

PERSONAL TRAINER

NETWORK

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The forgotten practice of overhead pressing

For many decades, overhead pressing was the standard by which strength coaches measured upper body strength. Recently, the common trend has seen personal trainers using the bench press to the exclusion of overhead pressing lifts as the primary upper body exercise and indicator of strength. As a strength coach, the most common question I'm asked by people is 'how much can you bench?' I'm still waiting to be asked what my best overhead press is!

Although the bench press and its derivatives have their place and must be used in training, the over-reliance of horizontal pressing movements can create major problems for the shoulder girdle if the program is not carefully

balanced. For example, emphasising the bench press over pulling and overhead movements can put pressure on the shoulder joint due to the chronic shortening of the subscapularis. This problem can be corrected by training overhead presses, which will result in better long term shoulder health.

The advantages to the personal trainer of training overhead pressing movements are numerous:

1. It is an excellent way to develop the strength of shoulder flexors, abductors and elbow extensors
2. It can improve bench press strength by minimising the various inhibition mechanisms of the shoulders that are associated with poor overhead pressing strength
3. The standing overhead press is an excellent strengthening exercise for the lower back and core muscles. Weak core and lower back muscles become obvious during the performance of the overhead press, which makes it a great diagnostic tool for the personal trainer

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The forgotten practice of overhead pressing

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- Many therapists trace a number of causes of shoulder pain in the weights trainee to a lack of overhead pressing work. The other major predictor of shoulder pain is external rotator strength.

In terms of injury and pain potential, the shoulder joint complex is extremely vulnerable to certain injuries and pain because of the large amount of mobility it affords. Strength coach Charles Poliquin has identified a strong correlation between shoulder pain and lack of overhead and external rotation strength. There are two ratios of interest that Poliquin uses which highlight this point:

- The ratio between the seated dumbbell overhead press, semi-supinated grip (See photo 1 & 2) and the close-grip bench press.

The weight done for 10 repetitions with each dumbbell should represent 29% of the close-grip bench press, 1 repetition maximum. In other words, if your IRM



close-grip bench press is 100kg you should use a pair of 29kg dumbbells for 10 repetitions in the seated dumbbell overhead press with a 4010 tempo (lower over 4 seconds, no pause, lift in 1, no pause).

- The ratio between the seated dumbbell external rotation from the knee (See photo 3 & 4) and the close-grip bench press.

The weight done for 10 repetitions should represent roughly 10% of the weight used for a 1 RM close-grip bench press. In other words, if your IRM close-grip bench press is 100 kg you should use a 10kg dumbbell for 10 repetitions in the seated dumbbell external rotation from the knee with a 4010 tempo.

If your test results from these two ratios are positive, and you can perform close to ten repetitions at the correct ratio and tempo, then it indicates good shoulder health and you can proceed to the overhead lifts described below. If your results weren't as good, don't worry - prioritise your external rotation movements with

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the elbow low (for teres minor) and elbow high (for infraspinatus) and deltoid exercises below shoulder height, such as front and side raisers. Use the article *Upper Body Strength*



Training for Structural Balance in the Spring issue of *Network* magazine to help guide you and re-test in six to eight weeks to monitor your progress.

Technical points for safe, correct overhead presses

1. When you perform standing overhead presses, make sure that your dominant leg is about fifteen to twenty centimetres in front of the other foot. This diminishes pressure on the lower back compared to the standard feet-aligned technique. You will know how effective your core training has been as soon as you perform overhead lifts; trainees with poor core strength will find it difficult to stabilise the trunk during these lifts.
2. If you have difficulty performing overhead lifts due to flexibility issues, which is extremely common, prioritise rigorous stretching of the muscles listed in the box below, using both static and PNF stretching. The ideal time to stretch is four to six hours after training; stretching immediately before or after training significantly reduces strength and interferes with the adaptational and recovery processes.

Muscles to stretch if a lack of flexibility is preventing the correct execution of overhead lifts

Subscapularis	Latissimus dorsi
Serratus anterior	Long head of the triceps
Infraspinatus	Deep and superficial forearm flexors
Teres minor	Pronator teres
Teres major	

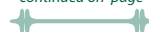
3. When specialising in the overhead press, make sure you train the antagonist muscle groups (such as all variations of pulldowns) and include some rhomboid and external rotator work.

4. To maintain healthy shoulder joints and the surrounding soft tissue, use a complete range of motion in all the overhead pressing movements. This means that the starting position of the barbell press is



on the clavicle (See photo 5) and on the deltoid for the dumbbell press (See photo 6). The top position for both lifts is 99% of full elbow extension,

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The forgotten practice of overhead pressing

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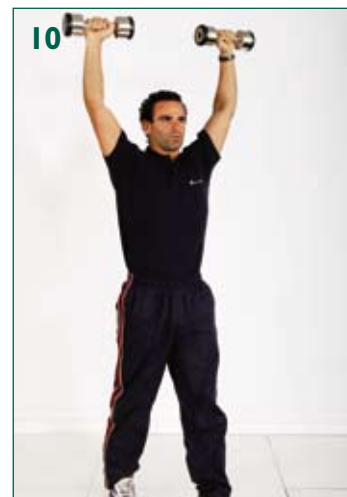
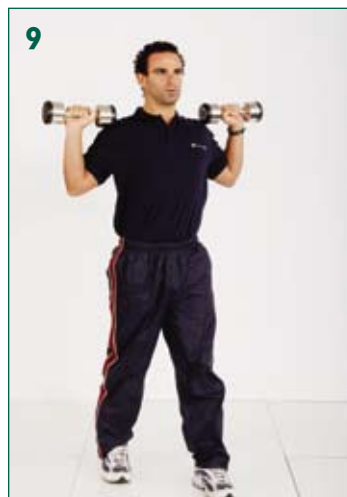


where the bicep is as close to the head as possible (See photo 7 & 8). To promote healthy functioning shoulders, full range of motion, from touching on the shoulder to almost full extension, must also be encouraged with the dumbbell press, pronated grip (See photo 9 & 10).

5. When gripping the barbell, the index finger should be just outside of the medial deltoid in the lowest position and the arms brought in line with the head in the top position to maximise the range of motion and promote longevity in the shoulder girdle.



6. To minimise stress on the shoulder joint, the elbows must be tucked in on both the dumbbell press, semi-supinated grip and the barbell press. Allowing the elbows to flare out places too much pressure on the shoulder capsule and surrounding tissues.



Use these strength ratios and exercises (both seated and standing, with one arm and two) to better inform your programming and to create healthy, long-lasting shoulders for your clients. ♦



Tony Boutagy

Tony is a strength coach and the director of the Sydney Sports & Athletic Performance Centre, a strength training facility located in Cremorne, NSW. He is a lecturer in the Exercise Science Department at ACU National and was the recipient of the 2004 Fitness Industry's Author of the Year Award. Visit his website at www.tonyboutagy.com



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