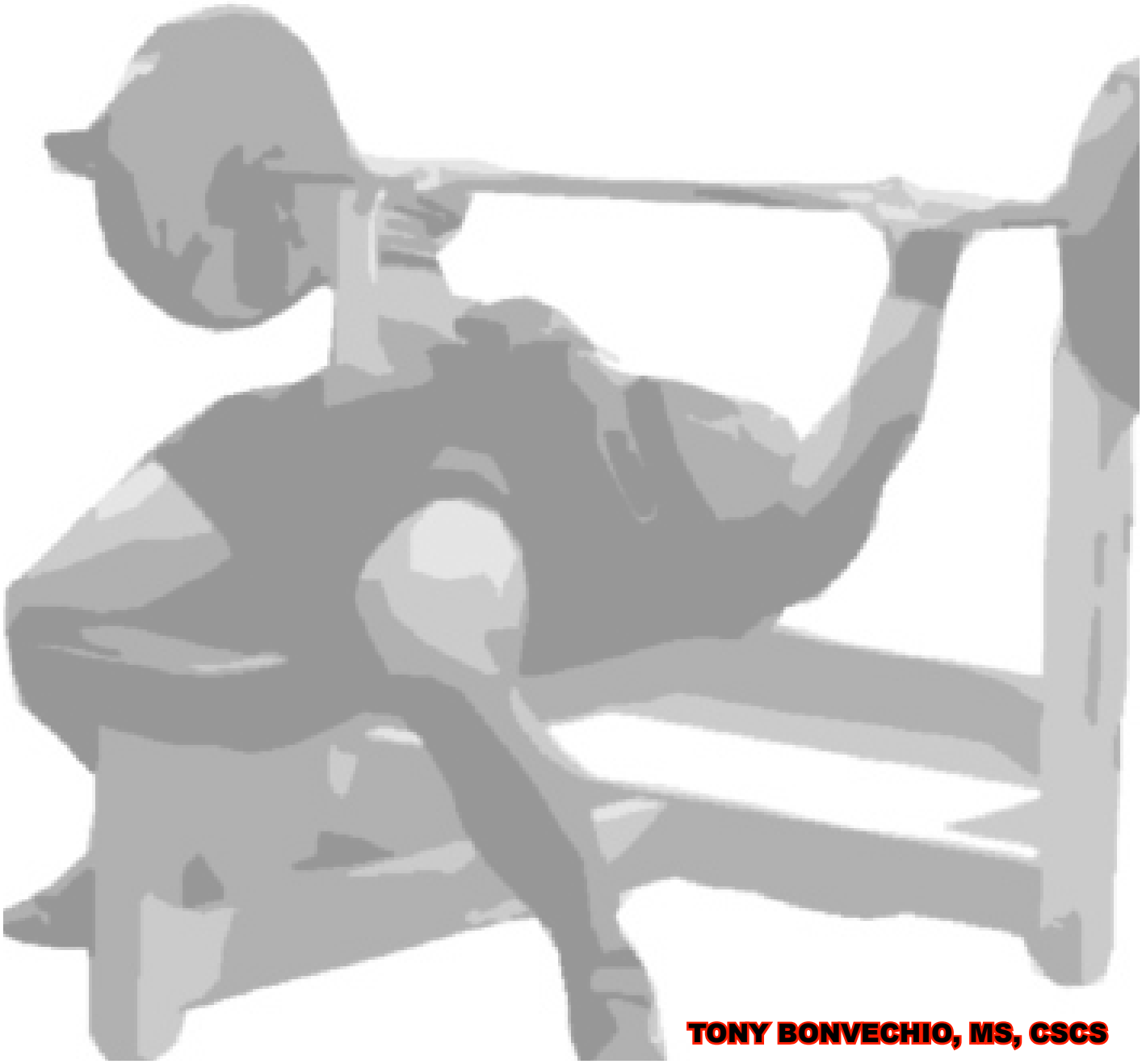
TOP 10 BENCHPRESS MISTAKES



TONY BONVECHIO, MS, CSCS

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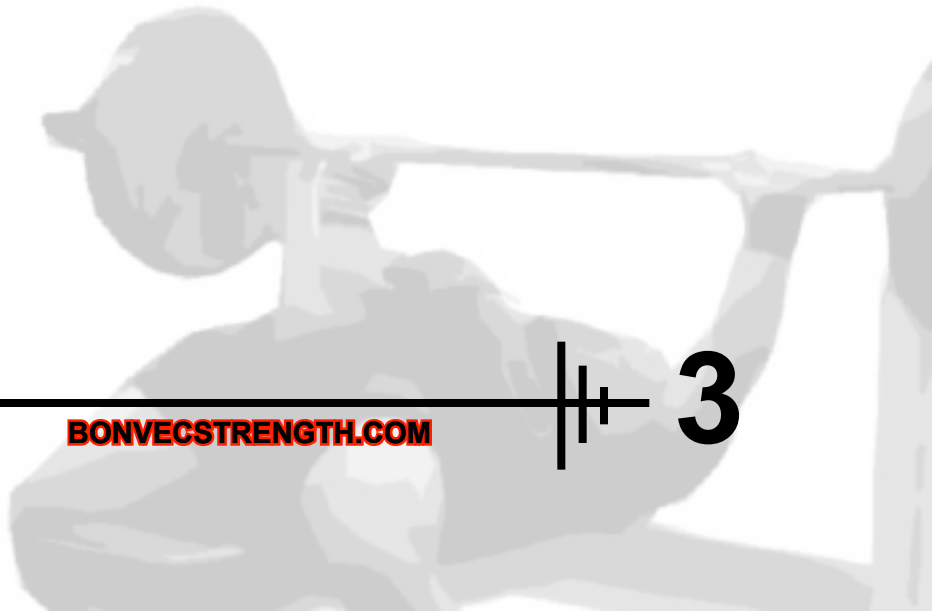

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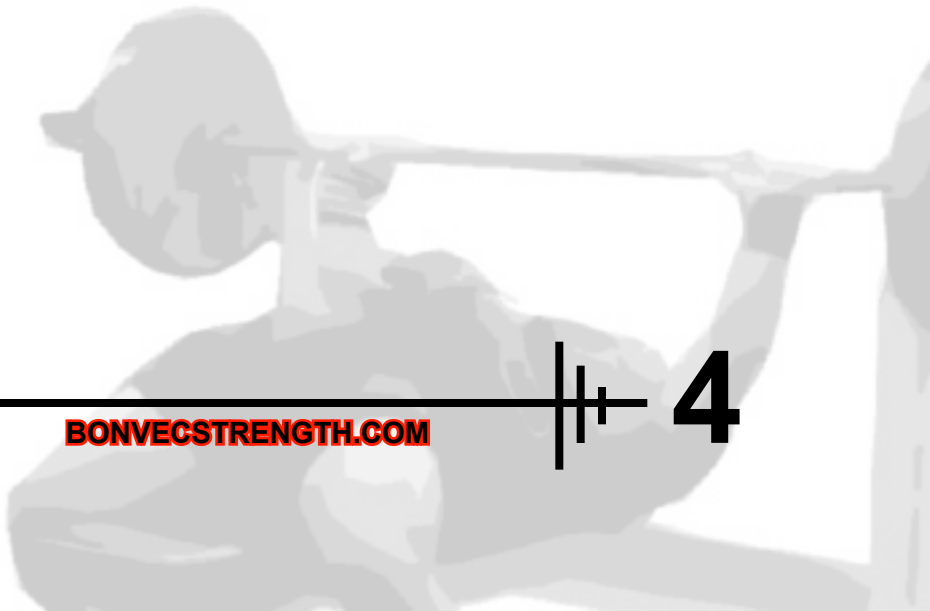


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Tony and I am obsessed with strength training.

I entered the world of strength and conditioning in a somewhat backward way. I didn't choose strength and conditioning – it chose me. Nothing makes me feel more fulfilled, more complete or more in my element than when I'm in the gym working with athletes, shouting coaching cues and helping people get bigger, stronger and faster.

But it wasn't all back squats and barbells from the beginning. In fact, I got my Bachelor's degree in journalism, of all things. Not exactly the brawniest of majors. But 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.

I am 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. At Adelphi, I served as the strength and conditioning coach for the field hockey and volleyball teams, where I designed and implemented all aspects of their physical preparation. I had the privilege of working with some awesome athletes, including an All-American, a conference Rookie of the Year, three All-Region selections and seven All-Conference honorees.

While I was in grad school, I worked as an intern at Xceleration Sports Training, one of Long Island's finest strength and conditioning facilities. We worked with countless athletes of various sports, ages and abilities, but specialized in high school and college baseball and lacrosse players. Every day I had the honor of training dozens of current or future NCAA Division I athletes, and had the unique experience of observing the training of several professional athletes, including Lew Ford (MLB outfielder) and Stephen Bowen (NFL defensive end).

My ability to effectively coach and communicate with people is enhanced by my experience as a college baseball player. I played catcher at Saint Michael's College, a small Division II school in Northern Vermont. I led the team in home runs and slugging percentage as a senior while setting the program's single season record for fielding percentage, handling 131 chances without an error. After graduating, I served as an assistant coach for Saint Michael's during the 2011 season and ran the team's strength and conditioning program. I credit college baseball for first introducing me to strength training, which was literally love at first lift and led me to where I am today.

Currently, I am a volunteer with the strength and conditioning staff at Brown University, where I am soaking up as much knowledge as possible while observing the physical preparation of 37 Division I varsity athletic teams. I also work in Brown's athletic communications department and run a strength and conditioning blog, Bonvecstrength.com.

My most recent athletic endeavors have been in the world of powerlifting. I have recorded personal bests of a 510 squat, 360 bench press and 550 deadlift for a 1420 total in the 198-pound weight class. I continue to train and compete in powerlifting as my competitive outlet.

When I'm not training others or myself, I enjoy watching baseball, writing, cooking and eating amazing food, playing guitar, and listening to heavy metal music at ear-shattering volume.

INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this, you probably like to lift weights. And if you lift weights, you probably want to get stronger. If you care about getting stronger, you probably bench press and probably want to bench press more weight. Few exercises test brute upper body strength and build upper body muscle mass like the bench press. So if you want to improve your bench, read on.

The bench press is argubly the most popular exercise in all of strength training. You don't even have to work out to know this. Even the most uneducated of non-exercisers know enough to ask a muscular person "How much ya bench?" Unfortunately, many people who hear that question are not proud of their answer.

The only thing more staggering than the popularity of the bench press is how frequently it's completely butchered by gym goers everywhere. The bench press looks simple - lay down, grab the bar, bring it down, press it up, right? Wrong. Despite its apparent primal simplicity, the bench press is a highly technical lift, and great bench pressers know how to use nearly every muscle in their entire body to create enormous amonts of force to press the bar.

That said, it is never a matter of strength alone when people struggle to increase the amount of weight they can bench. In fact, technique - not strength - is often the number one limiting factor. Most average lifters could probably add 20-30 pounds to their bench in a matter of minutes if they simply improved their technique. That's how important it is.

The bench press is a skill that must be mastered. Just like throwing a baseball, shooting a basketball or kicking a soccer ball, the bench press is a highly-technical movement that requires lots of practice. As with anything so technical, lots of things can go wrong. This book was written with the intent of helping lifters avoid common technique flaws, improve their form and lift with a purpose.

So why should you listen to me when it comes to the bench press? Because I've made all these mistakes. Every single one of them. I spent years trying to improve my bench and, for a long time, did nothing but spin my wheels on an endless road of frustration. As a freshman in college, I sported a bench press max in the mid 200s and set a goal to bench press 315 pounds within a year. After dozens of misses and hundreds of hours benching with terrible form, I finally had to step back and reevaluate everything I was doing. I sought out accomplished powerlifters, watched hours of videos and read tons of articles. Finally, over four years later, I hit my goal of a 315 bench press and gradually made my way to a recent personal record of 360 pounds at a bodyweight of 190 pounds. Even now, I have to constantly monitor and improve my technique, fighting and clawing for every extra pound.

Sometimes, it's better to learn from the blue collar grunt lifter than the genetic freak. It's never come easy for me, and that's why I can help you.

As you read the following pages, take a critical look at your approach to the bench press. Are you guilty of these bench press errors? If so, you know what you have to do. Fix your technique, work your ass off and watch your bench press strength go through the roof.

Good luck and lift heavy.

MISTAKE #1: NOT BENCHING OFTEN ENOUGH

Bodybuilding magazines and websites are largely responsible for the popularity of body part splits, which involve training a single muscle group every seven days. So you've got a chest day, an arms day, a legs day, a shoulders day, etc. You do a ton of exercises for a ton of sets and reps to completely smash the muscle into oblivion. You end up so sore and fatigued that you really can't work that muscle more than once a week. And just about everyone bench presses on chest day, so people usually bench once a week.

But riddle me this. Say you wanted to get good at playing guitar. What would you do? Well, you'd sit down every day, probably for a couple hours a day, and play. You'd practice all the time, starting slow and honing your technique until you got better and could handle more difficult techniques and complex songs. You wouldn't imagine only playing guitar once a week if you wanted to get any good. So then, if you wanted to get good at bench pressing, why on earth would you only bench once a week?

Therein lies perhaps the biggest mistake that people make when trying to increase their bench press – they only bench once a week. You can't possibly groove technique by lifting that infrequently.

Most of the world's best powerlifters bench press at least twice a week. Louie Simmons, founder of Westside Barbell, pioneered the twice-per-week bench approach of max-effort and dynamic-effort training. One day a week is devoted to heavy weights and low reps, and the other day is used to bench light weights with high speed to hone technique. This method is better suited for advanced lifters, so novice and intermediate lifters can benefit from less variety and more frequency (e.g. benching three days per week).

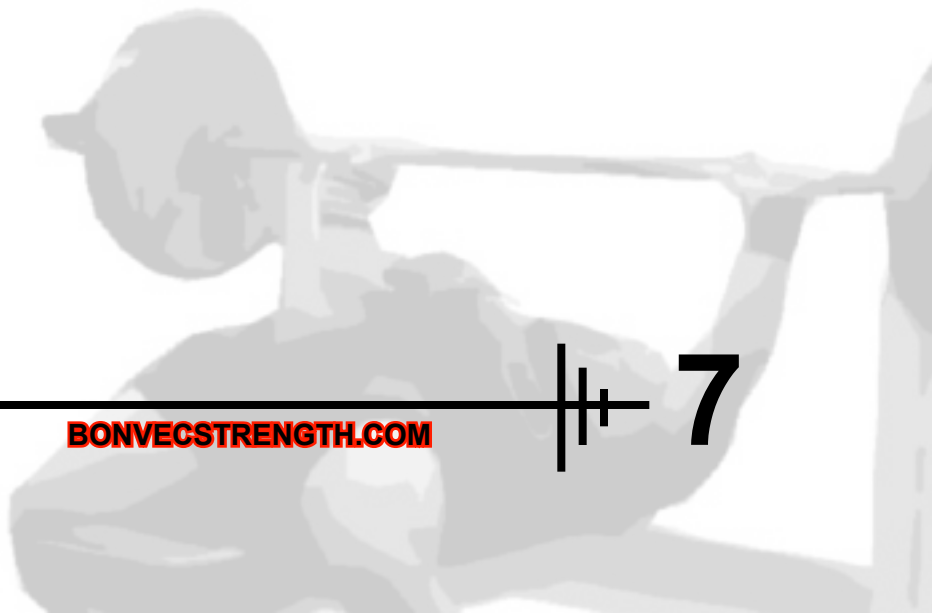
You can't bench once a week and expect to make any progress beyond typical newbie gains. The bench press is a skill and must be treated as such. It's so much more than just lying on the bench, grabbing the bar and pressing. Learn the technique and practice it often.

MISTAKE #2: GOING TO FAILURE AND BEYOND

You've seen it countless times (and maybe even done it yourself). Some guy loads up the bar, gets on the bench and does rep after rep until he can't go any more. Then, more plates get slapped on the bar and the reps get worse and worse. Eventually, not a single rep is completed unless the bencher's buddy is using all his might to pull it off his chest. It's like trying to learn to drive a racecar by going 200 miles per hour on the first lap, then crashing into a wall at full and speed and continuing to drive even though your car is totaled, your engine is smoking and your wheels are spinning on the fast track to nowhere.

Most people wouldn't dare go to failure or do forced reps on squats or deadlifts. Too dangerous, right? Yet tons of people let their spotter get a killer trap workout during forced bench press reps. That's a big reason why I prefer to do my bench workouts by myself – the risk of dropping a bar on my face keeps me from going too close to failure.

Remember: strength is a skill. If you train the bench too close to failure, your form goes out the window and your technique suffers. You're no longer training the skill – you're just stressing the muscles and connective tissue. There's a reason gymnasts, Olympic lifters, sprinters and other amazing athletes can train every single day – they use perfect technique all the time and never go to failure.
A good rule to follow is to always leave at least two reps in the tank when benching. Finish every set with perfect form and never attempt a rep that you couldn't finish yourself. Save the flirtation with failure for less-strenuous accessory exercises like dumbbell bench presses and triceps pushdowns.



MISTAKE #3: NOT GETTING TIGHT

Tension creates stability which leads to strength. There's no way you're going to unrack hundreds of pounds while laying on your back – let alone bring it down to your chest and press it back up – without getting your entire body extremely tight. From the tips of your fingers to the ends of your toes, you've gotta squeeze like your life depended on it.

Everyone's technique is going to be a little different, but getting tight has to start the moment you grab the bar. After you lay down on the bench, grab the bar toward the palm of your hand – not in your fingers – and squeeze it til your knuckles turn white. You have to keep this tension until you finish the lift because if your grip isn't tight, there's no way the rest of your body will get as tight as it needs to be.

Next, drive the back of your head into the bench, squeeze your shoulder blades together and push your lats and traps "down" toward your feet. This will "set" your upper back and act as a foundation to press from. Think about it – if you were trying to jump as high as possible, would you rather jump off a cement floor or a waterbed? Obviously the more stable surface allows you to produce more force.

Now, get your legs tight. Squeeze your glutes and try to "hug" the bench with your thighs. If you're going to have your heels flat on the ground, create tension in your legs by trying to slide your heels "back" toward your face. If you're going to have your heels up, try to get your toes under your hips and get your quads as close to straight up and down (e.g. perpendicular to the bench) as possible.

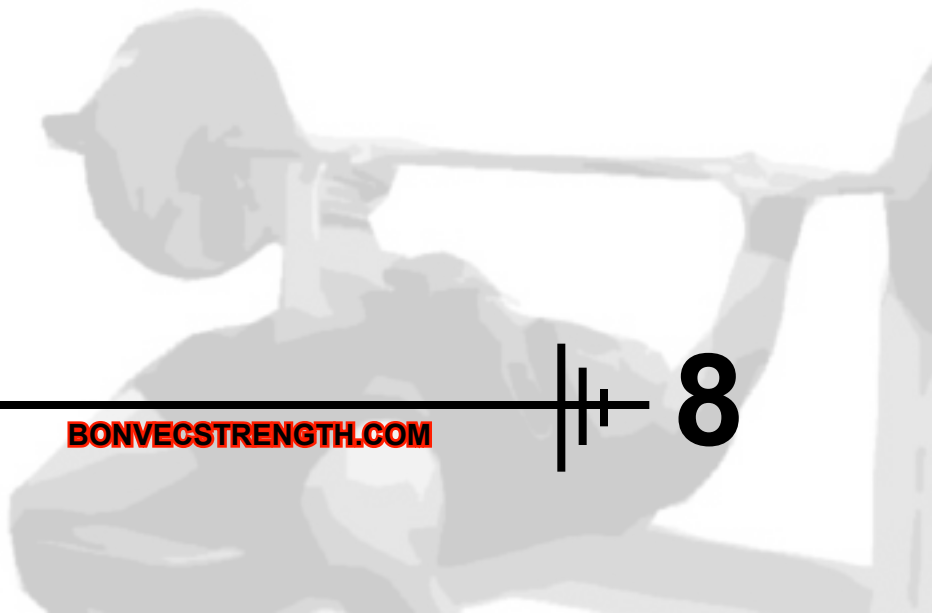
Then, take a huge breath into your belly, flex your abs and hold it. Now you're ready to unrack the bar. Keep your tightness by "pulling the bar apart" and "rowing" it to your chest with your back muscles rather than just letting it fall. Drive your heels toward the floor and squeeze your ass cheeks the whole time like you're holding in a fart at the massage parlor. If you do it right, the bar will almost feel weightless until you bring it down to your chest.

MISTAKE #4: NOT USING YOUR LEGS

Good benchers turn the bench press into a full body lift. They create the full body tension that we talked about in Mistake #3 and then transfer that tension from the legs, through their torso and into the bar.

Leg drive is one of the hardest parts of the bench press to master. You'll never move maximal weights using just your upper body, but you also can't just wildly thrust your hips into the air and let your ass jump a mile off the bench just to hoist the weight. Creating the proper tightness can help "anchor" your lower body to the bench and prevent unwanted air humping while letting your legs contribute to the lift. Rather than just pushing your hips up, drive your heels into the floor as soon as the bar touches your chest and think about trying to shift your weight back toward your head using your legs. This is a little out there, but it helps to think of transferring your energy "backward" from your legs to your arms, rather than just "up" through your legs into empty space.

Leg drive takes lots of practice and the exact technique varies based on where and how your place your feet. If your feet are pulled back under your hips and your heels are up, you can concentrate more on pushing your heels toward the floor. If your feet are flat and out in front of you, you'll really have to work hard to drive "backward" toward your face.



MISTAKE #5: PRESSING IN A STRAIGHT LINE

Physics tells us that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Many people advocate pressing the bar in a straight line because technically that results in the shortest bar path, and moving the same weight over a shorter distance requires less work (because work equals force times distance). But the real question is does a straight bar path put the muscles and joints in the correct position to move the most weight?

I would argue that a straight bar path is not the optimal the way to bench press. Moving max weight requires proper leverage and using all the active muscles in unison. When you bench press correctly, you keep the elbows close to your sides and touch the bar just below the nipple line. This brings your hands – and therefore the weight – further away from your shoulders, which is the axis of rotation. The further the weight is from the axis of rotation, the longer the length of the moment arm (i.e. the distance between the axis of rotation and the application of force). The easiest way to understand moment arms is to think of a biceps curl. The acting joint is the elbow, which is therefore the axis of rotation. The further the bar gets from the axis of rotation, the longer the moment arm and the harder the lift becomes. Think about it – the bottom of a curl is easy and the top of the curl is easy, but the midway point (where the bar is furthest from your elbow) is really hard. That's always where you get stuck. That's why people lean back and "cheat" during curls – it shortens the moment arm.

If you press the bar straight up, the hands are closer to your feet at the lockout point than they would be if you pressed the bar up and back toward your face at lockout. Pressing straight up may decrease the distance the bar has to travel, but the moment arm is still longer than it would be if you pressed up and back. The bar also never becomes centered over the larger working muscles (chest and shoulders), leaving the smaller muscles (triceps, forearms) doing more of the work. As the bar travels backward, the bar finishes directly over all the involved joints and muscles (hand, wrist, forearm, elbow, triceps, chest, shoulder) like the floors and foundation of a tall building. This uses all the structures of the upper body to harmoniously lift the weight.

In my experience, the people who argue most viciously for the straight bar path are equipped lifters who wear bench press shirts. Now there's a very simple explanation for this. Bench press shirts are made of super-tight polyester that "locks" you into a position where your arms are raised and drawn across your body. Ever see a person in a bench shirt walk around? They look like the kid from the movie *A Christmas Story* who can't put his arms down. The bench shirt assists the chest muscles by drawing the arms across the body. That's why shirted benchers do a ton of triceps/lockout work and not a lot of chest work – the shirt does some of the chest's job. Shirted benchers have no need to push the bar backward over the chest. They can press straight up, let the shirt do its work and then use their triceps to lock it out. But those of us who don't bench with a shirt need all our muscles to contribute, and therefore it makes perfect sense to throw the bar back and up in an upside-down "J" shape to center the bar over the largest working muscles.

ABOVE: Straight bar path, bar not lined up over shoulders/pecs
BELOW: Inverted "J" bar path, bar lined up over shoulders/pecs

MISTAKE #6: USING THE SAME GRIP ALL THE TIME

Lots of people speak in absolutes when it comes to grip width on the bench press. “Wide grip works your pecs.” “Close grip works your triceps.” “Any wider than pinkies on the rings will wreck your shoulders.”

None of these catch-all assertions apply to everybody. It’s vital for everyone to find the grip that works best and feels most comfortable to them. A huge mistake, however, is to find one grip and stick with it for eternity. If you never switch up your grip, you’re asking for an overuse injury and you miss out on all the muscle-building benefits of different grips.

Simply, a wider grip reduces the range of motion, which may increase the weight you can ultimately lift. Wide grips can bother some people’s shoulders, however, and a lot of people (myself included) believe that a narrower grip is more shoulder-friendly in the long run. A narrower grip will involve the triceps a lot more, help you stay tighter at the bottom (since your elbows will be tucked closer to your body) and may help with speed off the chest. The tradeoff is usually a tougher lockout than with a wider grip.
It’s important to find a go-to grip for your heavy sets. For me, middle fingers on the rings is my “competition” grip which I always use at powerlifting meets and during my heaviest sets during training. But you also have to switch up your grip often to avoid injury and vary your training stimulus. Switching your grip on a monthly, bi-weekly, weekly or even daily basis can be beneficial. Hell, sometimes I even change my grip from set to set.

For example, I may start my bench warmups with a narrower grip (pinkies on the rings), then progress to a wider grip as I get heavier. If I’m doing multiple working sets at the same weight, I may take the first set with my competition grip, then go narrower with each set to take stress off my shoulders. There are lots of different ways to go about it. Simply put, find a go-to grip width for heavy sets, but mix it up frequently.

NARROW GRIP

MEDIUM GRIP

WIDE GRIP

MISTAKE #7: TOUCHING THE CHEST TOO HIGH OR TOO LOW

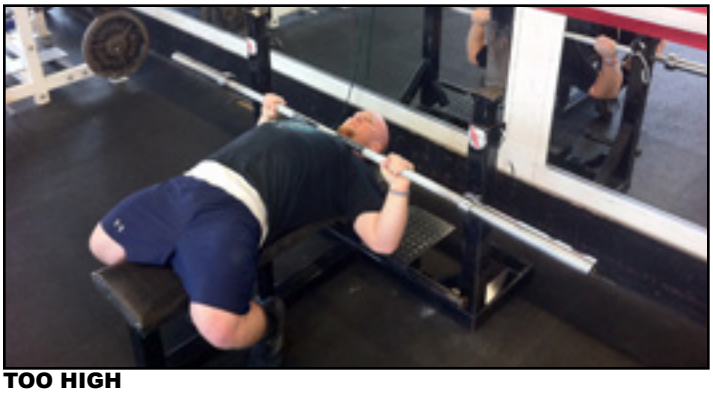
The way you bring the bar to down to your chest has a ton to do with the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the exercise. Along with a tight setup (see Mistake #3) and a proper grip (Mistake #6), where you touch the bar on your chest can make or break what happens when you try to press the bar back up.

One of the most common mistakes you'll see in the gym is guys touching the bar way too high on the chest, somewhere between the upper chest and the neck with the elbows flared out. This puts an enormous amount of strain on the shoulders, renders the triceps pretty much useless and makes it really hard to keep a tight upper back. Old school bodybuilders used to do "guillotine presses" where they would lower the bar literally to their throat, claiming that it hit the pecs harder, but we know better. And besides, if you're reading this, it's because you want to bench press more weight, not pump up your pecs. If you want to work your chest, do some flyes or dips. Don't risk a shoulder injury by touching the bar too high on your chest.

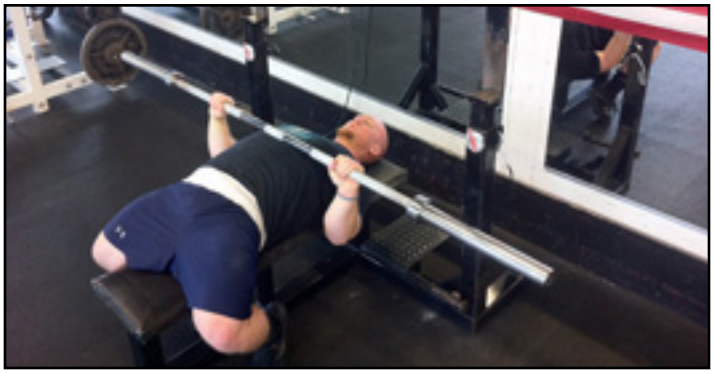
On the other end of the spectrum, a lot of powerlifters – guys who wear bench shirts in particular – will touch the bar very low on their chest or even on their upper belly. When they bring the bar down, the elbows are tucked really tight to the sides. This effectively shortens the range of motion, especially if you're arching your back and have a big protruding gut. However, if you don't have a huge man belly, the highest point of contact for the bar will likely be your lower chest, just below the nipple line. Touching any lower than that not only won't decrease the range of motion, but also increases the moment arm length (see Mistake #5), doesn't let your upper back support the bar and doesn't let your pecs contribute to the lift. Shirted benchers get a ton of support when the bar is on the chest because of the tightness and construction of their shirt, but raw benchers don't get that.

You need to touch the bar on the chest somewhere where the bar is supported by your upper back muscles and your wrists line up with your elbows. This is going to be somewhere between the nipple line and just above the top of your abs. Your elbows should create about a 45 degree angle with your torso, give or take a little bit in either direction. You can flare a little more or tuck a little more, but don't flare out so much that you form a "T" shape or tuck so much that your arms are pinned to your sides.

Here's a little trick to see if you're consistent with where you touch the bar on your chest – take some chalk and rub it around the middle of the bar. Now, whenever you touch your chest, it will leave a chalk mark on your shirt. Aim to touch the same spot on every single rep.



TOO HIGH



TOO LOW

JUST RIGHT

MISTAKE #8: LOWERING THE BAR PASSIVELY

From the moment you get under the bar on the bench, you need to be in control. The bar does not move you – you move the bar. Grab the bar with white knuckles tight, get your back and legs set, unrack it and "pull" the bar down to your chest. Don't just "relax" the bar to your chest or let it fall. The bar is just a stupid piece of iron – it can't think or do anything unless you let it. So be the one in control.

Bring the bar to your chest as if you were doing a barbell row. Squeeze your lats, traps and rhomboids, using these strong muscles to control the bar and bring it to the exact spot you want. This not only builds confidence as you lower the bar, but it also adds extra tightness to your upper back and gives you a tremendously solid foundation when you press the bar back up.

Letting the bar fall to your chest – or even worse, bouncing it off your chest – can make you lose any tightness that you've created in your upper back. I see this all the time. Even if a guy gets a good setup, pulls his upper back together and is nice and tight when he unracks the bar, it's all for nothing if the bar divebombs to his chest and flattens his back on impact. No matter how tight you get at the beginning of the set, it's all worthless if you turn into a flopping ragdoll when you touch your chest.

MISTAKE #9: TAKING A HANDOFF ALL THE TIME

I almost always cringe when I'm at a commercial gym and some random person asks me for a spot on the bench. I'll ask them how many reps they're going to do, and they usually answer with something along the lines of "Uh, I'm gonna try for eight or so." There's your first mistake, you ambivalent, self-doubting pantywaist. The next mistake occurs when I ask if they want a handoff or not. The typical response is "Yeah, I guess so." Then when I try to give them a good handoff (e.g. help them guide the bar out of rack with their lats inside of up and out with their shoulders), they usually just press straight up and I end up yanking them off the bench, doing more harm than good.
Until you know how to properly unrack the bar on your own, using a handoff won't help you. Once you get set up, you need to "pull" the bar straight out of the rack with as little vertical movement of the bar as possible. Imagine doing a stiff-arm lat pulldown – that's the way you properly unrack the bar on the bench. Once you've mastered this movement, then you can use a handoff on your heavy sets. I'm talking anything three reps or less. Don't be that guy that needs a handoff on every warmup set.

In my experience, a bad handoff is far worse than no handoff at all. I train by myself 90 percent of the time, and I'll be damned if I'm going to skip out on my heavy bench sets because there's nobody around. This has forced me to not only master my setup, but to be confident in my abilities and know that every rep of every set I perform is attainable without a spotter's help. At the time of this writing, I recently set a 30-pound bench press personal record of 360 pounds. I didn't take a single handoff at the powerlifting meet, nor did I take a single handoff during the entire 16-week training cycle leading up to the big lift. I learned how to get extremely tight in my setup even without a handoff, so why would I change things up when attempting a new 1-rep max?

Some powerlifters swear that you should get a handoff on every single set, no matter how light or heavy. They'll say that if you set up properly, you won't be able to unrack the bar yourself, and if you try, you'll lose your upper back tightness and won't be able to bench properly. I call bullshit. It's one thing if you're benching in a bench shirt. Those things are so tight and are trying to force you into a "T-rex arm" position, so if you're not pulling your shoulder blades together with all your might, your setup will suck. That said, it's really tough to unrack the bar yourself in a bench shirt, which is why they always use handoffs. Raw benchers don't have to "fight the shirt" for a good starting position, so there's no reason you can't maintain your good starting position and unrack the bar yourself. Also, there's a huge difference between unracking 400 pounds yourself and trying to handle 800 pounds in a bench shirt. If that were me, I think I'd take the handoff, too. Ya know, for safety's sake. Learn to unrack the bar yourself and you'll build tightness and confidence that will make your heavy sets feel more solid.

MISTAKE #10: NEVER USING PAUSED REPS

Perhaps the biggest change I made in my training over the past years leading up to the biggest bench PR I've set since I started powerlifting is using paused reps. I'm not just talking once in a while or the last rep of each set. I'm talking every single rep. Touch the chest, pause for a one-count, explode back up. Every time.

This is a no-brainer for me because in powerlifting competitions, you have to pause the bar on your chest until the judge tells you to "press", and if you don't listen, your lift is disqualified. No touch-and-go and definitely no bouncing. Even if you're not a powerlifter, using paused reps is a great way to increase strength over the first few inches once the bar leaves the chest. This is where most people get stuck and one of the most common questions in lifting is "how do I fix my sticking point off the chest?" People want some fancy answer about special exercises or fancy routines, but the truth is if you just do more paused reps, you'll likely eliminate that sticking point altogether.

Paused reps take away some of the assistance you get from the stretch-shortening cycle, which is that little "pop" of momentum you get from the quick change of direction (similar to dropping into a quarter squat before jumping). Pausing on the chest also forces you to maintain upper back tightness when you touch the bar to your chest. A lot of people can set up well, but their upper back goes limp and everything goes to hell when they lower the bar (see Mistake #8). Paused reps force you to hold that bottom position with everything you've got. Otherwise, the bar won't budge off your chest.

If you've only ever done touch-and-go reps, start off by pausing the first rep of each set. So if you're going to do a set of five reps, pause the first rep, then touch-and-go reps two through five. After a while, you can start pausing the first and last rep of every set. Eventually, you should get comfortable enough to pause every rep of every set. This will pay off in spades when you go back to handling heavy weights.