Barbell curls allow for both elbow flexion and shoulder flexion, they utilize a normal function of the arms, and they do not require specialized equipment (the bar being considered non-specialized; a big rock could be used if necessary). So barbell curls could be considered a functional exercise, in the strict sense of the definition.
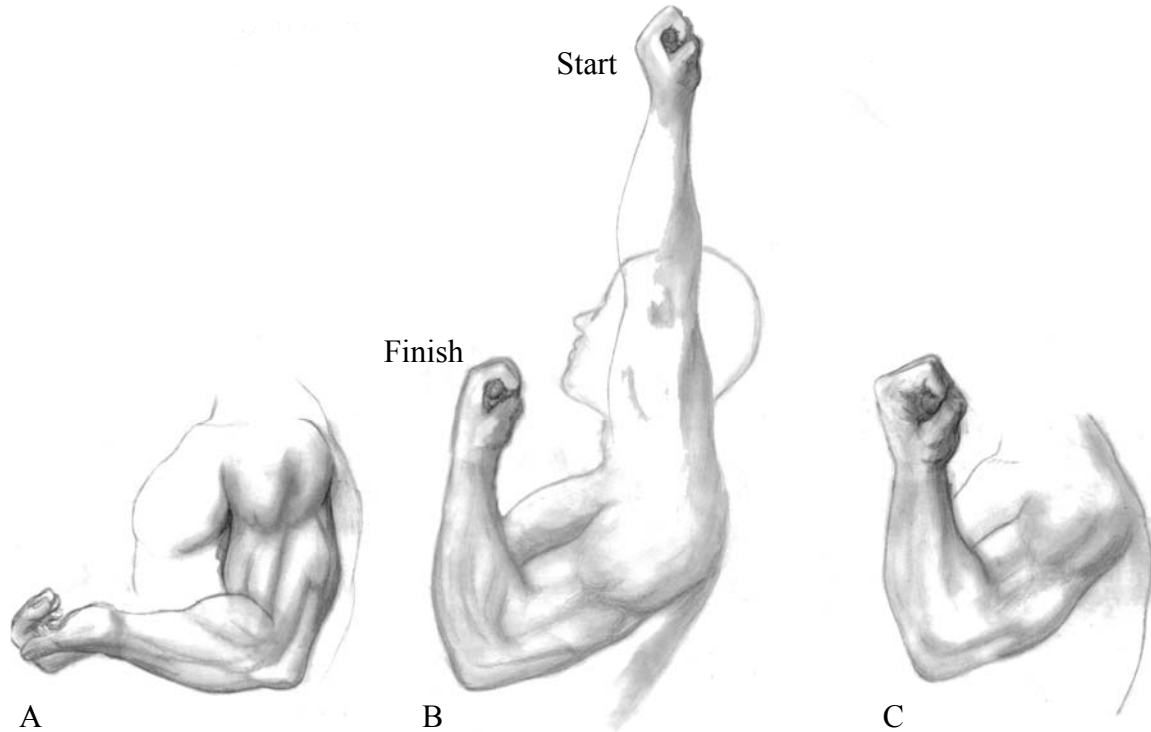
Start

Finish

A   B   C

Figure 7-65. Three ways to work the biceps. A. Elbow flexion in isolation: a strict curl. B. Shoulder extension with elbow flexion: a chin-up. C. Elbow flexion with shoulder flexion: a barbell curl as described in this book.

There are as many ways to do curls as there are muscle magazine authors. If you're going to spend time doing them all, you have missed the point of this book. Let's assume you haven't, and that you want the best way to work the most bicep in the least time. That way is the barbell curl, done with a standard olympic bar. It is performed standing (since it cannot be performed seated) and is best done out of a rack set at the same height it would be for the press.

Approach the bar with a supine grip, the width varying between somewhat closer than shoulder width and several inches wider. The wider the grip, the greater the degree of supination that will be required to maintain that grip, and the greater the supination, the more the bicep will be contracted at full flexion. Depending on individual flexibility, a grip just wider than the shoulders will allow the full effects of the exercise to be expressed (this will be about the same grip used for the chin-up, for the same reasons).

This version of the barbell curl starts at the top, with the elbows in full flexion, as opposed to the more common method of starting at the bottom with an extended elbow. When the bar is lowered to full extension and then raised back into flexion without a pause at the bottom, the biceps get the benefit of utilizing a stretch reflex to contract harder, thereby allowing the use of more weight. Breathing is only at the top, with none of the supportive pressure released at the