Secrets of Strength and Bench Pressing with Jim Wendler

ZE - Jim, thanks for hooking us up with tips for the most important exercise in the world, the bench press :)

Let's start off with this....

Why do some people have a big bench and others kill themselves for an extra 5 lbs a year. How have you stumbled across any BIG tips that have made a difference in yours, or anyone else's bench?

JIM - Listen up Underground Strength Lovers and fellow Heeb’s – This nigga’s got something to tell you about Thug Benching and how to give proper rim jobs in prison!

Big Tips?
These are some of the big tips that I have seen work in myself and others – these are not fool proof but they can work pretty well.

1. For raw benching, don’t use a super wide grip. Shoulder width or a little bit wider. This will help you get the bar off of your chest where most people fail anyway.

2. Shoulder strength was a huge problem with me (I had none) so I did the following exercises as supplemental work. Supplemental work is commonly the 2nd exercise of the day. This was only done once per week with the following exercises:

   Blast Strap Pushups with added band resistance

   Standing Military Press

   Bradford Press

   DB Bench/DB Incline

3. Hit the lats and build some size – do them 2 times per week; for every set of pressing that you do – do one set of pulling (lat work). I include all warm up sets on the pressing exercises. This will ensure stability in your shoulders and give you a good base to push from.
4. Floor presses seem to work very, very well for me. Highly recommended. And don’t give me this “1/2 range of motion” bullshit. If it’s ½ range gain some fucking weight. This is a great exercise for building upper body strength.

5. Do more chins than anything else.

6. Don’t kill yourself in the weight room – leave something in the tank. This doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t push yourself. Train heavy. Training light is gay.

Zach - Jim, explain to our readers what the Bradford Press is, and, explain to use why there is no exercise named after yourself. In addition, there is also no exercise named after me? How can one get an exercise named after themselves? Give us the appropriate steps that have evaded so many of us.

This is a very Jewish exercise because every rep is cut short. Stand with the bar on your shoulders – same as you would if you were performing a standing military press. Press the bar up and just above your head. At this point, bring the bar back down and behind your head. You should now look as if you are at beginning of a behind the neck press. Again press the bar to slightly above your head and return to the front military press position. This is one rep. Basically alternating between a military press and behind the neck press without ever locking out the weight. This is also called a Rainbow Press because it’s gay. I shit you not – that’s the other name for it. This takes the triceps out of the exercise and puts all the stress on the delts.

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Are you telling me that there is no lift named after me? I’m cool with that although I can’t imagine anyone ever wanting to do something called The Even-Esh.

Zach - How do you know when it's time to stop using only free weights and start adding bands and chains? The guys from the 70's and prior never had this stuff and so many of them were benching over 315 lbs at bodyweights of about 205 lbs.?

JIM - This is a question I’ve tried to answer for years and here’s the best answer I’ve ever come up with – when you stop asking the question and just do it…then you know you are ready. “If there is a doubt, there is no doubt.” There is no strength guidelines to address this – I’ve seen some very strong people that weren’t ready for them. The problem is this:

1. it’s not for beginners.
2. it’s not that big of a deal if you do use them for awhile and maybe you are technically not ready to use them.

Just one more thing that people get hung up on when they should be focusing on lifting weights.

Zach - There are some people who don't utilize the Dynamic Effort (DE)
method of training. Instead they focus on strength and adding muscle which they feel makes them faster. What has been your personal experience with this regarding your own training and the training of others?

**JIM** - First off, categorizing things as dynamic is getting old – who the hell doesn’t lift fast? I was very fast before I ever used the supposed dynamic method. This is because everything I did in the weight room had a very fast concentric phase. I never understood people that didn’t do that. It’s common sense to be explosive. Who the hell actually lifts slow and thinks it’s a good idea?

Dynamic training, as used in the Westside Training method, did help me. But again, it’s just another tool that you can use to add to your training. People in this industry or people that lift think of things in such a black/white mind frame.

- You are either all for stability balls or never use them.
- You either use bands all the time or none of the time.
- You do 5 million sets/day or 1 set every 6 months.

See where I’m going with this?
Zach - Are you still switching your two "pressing days" by alternating between a military press day and a flat bench day? On the days you do military presses, what type of movements typically follow for assistance work?

**JIM** - Right now I have two pressing days – one lighter day in which I work up to about 85% x 1 on a pressing exercise (board press, floor press, etc.). On that day I then use military presses and chins for assistance work.

The other day is a full blown max effort training, followed by high board work, dumbbell presses and rows. I don’t have to point out how simple my training is – I don’t pick too many exercises that are fluff. Just a lot of basic stuff done with a high amount of effort but without killing myself. This doesn’t mean you can’t be creative in your training. This is just what works for me, at least right now. I may have to break out the weird shit in a year to continue to make progress. Never limit yourself in regards to what you do or what you are willing to try.

Zach: Those feats of strength are pretty damn awesome! The ballistic incline benching at 405 lbs, dumbbell extensions at 125 lbs! Those are insane weights and most people probably view them as an assistance movement. Should the lifter constantly strive to increase his / her numbers in the assistance lifts?

**JIM** - Yes, but not as much as one wants to increase the core lifts. You don’t have to push yourself all the time on these movements as you will burn out.

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mentally and physically. As a general rule of thumb, we usually pick two exercises to focus on in a workout. For example, let’s say that your workout looks like this:

Floor Press
Chins
DB Bench
Face Pulls
Triceps Pushdowns

After the Floor Press, let’s say you bust your ass on DB Bench but then simply have a good workout on the rest of the stuff. There is NO REASON to get crazy and intense for chins, face pulls or pushdowns. If you do, then you are a beginner or an incredibly immature lifter.

Zach - And, from your experience, have you found being weak in movements such as lying DB extensions, dumbbell benching and military pressing been a MAJOR problem for improving the bench?

JIM - I would say this is true more times than not. The problem is that too many times people get wrapped up in doing one thing (bench press) and forgetting that other movements can make the lift strong. This prevents burn out and overtraining. The trick is finding those exercises that work. In general, most beginners can rely on the major movements to make gains and the assistance
work is pretty straight forward. For example, for the bench press one would use various chins, rows, dumbbell pressing and triceps work to improve the bench.

Another important part of assistance work is that provides balance – from anterior to posterior. Balance is the key and will allow for a lifetime of healthy (or near healthy) lifting.

**Zach:** Here’s what always shocks me. The guys from the 1970’s and prior were often stronger than all hell, and it wasn’t rare to see guys weighing 210 lbs. benching 365 – 405 lbs.

Looking at their programs, they were high volume, very basic and the consistency was never wavering, they ALWAYS trained.

I know a lot of people who have been training hard for many years with basics, including myself, and I don’t have a 365 lb bench.

What’s your take on this? Why am I such a pussy and how can other people figure out “the secrets of benching big”?

**Jim:** Here is my take: quit trying to romanticize this era. Believe me when I say that there were plenty of guys in the 70’s that were weaker than shit and trained their asses off. This was not a magical time and they weren’t doing anything different. Remember this – what you see written is:

1. Written by people that want you to know how great they were.

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2. Written by people that were told how great everyone was.

3. Written so that only the strong guys are talked about.

I’m not saying there weren’t strong dudes, but every era is romanticized. Look at the 1950’s. Everyone thinks that this represents America at it’s finest i.e. the American home was thought of to be akin to “Leave it to Beaver”. But it wasn’t. There was hate, bigotry, racism, homelessness, teen pregnancy, backyard abortions, etc. I know this is a far cry from the question but don’t believe the hype.

Also, the age of the weight room and the passing of knowledge have all but gone. Now it has been relegated to the pussies on the internet. There aren’t gyms that a kid can go into and learn the ropes. These are now in garages, in warehouses, basements and tool sheds. So even if a kid doesn’t know what he wants to do, he won’t ever be given a chance to find out.

At least in the 70’s and 80’s there were places a kid could go to learn about training. Now the only people that they can learn from are a bunch of needledick pusses that operate a keyboard. At least back then, you could size up your teacher.

Also, how did these guys train? Like bodybuilders, right? So what do we all preach? “Bodybuilding is bad. Train like an athlete.” Which is funny because everyone is hurt and everyone is weak. Something to think about.

ZE: Jim, I am only romanticizing (is that even a word) because we’re talking about strength, so please forgive. Also, please refrain from so much cursing. My next question is this, check out this workout, it’s my one of my own, and critique it as you may.
Things you'll want to know:

- My bench press is horrible, so horrible that when Jason Ferruggia interviewed me for Elite he refused to put my 1RM bench press.
- I get in one max effort upper body workout each week. The other upper body training is combined during full body workouts with lots of calisthenics and often times overhead pressing done heavy with Kettlebells.

The last workout:

1A) Floor Press with Chains: 135 x 6, 185 x 6, 185 + 1 chain x 3, 185 + 2 chains x 3, 185 + 3 chains x 3, 225 + 3 chains x 3, 255 + 3 chains x 1

1B) reverse grip BB row: 135 x 10, 185 x 6, 226 x 6, 275 x 5,5,5 – last 2 sets were pull ups with the floor press

2A) Incline DB bench 70 x 8, 90 x 6, 105 x 3, 105 x 3

2B) 1 arm DB row 105 x 10, 130 x 12, 12, 12

3A) blast strap push ups 2 x max
3B) mixed grip pull ups 2 x max

4) lying DB extensions 40 x 8 – 12 reps, 50 x 6 – 8 reps

So, let it rip, why does my bench suck so badly. I have not gained strength in the bench in a long time. Even back when I was bodybuilding and on a regular schedule with pressing, I seemed to be stuck at 295 for 2 – 3 reps.
My current plan is to keep hitting one ME workout each week for upper body.

Should there be a 2nd ME upper body day?

Does the fault simply come from NOT specializing in strength and only strength?

Please answer and advise oh wise Yoda 😊

Jim: First of all, fuck you. Second, “romanticizing” is a word.

Okay…let’s look at your workout. There is nothing wrong with what you are doing but remember that this is only a snapshot of what goes on. So it’s hard for me to critique your strength training by looking at this workout.

Zach: “My current plan is to keep hitting one ME workout each week for upper body.”

This is one of your problems right here – your plan should also include submaximal effort (not to failure) for your pressing and core movements. Remember that repetition work is (in my eyes) the most efficient way to gain strength and muscle. This is because you are not emotionally and physically fried after a workout. So don’t forget to look at Prilipin’s chart and work off of that.
That way you can handle some lighter weights, gain strength and still make progress.

This doesn’t mean that you don’t use the max effort method but you can’t use it all the time.

The other thing that I’ve seen a lot of with max effort work is this: too many exercises and not tracking the exercises. You should pick 3-5 exercises and rotate them; keep records of your 1, 2, 3, 5, 6 and 8 rep records.

For you Zach, the thing that I would recommend is having a couple of training sessions with guys that know how to press and are stronger than you. There might be some technique things you can work on but the main reason your bench sucks ass is because you need to train with guys stronger than you…and you need to feel some pressure – some “what the hell is wrong with me?” moments that are going to force you to push some heavier weights. I’ve seen you and your build – there is no reason why you can’t be pressing at least 365. I think that part of the problem is that your training (right now) isn’t a huge priority. You are working two jobs and being a father and a husband. Something has to give.

Zach: “Should there be a 2nd ME upper body day?”
No – I’ve tried this with some success but it wasn’t a true max effort day – I called it a Kind of Max Effort Day. This is hard to do, though. I prefer people use an assistance day with some higher rep movements that aren’t going to kill them.

Zach: “Does the fault simply come from NOT specializing in strength and only strength?”

This is a huge problem that I see – people want the following:

- Get stronger than a powerlifter/Olympic lifter
- Get in shape like a Navy Seal
- Get leaner than a bodybuilder

And they want it NOW and all at the same time. It just isn’t in the cards, baby! You gotta pick a goal and go for it. Of course that doesn’t mean you have to ignore the other facets. It just means that there isn’t a lot of focus on them and they should never take away from the primary goal.

Zach: Wow, this is great stuff, you always seem to shed the light in a very straight forward manner that really hits home! Let’s close this up brother. You have gotten extremely strong training differently than you were back when you were a strict powerlifter. You’ve lost weight, feel better, use Olympic squats, high rep 1 arm rows and hit the prowler regularly.
Tell us how you began this transformation into weight loss and a different, yet very effective style of working out. Any tips you can advise to others looking to lose some extra weight, get stronger and get in much better shape?

Jim: Just so everyone knows – I weighed about 275-280 for about 4 years. Before I had been around 220-245 and in fairly good shape. So the weight gain was forced and part of a plan to increase my powerlifting total.

So it was some serious overeating and serious under moving. But it got to the point where I no longer wanted to be that big – I was out of breath, my health was in the shitter and everything was awful.

I did drop to about 225 for awhile and am now back up to 240. I feel good at this weight and am much leaner now than I was years ago. So here is what I did:

Diet

1. Eat smaller portions – I began by eating the same crap I was before only less of it.

2. Remove one bad thing from your diet at a time.

After that - just look at what a bodybuilder does for his diet and follow it as much as you can. I don’t care what anyone says – you know what to eat and what is clean. People just choose not to do it. I pretty much eat the same stuff everyday:

- Eggs
- Chicken

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• Brown Rice
• Wheat Bread
• Cottage Cheese
• Fruit
• Oatmeal

I only eat food until I’m satisfied. So I rarely finish a normal meal at a restaurant. I limit all protein drinks (I’ve had 4 in 6 months) and prefer to eat whole food. I do not count calories or any macronutrient. That is gay. If you want to lose weight, eat less. If you want to gain, eat more.

**Conditioning:**

I started doing some sled dragging to take the pressure off my knees and because this is all I could do without passing out. After I got in better shape, I started doing a variety of conditioning work:

1. Running

2. Stairs

3. Bodyweight Circuits

4. Walking with weight vest

5. Sled work (running/walking)

6. Riding bike

Then I got a Prowler and this has made up the bulk of my conditioning for the past year or so. This thing kicks my ass and I now use it as a warm-up and after

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I train. I try to condition after every single training session and my “off” days are exactly that. Nothing extra.

**Lifting:**

This really didn’t change that much, I just could try to do different things because I wasn’t just concerned about my 3 lifts. Just train heavy and break records…I don’t train to train. That is a waste of time in my eyes.

Listen – if you lose weight you will get weaker..in the short run. Be patient and it will come back. There were some days that I was weaker than a 4 year old boy. Now I am able to do some of the things I did 40lbs ago…and some lifts are even better. The problem is that no one wants to realize that this stuff takes time and it’s a long process. Lifting weights and getting stronger is not something for the 2007 American Citizen. We all want it NOW.

If someone wants to get stronger, better shape and in better condition, here is the model to follow:

- Warm up with Parisi Warm up
- Perform one big movement (squat, dead, clean, bench, military) for one or two hard sets.
- Perform 3-6 assistant movements with a bodybuilding rep scheme
- Condition with Prowler for 15-20 minutes

Do this 3 times a week and you’ll be fine – you won’t be the biggest, strongest or best conditioned person in the world – but you’ll have a little bit from every world.

**About Jim Wendler**

[http://UndergroundStrengthCoach.com](http://UndergroundStrengthCoach.com)
JIM WENDLER OF ELITE FTS
Senior Editor, Q/A Staff, Sales Manager, Powerlifting
Senior Editor and Sales Manager of Elite Fitness Systems. He worked as a Strength and Conditioning coach at the University of Kentucky where he worked with several different teams including football and baseball. He played football and graduated from the University of Arizona where he earned three letters. Jim’s best lifts include a 1000lbs squat, a 675 bench press, 700lbs deadlift and a 2375 total in the 275lbs class.

You can also contact Jim via the Q & A at Elite by clicking HERE

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