

10 *MORE* BENCHPRESS MISTAKES



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey there! My name is Tony and I am obsessed with helping people reach their health and fitness goals.

Currently, I'm a strength and conditioning coach at Cressey Sports Performance in Hudson, Massachusetts, and a personal trainer in Providence, Rhode Island.

I'm a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist (CSCS) through the National Strength and Conditioning Association and earned my Master's degree in exercise science from Adelphi University in 2013.

I've worked with people of all shapes, sizes and abilities. I've helped professional baseball players, record-setting powerlifters, marathon runners, movie producers, Ivy League professors and more. That's why I'm confident I can help YOU reach YOUR fitness goals.

I'm also an avid writer, and my articles have appeared on various websites such as STACK, Testosterone Nation and MyFitnessPal. I love to write and I love to help people, which is

why I wrote this – to help you, the reader, make sense of an all-too-confusing topic and reach your health and fitness goals.

Following a four-year career as a college baseball player, I dove into the world of competitive powerlifting. I have recorded personal bests of a 515 squat, 365 bench press and 555 deadlift for a 1435 total in the 198-pound weight class. I continue to train and compete in powerlifting as my competitive outlet.

So why do MY accomplishments matter to YOU? Because I know what it takes to get strong, gain muscle and lose fat. I've done it myself and helped hundreds of others do it, so I can help you do it too.

Good luck and lift heavy!

A handwritten signature of Tony in black ink, written in a cursive style.

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INTRODUCTION

In my original e-book, *Top 10 Bench Press Mistakes*, I talked about some common technique and programming errors that people make when trying to improve their bench press. Since then, I've learned a lot, gotten a lot stronger and helped many others get incredibly strong too.

That e-book is over 2 years old now, and it deserves an update. But first, let's outline the original top 10 bench press mistakes:

1. Not benching often enough
2. Going to failure and beyond
3. Not getting tight
4. Not using your legs
5. Pressing in a straight line
6. Using the same grip all the time
7. Touching too high or too low on the chest
8. Lowering the bar passively
9. Taking a handoff all the time
10. Never using paused reps

I highly suggest you go download the original e-book if you haven't already because I discuss all these mistakes in much greater detail. In combination with these 10 additional mistakes to avoid, you'll be armed with more knowledge about the bench press than just about anyone who walks through your gym doors.

As you read this book, ask yourself, Am I making these mistakes? If so, take the necessary steps to hone your technique, restructure your workout routine and take your bench press strength to new heights.

MISTAKE #11: OVER-TUCKING THE ELBOWS



I teach lifters to tuck their elbows in toward their sides when they bench press for a few reasons: 1) to help the lifter touch the bar lower on the chest, which reduces the range of motion, 2) to keep the upper back tight, and 3) to protect the shoulders. However, many lifters get too carried away with this cue and tuck the elbows *too* much.

You see, tucking the elbows isn't as simple as bringing your arms closer to your sides. You want this movement to come from your shoulders and upper back, NOT your elbows. Imagine putting your shoulder blades in your back pockets while puffing your chest up to the ceiling – THAT'S how you should "tuck" your elbows closer to the sides.



Give this a try: wherever you're sitting, stick your arms out with your palms down, as if holding the bar during the bench press. Now, rotate your arms so your thumbs and the pits of your elbows face up toward the ceiling. This is how most people tuck their elbows during the bench press. They'll often say they're trying to "bend the bar in half." This is a good concept, but notice one thing: how does your upper back feel? Is it tight? Are your shoulder blades pulled into your back pockets? If not,

you're getting too much motion at your elbows and not enough at your shoulders and upper back.

Not only is this an ineffective way to press heavy weight, but it's also a fast track toward achy elbows. If you grab the bar tight and continually try to twist your elbows inward, you'll run into discomfort, pain and, eventually, injury.

Instead, try to get your shoulder blades to touch together in the middle of your back. Then, try to pull them down into your back pockets. This will create the "tuck" you need without cranking on your elbows.

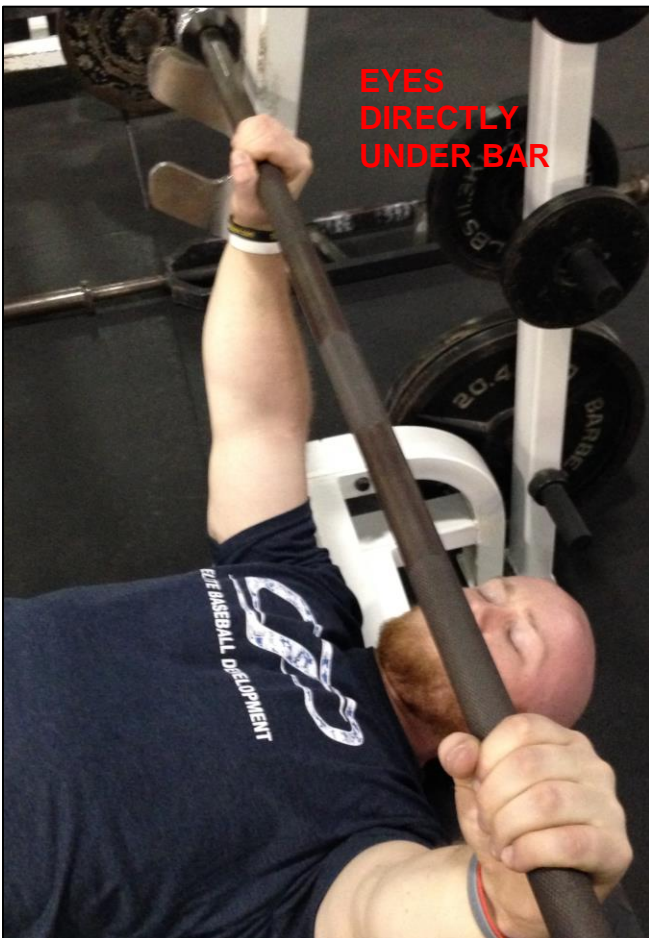
MISTAKE #12: NOT GETTING YOUR EYES UNDER THE BAR



A great bench press starts with a great setup, and if you set up with your head too far in front of the bar or too far behind the bar, you're doomed from the start. If the bar isn't lined up right over your eyes, you'll run into a handful of technical issues that will cause you to break down throughout the lift.

I actually prefer lifters to set up well behind the bar during the early portion of the setup, but I always coach lifters to arch their back toward their feet to eventually get their eyes under the bar before they unrack it. This allows the elbows to stay under the bar during the unracking portion and requires the lifters to pull the bar out with the lats instead of pressing it out with the triceps. Imagine the difference between a lat pulldown and a triceps pushdown – you want the lats to unrack the bar, not the triceps.

Setting up too far in front of the bar requires you to reach back for the bar to unrack it. This makes it nearly impossible to get your upper back tight. Plus, the bar will have to travel too far horizontally during the unracking process, which is simply wasted motion before you bring the bar to your chest.



Finally, if you set up too far behind the bar, you'll inevitably drive the bar into the rack as you press the bar up. If you press the bar in a proper J-curve path instead of a straight line, the bar will travel backward toward your face as you approach lockout. This requires your eyes to be directly under the bar to give yourself space for a backward bar path.

MISTAKE #13: FLARING THE ELBOWS TOO EARLY

As much as tucking the elbows can enhance the bench press, it's ineffective to keep them tucked throughout the whole lift. In fact, you want to actually *flare* the elbows out during the second half of the lift to allow your chest, shoulders and triceps to work together to lock out the weight.

Unfortunately, it's easy to get greedy and try to flare the elbows too early after your press the bar off your chest. The timing of your elbow flare will largely determine how quickly (and safely) you get to lockout.

As you bring the bar down to your chest, you need to pull your upper back together and put your shoulder blades in your back pockets. This tucks the elbows in close to the sides, as described in Mistake #11. When you go to press the bar back up, the elbows have to stay tucked in just long enough to clear your sticking point off the chest. Staying tucked gives you good speed to press through the first few inches of the rep and lets you get as much distance off the chest before you start to slow down. If you don't stay tucked and flare your elbows out too early, you'll slow down too much and the bar path will stray too far either forward (toward your feet) or backward (toward your face).

Flaring too early also puts a tremendous amount of stress on your shoulders. When you touch the bar lower on your chest (somewhere between your nipple line and the bottom of your ribcage), you need to keep your elbows and wrists under the bar as much as possible to support the weight. If you flare early, your elbows will kick out and your wrists will cave in, leaving your shoulders to bear most of the stress. This will cause missed reps at best and an injury at worst.

Resist the urge to flare your elbows too early off the chest. Stay patient, keep the elbows tucked in and drive as fast as possible through your sticking point. Once you've made it through the first half of the lift, flare your elbows out by turning your thumbs slightly toward each other and pressing the bar back toward your face.

MISTAKE #14: TREATING EVERY REP LIKE YOUR 1-REP MAX

I've heard many coaches (myself included) tell lifters to treat every single rep like it's your 1-rep max, from setup, to bar speed, to maximal effort - even the empty bar should be approached with the intensity of an extremely heavy lift.

After over a decade of lifting weights, I couldn't disagree more.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm all for honing technique and learning to handle heavy weights by applying maximum effort to submaximal weights. But at a certain point in a lifter's career, the risk of always going balls-to-the-walls outweighs the reward.

You see, setting up for a maximal lift requires what's called a "high-threshold strategy" and it's extremely taxing on the body. If you've ever seen my bench press setup, you'll notice that it's pretty intense and uncomfortable. It certainly maximizes my ability to handle heavy weights, but it puts plenty of stress on my lower back and hips. It's safe to say it's a high risk/high reward technique. And if you want to have a long, rewarding lifting career, you can't constantly use a high-threshold strategy week in and week out and expect to stay healthy.

Yes, rookie lifters need to practice perfect technique on every single rep, even with an empty bar. But once you get decently strong and your technique becomes second nature, what benefit do you get

from lifting 135 pounds like it's 500 pounds? Will you really forget how to lift heavy if you dial it down a bit for your warm-up sets and save your high-threshold strategy for the heavy sets when it really counts?

The answer is, obviously, no, you won't forget how to lift, even if you don't apply maximal effort to every set. In fact, you'll put less wear and tear on your body, allowing you to get stronger in the long run. Once you've crossed over from a novice to an intermediate lifter, save your most intense setup and effort for your top working sets.

MISTAKE #15: DRIVING TOO EARLY WITH YOUR LEGS

As discussed in Mistake #5, driving with your legs is an essential part of benching big weights. Using your legs to "pop" the bar off your chest is what separates great benchers from average benchers, but many people butcher their leg drive technique and actually *hurt* their bench performance instead of help it.

One of the most common leg drive mistakes I see is when people push with their legs too early and lift their hips up while they're still bringing the bar down to their chest. They essentially "meet" the bar by humping their hips up in the air, which negates any help that your legs could provide in pressing the bar back up. To fix this problem, you simply need to wait until the bar settles on the chest before you push with your legs.

Instead of pushing with your legs as the bar comes down, squeeze your glutes tight the whole time as you lower the bar. Imagine spreading the floor with your feet just like you would during a squat. This ensures that your lower body tenses up like a spring and you'll be ready to drive into the bar as soon as you press back up.

Then, once the bar touches your chest, drive your feet into the floor at the exact moment when you press the bar back up. If you time it right, you'll pop the bar off your chest and smash through the first few inches off the chest, which is a common sticking point for most lifters. Make sure to keep pushing your feet into the floor throughout the whole press. This will prevent the bar from stalling and give you extra *oomph* until you reach lockout.

MISTAKE #16: USING TOO MANY BENCH PRESS VARIATIONS

Variety may be the spice of life, but if you're new to the bench press, you don't need much variety at all. You need to treat the bench press like a skill to be mastered, which requires lots and lots of practice to hone your technique. Using too many variations of the bench press can detract from valuable time that should be spent mastering the basics.

Close grip presses, incline presses, floor presses, dumbbell presses and overhead presses are all fantastic pressing movements that can build your bench press strength. But if you're not already pretty good at the bench press, you've got no business dedicating lots of time to these variations. Nothing will build bench press strength like the bench press itself, so train accordingly.

Here's a simple rule to follow: if you're relatively new to the bench press (less than a year of bench pressing with maximal strength as your goal) or relatively weak in the bench press (less than 225 pounds for an average-sized male or less than 135 for an average-sized female), you need to train the bench press at least twice a week. If you're a total rookie, you can get away with benching three

times per week, but as you get stronger, it's best to dial it down to two bench sessions to keep wear and tear to a minimum. Frequency is your friend.

It's perfectly fine to add in bench press variations to add variety, build muscle and work on weaknesses, but weak-point training is silly if you're just plain weak. If you're a 180-pound guy and can't bench press 200 pounds, you don't need to do "speed work" or "train the lockout." You just need to get stronger. Focus on the basics and worry about variety later down the road.

MISTAKE #17: LETTING THE BAR SINK INTO YOUR CHEST



Two of my favorite cues for the bench press are to "go up and get the bar" and "get your lats up to the bar." This forces the lifter to drive their shoulders down and back into the bench, puff their chest up and stay tight. I use these cues to discourage another one of the most common bench press mistakes: letting the bar sink too far into the chest.

Many lifters do a great job getting tight during the setup. It's easy to leverage yourself against the bench or the power rack and contort yourself into a solid arch. It's much harder, however, to hold that tightness as you bring the bar down to your chest. Far too often I see lifters nail a great setup, only to let the bar sink into their chest and turn them into a ragdoll when it matters most. If you let the bar flatten your arch and loosen your setup, you've got almost no chance of pressing big weights off your chest.



To make sure you don't flatten out as you bring the bar down, try to meet the bar halfway with your chest. Don't simply let the bar come down to you – *pull* it down to you as if you were doing a barbell row and drive your lats up to the bar. Be in control and *own* the bar, don't let it own you.

MISTAKE #18: TOUCHING THE BAR TOO LIGHTLY ON THE CHEST

On the opposite end of the spectrum of Mistake #17, touching the bar too lightly on your chest can sabotage your press too. In an attempt to stay tight and not flatten out, many lifters lower the bar so painfully slowly that they touch the bar to their chest with just the slightest little kiss, wasting precious energy and negating much of the stretch-shortening cycle that could help drive the bar to lockout.

When you bring the bar down, you don't want to do it so quickly that you smash your sternum and flatten out your arch. But at the same time, you want to bring it down quickly enough that you preserve some of the "bounce" that you get from the stretch-shortening cycle. Even if you pause the bar on your chest for a few seconds, you'll still benefit from much of the stored elastic energy from pulling the bar down to your chest. If you inch the bar down ever so slowly and barely touch your chest, you won't get any spring on the way up and will constantly miss lifts off the chest.

I often tell lifters to imagine that their chest is a scale. When they bring the bar down to their chest, I tell them to make their "scale" read about half of the weight that's on the bar. So if a lifter is trying to press 300 pounds, let about 150 pounds of the bar weight settle on your chest. This usually isn't enough to flatten the lifter, but it's also just enough to get some "spring" and create a sling shot effect to blast through the sticking point.

This approach plays upon a few crucial factors: 1) Not letting the shoulders roll forward when the bar touches the chest and 2) initiating the press with enough speed and leg drive to get through the first sticking point off the chest. Sometimes when lifters let the bar settle *too much* on the chest, their shoulders roll forward and their elbows drift behind the bar, which is both dangerous from an injury standpoint and terrible from a force production standpoint. To prevent this, the lifters needs to keep the shoulders pulled tightly to the bench and let the bar sink into the chest, NOT the upper back. This is a crucial distinction. Elite powerlifters such as Dan Green and Mark Bell are well known for their "heaving" technique where they let the bar sink far down into their chest, but it's important to notice that their upper backs stay insanely tight and never flatten out. The difference between sinking into the chest and upper back can make or break your lift.

MISTAKE #19: LETTING THE WRISTS EXTEND TOO MUCH



We've already discussed several times how we want to keep a straight line from wrist to elbow and then, as we press, keep the elbows under the bar as much as possible. This becomes impossible if you unrack the bar and make an exceptionally common mistake: letting the wrists roll back into too much extension.

During the setup, squeeze the bar as tight as possible and try to flex your forearms. This will keep the wrists locked and prevent them from rolling back into extension. Also, learning to *pull* the bar out of the rack instead of *pressing* it out is another way to ensure a proper wrist angle.

Many lifters can keep the wrists in line when they unrack the bar, but things fall apart as they bring the bar down. If you over-tucked the elbows and let the elbows drift in front of the bar, wrist extension will almost surely follow. Learning to pull the bar down to your chest with your lats and keeping your elbows about 45 degrees away from your torso will make it easier to maintain a straight wrist.

Finally, wearing wrist wraps will help keep the wrists straight under extremely heavy loads. There's no reason *not* to wear them, both in training and in competition. Make sure to start wrapping from the base of your thumb and not the bottom of the hand. This will lock the wrist in place and prevent too much extension.



MISTAKE #20: TOO MUCH REDUCED RANGE OF MOTION WORK

Similar to Mistake #16, relying too much on reduced range of motion bench press variations is a surefire way to stall your bench press progress. Very few lifters need *less* work in the bottom of the bench press, where the most common sticking point occurs. So doing lots of work with board presses, pin presses and floor presses makes little sense if these exercises ignore a lifter's biggest weakness.

Most lifters should always use a full range of motion for their main bench press exercise. Once you've done your full-range work, it's perfectly acceptable to add in some reduced range exercises, but once you start chasing maximal weights with board presses and pin presses at the expense of your full-range bench, you're in big trouble. It's easy to get caught up in these ego-stroking exercises because you can lift so much weight, but it's important to keep things in perspective. If you can't even get the bar off your chest with big weights, there's no point in lifting big weights with a reduced range of motion.

What's more, many of these exercises "unload" the bar where it matters most. Think about it: when you watch two hooligans bench pressing in the gym and one guy gives an "all-you" two-finger spot, how much effort does it take on the part of the spotter to help the lifter lock out a weight that would otherwise staple him? Honestly, not much. Board presses and pin presses work in a very similar way in that they unload the bar when you touch the board or the pins. You don't have to maintain nearly as much tension to reverse the weight like you would if you were touching your chest. This can lead to bad habits and make your full-range bench even worse.

The solution? When doing reduced-range presses, opt for pauses instead of board presses or pin presses. Lower the bar down and pause an inch or two away from your chest, never touching the chest before pressing back up. Imagine doing an "invisible" board press. This builds tremendous tension and confidence that you can stop the bar whenever necessary and drive it back up. For most lifters, this will have much greater carryover to the full-range bench press than board presses or pin presses.