

Basic Barbell Training

Spotters

In many gyms around the world, bench pressing is a team activity. The guy on the bench is “doing chest” while the guy standing over his head is working on his traps. It is truly amazing how much weight two guys working together like this can “bench press”. It is not an exaggeration to say that most gym claims of big bench presses are exaggerations. If the spotter puts his hands on the bar during the first rep, and keeps them there for the rest of the set, then who lifted what, and why?

There is a perfectly legitimate place in the weight room for spotters, but it is not in the middle of someone else’s work set. Spotters should be there for safety, when there is a question of safety. Spotters should *not* be there to help with a set. Make this your rule in the weight room: **No rep counts that is touched by anybody other than the lifter. No spotter touches any bar that is still moving up.** If this rule is followed by you and everyone you train with, all the personal records you set will be honest ones, and you won’t have to slap anybody for interfering with a new personal record. Tell your spotters – and practice it yourself: *spotters stay away from any rep that the lifter might finish alone.*

This cannot be overstated: if the numbers written down in your training log are not honest, you have absolutely no way to evaluate the results of your program. This obviously applies to all lifts that customarily require spotters. The bench press has been particularly abused by bad spotters, with the result being inflated gym records and much unwarranted bragging (making a good case for a strength contest that replaces the bench press with the press). If you let your spotter help you on your work sets, you’ll soon have absolutely no idea what you’re really benching, and no idea if you’re making progress.

Spotters should be there for safety, where a question of safety exists. For everybody except rank novices, the first warm-up sets are not a safety concern and do not require spotters, unless the spotter is also performing a coaching function. As the weight gets heavier, a spot becomes more necessary, some needing one on the last warm-up, until the work sets, where everybody should be spotted because the weight is supposed to be heavy. Excessive caution, and the insistence that every set be spotted, is inefficient, unnecessary, and bothersome to other people in the gym who are trying to train. But if your gym contains mostly people who can’t be bothered to help you when it is legitimately necessary, you need to find a better gym. Get a spot when you need to, and know when this is.

For the bench press, a competent center spot will suffice for all but the very heaviest attempts. One of the actual functions of a spotter is the handoff. A good handoff is one of those rare commodities – there are more bad ones than good. A bad handoff interferes with the lifter’s timing, balance, view of the ceiling, and concentration, by attempting to participate in the rep. A good handoff spotter is experienced and appropriate with the timing and amount of bar contact, respectful of the mental requirements of the lifter, and, above all, conservative about when and how much to help.

An entire chapter could be devoted to the art and science of spotting, and will be someday. But briefly, the bench press spotter stands behind the head of the lifter, in the center of the bar (fig. 3-41). This position can be adjusted a little if necessary. The primary requirement of the