

# Five Common Bench Pressing Mistakes

Joseph M. Warpeha, MA, CSCS,\*D, NSCA-CPT,\*D

**W**hether or not the bench press has earned it, few can argue that it is the most popular exercise out there. That being the case, this article will discuss some of the most common mistakes made with this exercise. The following list is neither all-inclusive nor in any particular order, it simply touches on some of the more important points.

## 1. Lifting the buttocks off of the bench while attempting to press out the bar

You have all seen it—the person doing bench presses who lifts their butt high enough off of the bench so you could drive a car underneath it. It is a natural reaction of the body to assume a more favorable biomechanical position when the resistance starts to become too much to handle with strict form. It is also an instinct that should be fought against every time to preserve low back health. Specifically, the intervertebral discs can experience excessive compression when forced into this position. Different degrees of arching the back while the butt is in contact with the bench also has the potential to cause low back issues, but it usually is not as problematic or prolific. Everybody can

lift more weight if they raise their butts off of the bench which makes it such a hard habit to break. If you have not fallen into this habit that is a good thing, do not start. If you do have this habit, take the initial drop in weight and try to keep the proper form—for the sake of injury prevention. Do not worry, your numbers will come back with a little work on the new form.

## 2. Bouncing the bar off of the chest

The first thing to understand is that realistically there is not going to be much bounce off of the chest. Think about this, if you were to take a bar loaded with any amount of weight and drop it on a cadaver from a couple of feet in the air, how much do you think it would bounce? Minimally, if at all. Most likely it would just sink into the chest. If asked, most say the reason for the bouncing is momentum. However, when you are lowering the bar, the momentum is in a downward direction and in order to complete the lift it needs to be reversed to an upward direction. So to say a person is using momentum when they heave the bar upward is probably not entirely correct. The most likely reason for the appearance of a “bounce” at the chest is the stretch reflex of the muscles

and connective tissues. The faster the reversal of the bar, the more this stretch reflex is invoked. This is another one of those things that a lifter can figure out by instinct alone, even if they do not have the faintest idea as to what a stretch reflex is. Due to the fact that high speeds are usually involved near the reversal point, the bar will often sink into the chest slightly. Combine that with an explosive start to the press and it appears as if the bar is bouncing. A simple touch-and-go bench press (without a visible bounce) can be performed under control and at relatively high speeds and thus can still take advantage of the stretch reflex phenomenon.

## 3. Putting the feet up on the bench while benching

This is not a mistake; it is more of a misconception. I often hear people say that they put their feet on the bench because it isolates the chest more during the exercise. It should be obvious why the chest is no more isolated when the feet are up on the bench as opposed to being on the ground. There may, however, be benefits for some people benching this way. Number one: putting the feet on the bench will certainly engage the upper body stabilizer muscles to a much greater degree since the big stabilizers

of the hips, legs and feet have largely been taken out. Number two: for some people with low back problems or injuries, putting the feet up on the bench alleviates the pain that is otherwise felt from the natural arch in the low back that is formed when benching with the feet on the ground. Benchng with the feet on the bench can be likened to performing dumbbell presses while having the back supported by a stability ball. However, do not expect to achieve a true maximum bench press (for repetitions or weight) while having your feet on the bench.

#### 4. The spotter gets a better workout than the bencher

This is seen with any exercise that requires a spotter to lend assistance when the movement can no longer be completed solely by the lifter, but it seems to be most prominent in bench pressing. The purpose of the spotter is to give a relatively small amount of help on the last repetition or two so the lifter can go past that failure point. If 300 pounds is on the bar and the spotter has to contribute 50 pounds of help to get the bar up, the weight should be reduced significantly, out of respect for the spotter's safety in addition to that of the lifter. There is also no point to doing a set of 10 repetitions when your spotter has to help with the last 6. Even if the spotter keeps saying "it's all you, it's all you", rest assured that it is nowhere close to being "all you". And for all of you spotters out there, the best spotting grip is an alternating grip, not two fingers or one hand in the middle of the bar. I will assume an explanation of why this is the case is not needed.



The bench press is extremely popular as a gym exercise as well as a competitive lift (as one of the 3 disciplines of powerlifting). However, its execution must be taken seriously in terms of technique in order to maximize safety, and certain training principles must be followed if strength gains are to be maximized.

#### 5. Lack of progressive overload in a training program

Without going into a lot of detail here, a person who always lifts the same amount of weight or never changes their program should not be surprised when they do not get any stronger. If you need a quick lesson on what progressive overload is and do not care for all of the science talk, refer to the tale of Milo of Crotona, a prominent athlete in ancient Greece. The story goes something like this: when an Olympiad ended and it was time to start training for the next one in four years, Milo began carrying a calf on his shoulders everywhere he went which was not particularly difficult. He did this everyday for 4 years and by the time the next Olympiad rolled around, Milo was carrying a four year-old, full

grown cow everywhere and was much stronger than when he first started with the calf. Since the resistance was constantly increasing, so to was his strength. Whether this bedtime tale is fact or fiction is a matter for historians. What can not be argued, however, is the idea that the story of Milo is an accurate, albeit simplistic, description of progressive overload. The point is this: if you always put 225 pounds on the bar and just do repetitions of that, do not expect to ever be able to bench press much more than 225 pounds. This also goes for training in general, not just the bench press.

While many argue that the bench press exercise gets far more attention than it deserves, no one can dispute its popularity across all groups from recreational

lifters to elite athletes. Despite the relatively simple nature of the lift, many errors are still possible ranging from technique flaws to less-than-optimal program designs to general misinformation regarding the lift and its execution. The consequences of such errors can be relatively benign in the case of not progressing at the desired rate of strength increase to the more dangerous technique mistakes that can lead to serious injury. This article has identified a few of the more common mistakes that, if avoided, can lead to proficient pressing on the bench with a minimal risk of injury.

## About the Author

*Joe Warpeha is an exercise physiologist and strength coach and is currently working on his PhD in exercise physiology at the University of Minnesota-Minneapolis. His current research focuses on musculoskeletal adaptations in stroke patients. Joe's other areas of interest include muscular and cardiovascular responses and adaptations to exercise. He is an instructor in the School of Kinesiology and has taught several courses including "Measurement, Evaluation, and Research in Kinesiology", "Strength Training Program Design", and "Advanced Weight Training and Conditioning". In addition to having a Masters degree in exercise physiology, Joe is a Registered Clinical Exercise Physiologist through the American College of Sports Medicine, a Level 1 Coach with USA Weightlifting, and a certified referee with USA Powerlifting. Outside of the academic realm, Joe is a competitive powerlifter with over 15 years of training experience and has won several national and state bench press titles while competing in the 148, 165, and 181-pound weight classes. ▲*