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PREVENTION & REHABILITATION: SELF-MANAGEMENT: PATIENT SECTION

The bench press: The most misunderstood lift in Strength & Conditioning



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The bench press (BP) is probably the single-most popular lift and for good reason. Whether you are at the local health club, crowded around the BP to see who the strongest person on the team is, or just simply the one with the most ‘upper-body’ power. We all know “how much do you bench?” is a question that is commonly asked of someone who looks as though they lift. Questions like this are part of the reason that bad habits and abuse of this lift have been perpetuated.

Lately, even professional Strength and Conditioning (S&C) coaches have discouraged the BP in favor of lifts such as the Turkish get-up (TGU) and the standing overhead press (OHP), due to the ‘BP being too dangerous’. However, it is not possible to compare a Turkish get-up to a BP for upper body strength, size and power. The OHP and TGU should be supplemental lifts, but NOT a replacement for the BP.

Why has this occurred? The answer is simple. Many so-called experts cannot perform or teach how to BP safely. Availability supersedes ability. One cannot blame S&C coaches for avoiding the BP, since you cannot teach what you do not know.

The goal of this article is to show some of the most common and detrimental mistakes and lack of knowledge concerning the BP. Any compound movement can be dangerous when not performed properly. The most dangerous lifts done in a sports-team training room would be the Olympic lifts (OL's) - not the BP. OL's take years to master, some even say they choose the lifter not the other way around. Therefore, these should be approached with caution.

The lead authors background is powerlifting. Any athlete that trains for power, should consider incorporating the powerlifts into their training. Nobody knows the squat, deadlift and the BP better than powerlifters do. It's all that powerlifters do! With that said, we should try to learn what we can from powerlifters, and apply this.

1. The basics

Anyone can perform the BP relatively safely as long as:

1. The athlete is Instructed in and can execute proper lifting form.

2. The person understands the purpose of the BP – to build full-body strength, power and explosiveness as a part of well-rounded strength programming. NOT to be a powerlifter!
3. The person lifting utilizes proper programming – involving appropriate time between lifting days. Not benching 3x a week.
4. The athlete stays within the ‘safe zone’. Around 70–85% range on the press – (hardly ever going to failure) is key. Lifting too heavy leads to form breaking down. The weight should be heavy enough to push, but not to the point of failure.
5. The person lifting attacks and improves the BP weak points with customized assistance work, not just ‘benching more volume, sets or higher intensity’.

2. The lift

Form has to be the first and *most* MOST important factor – whether it's learning the right groove with a dumbbell (DB), an empty barbell or simply “air-pressing” (doing the motion unweighted). If one can't properly do a BP with an empty bar, the bar should never be loaded up. You're asking for injury and this is where many organizations, coaches and teams have gone wrong. *The problem isn't the movement. The problem is a lack of understanding about the movement.* The goal of the BP is not to build the pectorals, shoulders and triceps bodybuilding style. It is to create power, utilizing the whole body.

3. Bench cues (see Fig. 1 a b c d)

- a. Eyes directly under the bar while in the rack.
- b. Set-up like a tripod, feet out, heels dug in and trapezius muscles dug into the bench.
- c. Bend the bar with your latissimi, and retract your scapula while lowering the bar with your elbows tucked to your sternum.
- d. To initiate the press, start by driving your heels into the floor and pushing the bar back toward the rack.
- e. Don't press the bar too far, and chase it by letting your back tightness go (scapula).

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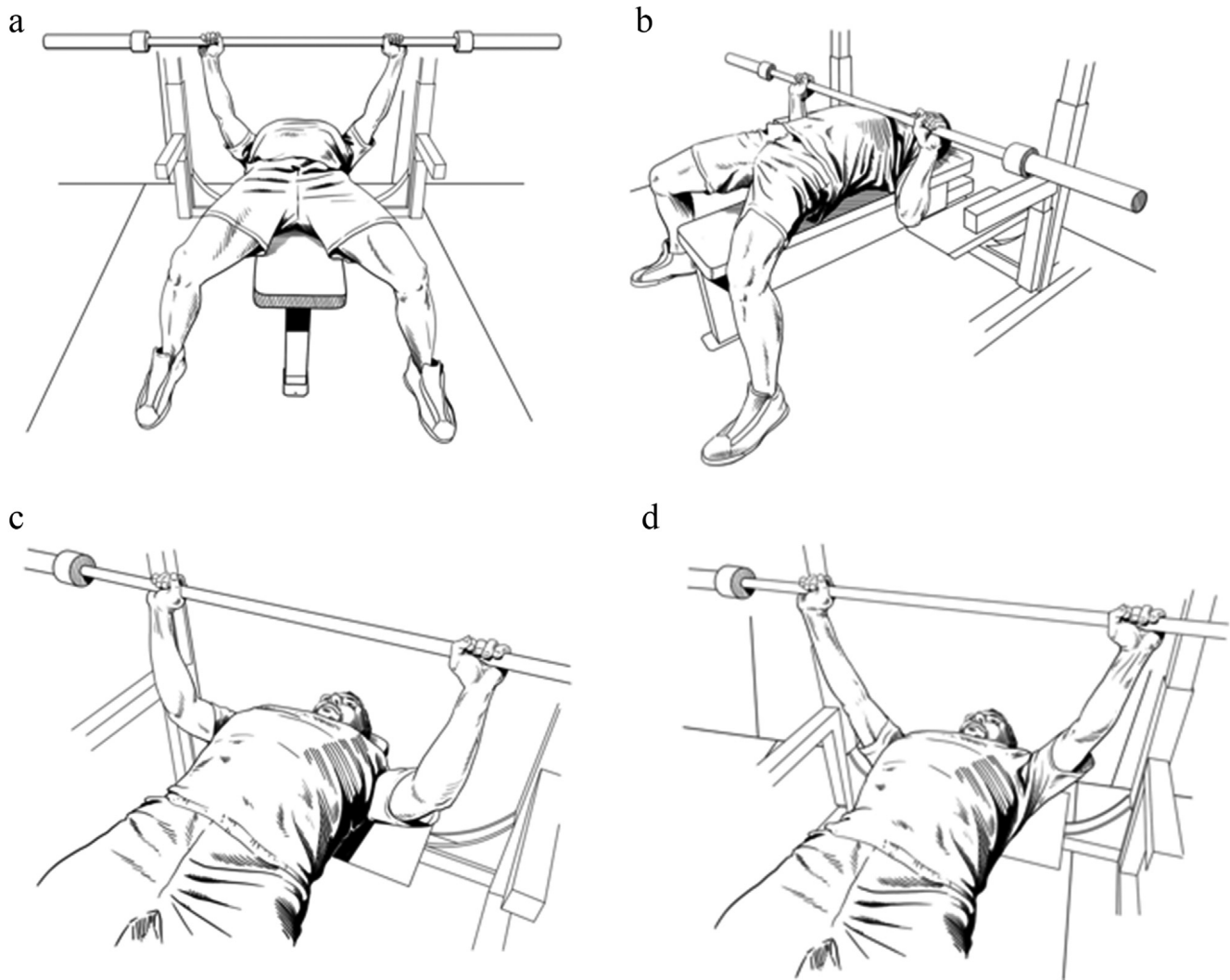


Fig. 1. Correct Bench Press. a) Lockout - This is a zoomed out overview of how the bench press should look when starting AND finishing the lift. Feet are firmly planted, quadriceps, adductors and hamstrings are locked in and tense (whole body press). Hips are up, bar is bent, with scapula retracted (rhomboid squeeze). Elbows are angled in, latissimi are flared, showing the effort of bending the bar and following a much safer groove to the sternum and back. b) Bottom Position - Feet and back rooted into the bench and floor. Nothing is casual or lazy – tight top to bottom and locked in. Touching near the sternum, elbows tucked - placing the stress on the latissimi, triceps, pectoralis major, and deltoids. This is now a much safer and full body movement! Notice the hips now are up, and legs are engaged. c) Transition Position - Elbows are tucked in transition – heading toward lockout, rhomboids together, bar being bent and pushed to lockout. No unnecessary stress on the pectorals or deltoids. This is a position of power. d) Finish - Bending the bar at the top with elbows angled in, ready to reach toward the sternum while using the whole body. Or to finish a perfect bench press. You finish the exact way you start.

4. Common mistakes

1. Not utilizing a proper warm-up prior to getting under the bar. Efficient and thorough warm-up is key. You must be mentally and physically ready for the work that's to come.
2. Not being rooted into the floor with feet and *trapezius muscles* pressed hard into the bench – i.e. loose, sloppy and inconsistent (see Fig. 2a). Think of a tripod, heels dug in, and *trapezius muscles* firmly against the bench.
3. Benching toward the clavicle (see Fig. 2b) not reaching toward the sternum with flared elbows. Do not bench-press like a bodybuilder. Coming in high is likely to lead to Injury.
4. Gripping too wide, or too close. Start with a shoulder width grip, and then change if needed. The grip will usually be in the middle somewhere.
5. Not using rhomboids and *latissimi* to bend the bar, tuck the elbows and control with a consistent bar path and groove. Each repetition should look the same. Rhomboid squeeze, *latissimi* pulling the bar down with a smooth and consistent path toward the sternum with each repetition.

5. Assistance work

Now that the form has been outlined, it is important to consider assistance work. The 3 most common BP errors are considered below. Since everyone is built differently with unique limitations, strengths and weaknesses - each person will have unique weak points that require specific assistance work.

- 1 Missing off the chest (in the bottom) – Solution: utilize **pause presses** – holding the bar on the chest motionless, while maintaining perfect form for a 2 s count then pressing it up. This helps weakness off the chest. Sets of 3–6 repetitions. Also, try *Wide grip bench (direct pectoral work, positioning work)*.
- 2 Missing in the middle of the press - Solution: utilize **floor presses**. This is done by lying on the floor in a power-rack position so that you are pressing from the floor without leg drive. This is good for the middle of the press in transition. Sets of 3–6 repetitions.
- 3 Missing at the top of the lift – Solution: a good way to combat this is **close grip bench presses**. Move the grip in a couple of

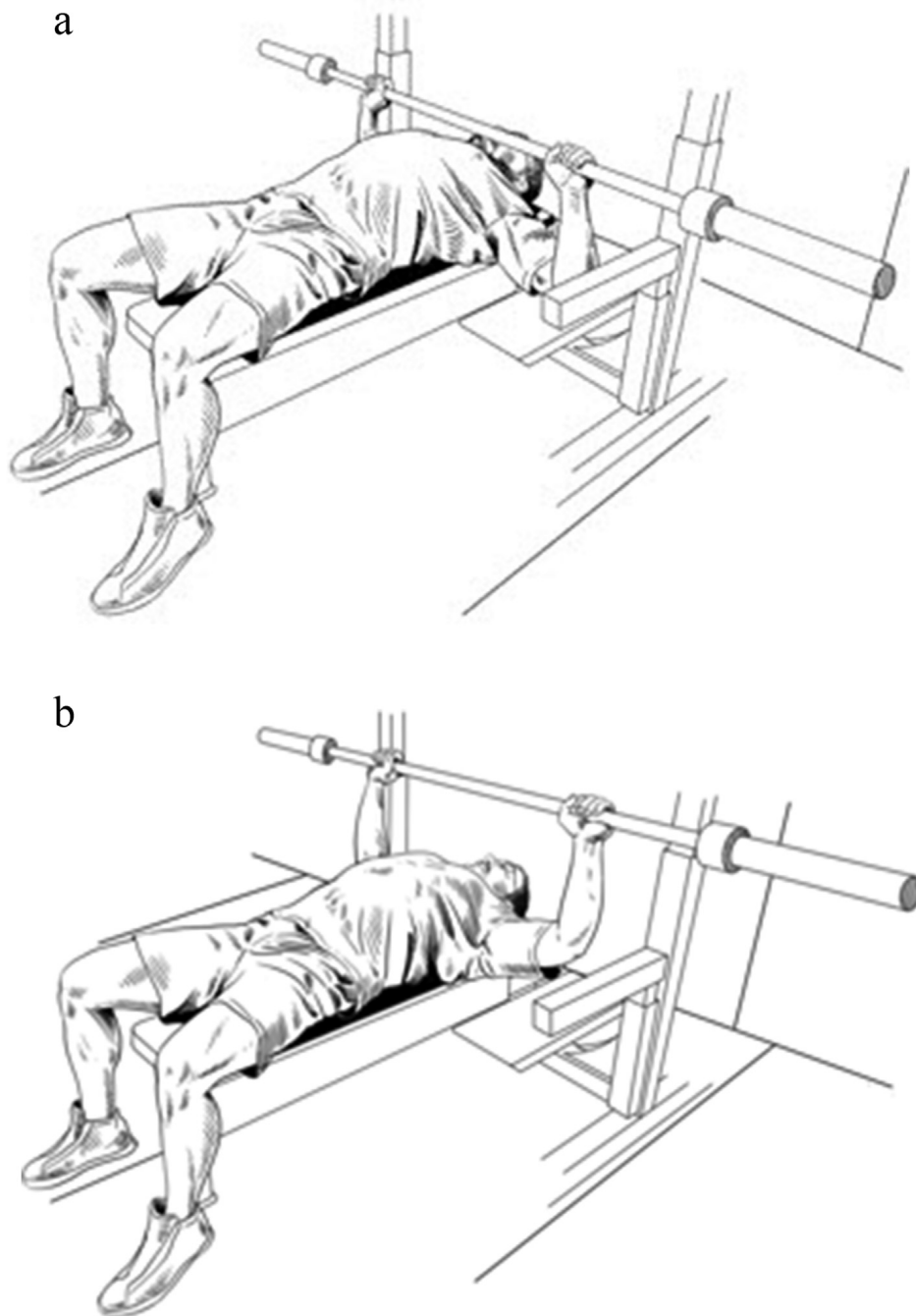


Fig. 2. Incorrect Bench Press. a) Loosely lying on the bench, feet and back not planted. Touching near the clavicle, elbows flared out, placing undue stress on the rotators, labrum, and bad positioning for pectoralis major and minor. This is a bodybuilding press -This is what is all too common, which gives the bench-press a bad name and makes it more dangerous than it should be. b) Not only are the hips wrong, but notice the elbows flared out, which makes it impossible to engage the latissimus and rhomboids (squeeze) to bend the bar properly and create maximum neurological drive. This is a dangerous bodybuilding position, not one to build power.

inches. This really works the triceps and helps top-end lockout power. Sets of 3–6 reps.

If you are all over the place (moving) and cannot lock in tight form, and energy leaks during the press, **one arm DB presses** (McGill, 2007) are suggested. Balance yourself on the bench and

lock in the side you are not pressing with and stay balanced and even on the bench while performing sets of 10–12.

Reference

McGill, S.M., 2007. *Ultimate Back Fitness and Performance*, Wabunu, second ed.