

Basic Barbell Training

The squat, bench press, deadlift, press, and clean form the basis of any successful, well-designed training program. But there are other exercises that can assist these five and improve certain aspects of their performance.

There are, quite literally, thousands of exercises that can be done in a well-equipped gym. Bill Pearl, in his classic text *Keys to the Inner Universe* includes cursory descriptions of 1621. Not all of these exercises are useful for strength training purposes, because few of them actually contribute to the performance of the core barbell exercises.

This is important for a couple of reasons. Your training priorities, which should depend on your advancement as an athlete, should involve strength, power, or mass. No matter how long you train, how strong, explosive, or big you get, your training will always be tied to the performance of these basic movements or their derivatives. The fact that resources – time, recovery, the patience of family and friends – are always in shorter supply than we'd like makes the efficiency with which your goals are accomplished an important consideration. The best assistance exercises are those that contribute directly to the performance of the basic movements that produce the most benefit.

Not that the basic movements need much help. They are complete exercises in and of themselves, since they all involve lots of muscles moving lots of joints in anatomically correct, functionally useful ways. But after a certain period of time, usually several months after serious training begins, the stimulation provided by the simple execution of the basic exercises alone is not enough to produce sufficient stress to cause further adaptation. This is not due to any deficiency in the basic exercises, but to the trainee's ability to successfully adapt to the stress these exercises provide. It is a natural result of training that progress slows down after progress has been made, and progress is why we train. These topics are discussed at great length in *Practical Programming for Strength Training*.

For example, an excellent way to improve a stuck bench press is to add chin-ups to the workout. Chins add enough work to the triceps, forearms, and upper back that the contribution of these muscle groups to the bench press is reinforced for the trainee that needs a little extra work. And this work is done in the context of another multi-joint functional exercise. A less efficient way to accomplish the task would be to add a tricep isolation movement like cable triceps extensions, a movement that when done with strict form leaves out lats, scapula retractors, forearms, posterior deltoids, biceps, and grip strength. Since the bench press uses all these muscles, why lose the opportunity to train them all together at the same time, the same way they function? (The lying triceps extension is an example of an exercise that actually is more beneficial when performed with what would conventionally be interpreted as less-than-strict form. When a lying triceps extension is done with heavy weight and a pullover preceding the extension, it uses a lot of lat, grip and forearm work.)

Assistance exercises work by either 1.) strengthening a part of a movement, like a partial deadlift – a rack pull or a halting deadlift – or 2.) are variations on the basic exercise, like a stiff-legged deadlift, or 3.) are *ancillary* exercises, which strengthen a portion of the muscle mass involved in the movement in a way that the basic exercise does not, like the chin-up. All assistance exercises of value can be assigned to one of these three categories.