Teaching Techniques #11:

Supine dumbbell flys

1. When instructing proper exercise technique for the supine dumbbell fly exercise, list some of the common technique errors observed in beginners.

Mannie: The errors most commonly noted in beginners during the execution of the supine dumbbell fly movement are:

a. Failure to keep palms facing the torso.

b. Failure to take dumbbells to at least chest level in the mid-range position.

c. Failure to keep a slight bend in the elbows at the top of the movement (this will keep tension in the target area).

Jones: Common technique errors observed in beginners are:

a. Failure to keep the elbows back and in line with the shoulders;

b. Flexion of the elbows more than 20 degrees, while lowering the dumbbells; and

c. Pressing the dumbbells from the bottom rather than raising them together at an even rate with the palms facing up and the elbows flexed 15 to 20 degrees.

Salmon: I prefer that the beginner be proficient at barbell exercises for the upper body before dumbbell exercises are introduced. After introducing the supine dumbbell fly exercises, some of the common technique errors are:

a. Athlete selects too heavy a weight, which can cause the exercise to be a combination of a fly and press motion. The elbow does not stay fixed, and thus the triceps do come into play.

b. The hands do not stay in proper alignment with the elbows and shoulder (straight line) during both the concentric and eccentric phases of the exercise. With the hands in front of or behind the elbow joint, this causes a weaker biomechanical position and creates the potential for injury.

c. The lowering aspect of the exercise may be too fast, which does not allow the muscles to build proper tension for the concentric phase of exercise.

d. Not going to proper depth in range of motion. The athlete will tend to cut the range short. This may occur due to a weight that is too heavy. The strength and conditioning coach should be aware of limited range of motion due to past injury in shoulder or surrounding areas.
e. Poor stability on bench. Athlete needs lower body to be still with feet firmly in place for proper balance.

2. Are there any special safety and/or spotting considerations for the exercise?

Jones: Safety and spotting considerations include having a spotter place the hands in a position to support the wrists if necessary.

Salmon: The primary safety consideration for this exercise is selection of a proper weight. Often an athlete inexperienced with this exercise selects too heavy a weight, thus sacrificing technique for heavier poundages. Sometimes athletes have one shoulder and arm that is far stronger than the other (such as a tennis player) and the athlete does not realize how much difference in strength levels exists between limbs. If increments between dumbbells are two and a half pounds instead of five, then the athlete could use a lighter weight for the weaker arm without affecting balance. A five-pound difference in weight could be too much—an extra rep or two with the lighter weight should be done instead.

The strength coach should always be aware of the descent motion of the exercise when dumbbells are being used. Athletes tend to lower dumbbells too fast, and need to realize as loads increase the lowering aspect of the exercise should slow down.

Coaches’ Checklist

The Supine Dumbbell Fly

Before You Begin
- Select two dumbbells equal in weight
- Lay in supine position on bench with head and hips on bench
- Keep feet flat on floor and to the sides of the bench

The Start
- To begin exercise, press both dumbbells to arms extended position above chest, palms facing in
- Begin lowering both dumbbells simultaneously, with palms up
- Keep elbows back and the dumbbells in line with the shoulders
- While lowering the dumbbells, the elbows should begin to flex to 15 degrees to 20 degrees
- Continue lowering both dumbbells until a comfortable stretch is felt in the chest and shoulder area
- This comfortable stretch will vary according to each athlete’s shoulder flexibility

The Ascent
- Once this bottom position is accomplished, the dumbbells are raised together at an even rate with palms facing up and elbows flexed
- Raise the dumbbells back to a fully extended arm position above the chest
- Bring both dumbbells together at the extended arm position above the chest, palms facing in

Coaching Points
- Inhale while lowering the dumbbells
- Exhale while raising the dumbbells
- Maintain an evenly controlled speed while lowering and raising dumbbells
- Maintain flexed elbow position while lowering the dumbbells from the shoulders

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If a spotter is necessary due to the weight or a forced rep or two, this individual needs to be an experienced spotter. A spotter needs to be especially aware of proper technique and have his or her hands close by to support the wrist to ensure completion of a safe repetition. The spotter may have to get one knee or both knees behind the athlete to ensure a better mechanical position from which to spot. Once the athlete is finished, dumbbells should be lowered out to the side of the athlete’s head, just in case miscommunication occurs between spotter and lifter and the dumbbells drop. Dumbbells can be lowered to bench depth, or can be taken directly to lifter’s thigh area.

Mannie: Safety considerations for the lifter:

a. Lie as flat as possible on the bench with the feet flat on floor.
b. Use a weight that allows for at least six properly performed repetitions.
c. Establish a system with your partner for receiving the dumbbells at the start of the exercise and for returning them upon completion of the set.
d. Do not overstretch the anterior aspect of the shoulder by taking the movement too deep (lower than chest level).
e. Perform controlled concentric and eccentric contractions.

Safety considerations for the spotter:

a. Establish a system for handing and removing dumbbells to and from the lifter.
b. When the lifter needs assistance raising the dumbbells (or is performing forced reps), spot on the wrists, not the elbows. If the lifter loses control while the spotter has his hands on the elbows, the lifter is at obvious risk of injury.

3. Are there any prerequisite strength or skill requirements before beginners should include supine dumbbell flys in their workouts?

Salmon: As previously mentioned, I prefer the athlete to be somewhat proficient in barbell exercises before introducing dumbbell exercises. Generally, dumbbell incline, bench and decline press are introduced before the supine flys. In general, dumbbell exercises are more difficult to master than barbell exercises. Strength levels need not be high for the lifter to be introduced to dumbbell exercises. Proper technique is of the utmost concern, and should always be emphasized. I do not consider this an advanced exercise; it is one that can be mastered quickly.

Mannie: A suggestion for youngsters who are just beginning a resistance training program would be to perform several weeks of body weight exercises for the target area (push-ups, parallel dips) in addition to performing the supine fly movement with manual resistance or a machine for higher reps (10 to 15) before advancing to dumbbells.

Jones: Beginners should develop a strength base consisting of at least 12 weeks of chest development exercises, including bench press and dumbbell press, with high to medium repetitions.

4. Are there any particular instructional methods you have found helpful when teaching supine dumbbell flys to your athletes?

Mannie: Other than the previously mentioned points, we offer the following suggestions to our advanced trainees:

a. Perform two sets of the exercise, taking both sets to fatigue (rep range is six to eight).
b. Perform three to four forced reps at the conclusion of the second set.
c. We will sometimes follow the forced reps immediately with a manual breakdown set (approximately six additional reps).
d. To help certain lifters avoid bridging and/or to be assured of targeting the pectoral area with as little cheating as possible, we make a T-bench by placing an additional utility bench at the foot of the exercise bench in a perpendicular position. This allows the lifter to place his or her feet up with bent knees, and alleviates some of the stress in the low back region.

Salmon: The primary concern is the alignment of the hand, elbow and shoulder joint of each arm to ensure a safe exercise and isolation of the pectoralis muscle group. The hands should be further out from the elbow joint. The greater
the distance (lever resistance arm increases), the more difficult the exercise. I stress a slight bend in each elbow (fixed position), with the arm extended well away from the elbow joint. I classify this exercise as a torso or shoulder movement, thus emphasizing the chest and anterior shoulder region as the muscle group that acts as the primary mover. Emphasize contraction of the pectoralis muscle group after the pre-stretch from the eccentric phase of the exercise.

One instructional method I have found helpful is to have the athlete lie on the bench without any dumbbells and go over the range of motion slowly, with the coach lightly holding the athlete's hands and guiding the athlete through the motion, pointing out the alignment of the hands, elbows, shoulders and knuckles. Using partner resistance first instead of dumbbells could provide the lifter with the proper feel of the exercise. Instead of dropping the dumbbells to the floor, the athlete either needs to be able to place them on the floor or to hand them to a spotter or spotters. Encourage the lifter to use lighter loads, at least initially, before jumping up to heavier poundages.

Jones: I have found it helpful when teaching the supine dumbbell flys to provide an opportunity for the athlete to imitate my technique.

a. Athletes are taught to imitate my movement from a standing position, as I stand and perform the exercise with no resistance.

b. The athlete will follow my demonstration on the bench, with no resistance, being careful to concentrate on the techniques of the movement.

c. Once the techniques have been mastered with no resistance, the athlete will perform the exercise with minimum resistance and a spotter.

d. As the proper techniques are maintained, the resistance is gradually increased to a point where the exercise can be performed effectively, with good technique.

5. What have you found to be the main benefit of using this exercise with your athletes?

Mannie: We use the exercise as an adjunct to our free weight and machine chest exercises and to add variety. We also like the fact, as with all dumbbell exercises, that each extremity is forced to work in an independent fashion.

Jones: The main benefit of using this exercise with my athletes is that it provides a different method of exercising the chest, and it is an excellent exercise for those athletes interested in defining the muscular structure of the chest.

Salmon: Because many athletes enjoy training their chests, this exercise is not difficult to implement in most programs. It provides an excellent change-up exercise to introduce variation into the program. This exercise can be a substitution for a pressing exercise, it can be used to isolate the chest or it can be part of two consecutive exercises (super-set) such as flies to close grip bench press, or flies to close hand push-ups.

Gayle Hatch
Weightlifting/Strength Training

United States Weightlifting Regional Training Center

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WALLBANGER
3103 Monterey Blvd.
Baton Rouge, LA 70814
(504) 926-7222