Improved Bench Press Performance Through Visual Feedback

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THE BENCH PRESS IS UNDOUBTEDLY one of the most popular exercises in the weight room. There are various forms of bench pressing, including barbell, dumbbell, and machine, all of which can be executed from different angles. The bench press is considered a core exercise for many sports due to its overall upper body strengthening qualities. It is also a popular lift contested in the sport of powerlifting, which is practiced around the world.

■ Technical Problems

Beginners may exhibit improper technique as a result of muscle imbalance or bad habits developed during training. A common example of poor technique, which is also a cause for disqualification during competition, is uneven extension of the arms at the completion of the lift (1). This means the movement of the barbell is not executed evenly after the initial effort at pressing from the chest.

There are several reasons for this problem: (a) too heavy a weight for the lifter to complete in good form; (b) poor coordination; (c) unequal strength in the tricep, deltoid, or pectoral muscles; (d) a bad habit developed in training; or (e) lack of development and use of the upper back muscles while bench pressing. The influence of the muscles of the upper back is often overlooked. The weight is stabilized throughout the lift by the muscles of the upper back. Additionally, the initial push off the chest begins with the upper back. Improper use of the back may overload the other muscle groups used in bench pressing.

■ Special Considerations

The physically challenged lifter also may exhibit this technique flaw due to a difficulty in stabilizing the body during maximum effort. This group of competitors begins the bench press from a “dead stop” position approximately 1 inch above the chest. Although the lower body of such a lifter may be secured to the bench via a belt, the failure to be able to stabilize the body through lower body support frequently leads to this problem of uneven extension of the arms (2).

■ Common Corrections

The traditional suggestion for correcting this problem includes single joint movements performed by the body’s weak limb. These lifts may include a one-arm tricep pushdown or extension, use of dumbbells, or oral feedback from a coach reminding the lifter to maintain an even extension. This verbal communication is important but it usually comes after a slight delay—the time from when the coach observes the flaw and passes this feedback on to the lifter. This delay can prevent proper corrective measures from being taken soon enough to have an effect.

■ A New Alternative

As part of a project for the Hong Kong Powerlifter Congress, I have created a simple, yet effective visual feedback apparatus that allows the lifter to begin this correction immediately upon detection of any uneven arm extension. We use a board containing a vertical line in the center and several horizontal lines; the board is placed on a wall near the end of the bench. An arrow-shaped piece
of paper is secured to the center of the barbell. While performing the bench press, the lifter can maintain a straight and even orientation by comparing the bar with the lines on the board (Figure 1).

We have found this method to be very effective in correcting the problem of uneven extension of the arms during the bench press. Lifters tend to immediately compare the path of the bar with the chart in the background. Since these materials are not allowed in competition, we depend on “perfect practice making perfect.”

Lifters with the problem of uneven extension have found that by concentrating on maintaining an even extension as reflected by the chart, they are more likely to execute bench presses that will not draw red lights from the judges.

The concept is simple and the materials are inexpensive. Give this form of visual feedback a try and see if it doesn’t improve the performances of those lifters who have problems with uneven extension of the arms during the bench press. ▲

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**References**


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**Wong Yiu Ming** is Head Coach of the Hong Kong Powerlifting Team for the Physically Disabled. A former competitive powerlifter, he was the winner in the 56-kg class of the World Bench Press Cup in 1991 and a runner-up in three national bench press or powerlifting championships from 1989 to 1992. He has written several articles on sport science and nutrition in Chinese.