excellent side view of the recommended bar path. This tape is not only good to use for this purpose, but is an excellent tool for explaining all techniques involved. Ideally, a VCR is placed in the weight facility at the time of introducing exercises, and is in place and used in concert with the whole, part, whole approach to teaching.