

Starting Strength

The Olympic-Style Press

by
Bill Starr

My purpose in writing this article is twofold: to explain how to do the type of press known as the Olympic-style press and to defend all forms of pressing. The exercise has been maligned in the past and is once again under fire. In both instances, the criticism is ungrounded.

The overhead press has always been a primary exercise for those who were involved in any form of weight training. Bodybuilders did lots of overhead presses to build more muscular shoulders and arms. Strength athletes included heavy presses in their routines in order to gain more power in their upper bodies, and Olympic weightlifters spent a third of their training time working on the press since it was part of the sport's agenda. Even those who just trained for overall fitness did presses. It was the standard of upper body strength and, to most, also the gauge of how strong a person was. When someone wanted to know how strong you were, he asked, "How much can you press?"

There were many different ways people pressed. Some did them in a very strict manner, with upper bodies erect and the bar traveling in a straight line from shoulders to lockout. Others would drive the bar upward and immediately lay back to finish the lift. Yet others would wait until the bar hit the mid-point of the movement before laying back just a bit. The New Orleans lifters Louis Riecke, Dr. John Gourgott, and Walter Imahara, used a unique style of pressing that no one else could emulate. They would stand perfectly upright, punch the bar off their shoulders, then grind it home without any noticeable back bend. No trickery, simply raw deltoid and triceps strength.

There wasn't much new going on with the press for several decades, since they changed the rules from having the lifters follow the hand of the head judge as he designated the speed of the bar as it climbed upward. And the lifter had to remain ramrod-straight the entire time. With more lenient rules, the numbers for the press rose rapidly. It was a lift that everyone could understand. When we gave exhibitions for the York Barbell in the sixties, the crowds were always the most impressed with the heavy presses. Snatches and clean and jerks were considered tricks rather than pure strength, but the press, well, it was easy to see that that movement required great power in the upper body.

Then, in the early sixties Tony Garcy, America's premier 165-pounder, devised a new and different way to press. It required more than raw strength. It required a high degree of timing, coordination, balance, and quickness. He invented a highly technical form of pressing, and it paid off for him. When the foreign athletes and coaches saw him press at the '64 Olympics and '65 Worlds, they studied the films and began copying Tony's style. Within a very short span of time, nearly every foreign Olympic lifter was using the high-skill movement and it began to be called the "European" or "Olympic" press. Somehow, the person who had come up with the idea and put it into practice got lost in the shuffle.

The Olympic-Style Press

Not that Tony really cared. To him, it was no big deal what the movement was called. He was content to be able to utilize it to his benefit. If others wanted to join in, well and good.

And others most certainly did want to join the club and, as a result, records in the press began to fall as the younger lifters coming onto the national scene had learned this style from the very beginning. For those who had been in the sport for some time, the transition from power pressing to adopting the more dynamic style was more difficult. Old keys and habits had to be discarded and replaced with new moves.

This new version of the press sent records soaring in all weight classes, but ironically, it became the death knell for the lift. Why? It was extremely hard to judge because the bar moved so fast, as fast as a jerk in some instances. Those who had mastered the lift would clean the weight, fix it across their frontal deltoids, and wait for the head judge's signal to start the press. This was usually a clap, but I lifted in a contest where the head judge used a whistle.

Once the start signal was given, the lifter would explode the bar upward and in less than a heartbeat, it would be locked out overhead. There was seldom any pressing at all. It was one fast blur from start to finish. The rules allowed for some backbend, but not too much and the knees had to stay locked through the execution of the press. The problem was that the movement was done so fast it was nearly impossible for the judges to see if the knees had bent at all or just how far the lifter leaned back. Judging became erratic, especially on the international stages. At the Olympics and World Championships, judges would use the press for political purposes. Some contestants would get away with blatant knee kicks and others would lay back until their upper bodies were parallel with the platform. Some, who the judges did not want to place high, had to use ridiculously strict technique or they would be disqualified. Their favorite was to say the bar stopped on the way up, a stupid rule since it is certainly no advantage to have the bar stop during a heavy press. If anything, it makes the lift a great deal more difficult.

And it wasn't just the Communist countries treating the democratic nations unfairly. I saw a very good lifter from Cuba get royally screwed at the '68 Olympics by two judges, one from Puerto Rico and the other from Jamaica. The athlete pressed in strict fashion but they gave him red lights on his first two attempts, then passed the third, which was identical to the first two. They didn't go so far as to make him bomb out, but they made sure that he'd stay out of the hunt for a medal.

The judging needed to be consistent, yet that wasn't going to happen. It's not the same currently, but in the late sixties, the Cold war was a genuine presence in the world and none of the nations gave an inch in this matter. What to do? The only solution they could come up with was to drop the press from Olympic competition. But what would be the reason for such a drastic move? After all, the press had been a vital part of Olympic lifting since the very beginning. One reason that was suggested was that by dropping the press, it would shorten a contest considerably. However, that seemed a little weak since long meets only happened at a few contests, usually in the east, so it wasn't a major concern. How about safety? That usually sells and it did in this case.

Suddenly, articles began to appear, not only in fitness magazines, but also in the popular press, that overhead pressing was potentially harmful to the lower back. In some cases, downright dangerous, especially for younger athletes. Athletic trainers, team physicians in a wide variety of sports, and sports medicine specialists came out against doing heavy presses because of the undue stress placed on the lumbar.

In 1972, the International Olympic Weightlifting Committee voted to eliminate the press from official competition. At this same point in time, several other facts occurred that altered the overhead

The Olympic-Style Press

press from the status of a primary, essential exercise to that of an auxiliary one. Joe Weider took control of the sport of bodybuilding. Prior to that, the AAU was in charge of the sport and used athletic points for the major contests. A bodybuilder could gain as many as five points by participating in some sport. Since every bodybuilder was doing many of the same exercises as Olympic weightlifters, he would gain his athletic points by entering a weightlifting contest. That meant he did lots of heavy presses. But when Joe took over, he dropped the athletic points, so aspiring physique contestants no longer felt the need to do presses, snatches, or clean and jerks. The bench press replaced the overhead press in nearly every bodybuilder's routine.

Meanwhile, powerlifting was taking off and those engaging in that sport soon outnumbered Olympic lifters. Since the bench press was one of the lifts contested, powerlifters did a lot of them and ignored the overhead press completely. Simultaneously, strength training for sports, particularly football, was becoming popular across the country. Tommy Suggs and I helped to jump-start this trend by writing articles in *Strength & Health* magazine, holding clinics and demonstrations in high schools and colleges, and formulating a simple, basic program that could be used with very little equipment. We called it the "Big Three" and after I came out with *The Strongest Shall Survive*, weight training in junior and senior high schools and all divisions of colleges increased exponentially.

I am often asked why we made the bench press our primary upper body exercise when we both believed that the overhead press was the superior lift to improve shoulder girdle strength. It was because of all the negative comments in the media about the dangers of the overhead press to the lower back and we didn't want to have deal with two exercises that were controversial. We already had the full squat, which was also under fire due to the false information generated by Dr. K.K. Klein's so called "research" on the subject. We quickly discovered that we had our hands full defending that lift which we knew was the cornerstone of the entire program. We wanted to substitute the incline bench for the overhead press, but alas, that was not possible. In the late sixties, incline benches were as scarce as hen's teeth. We only had one at the York Barbell and after talking with coaches from high schools and colleges, we found that they had none. Zero. So it didn't make any sense to include an exercise that couldn't be done without purchasing another piece of equipment. We settled for the flat bench because every school had benches, even if they were only those in the locker room.

As a result of all things happening so close together, the flat bench emerged as the upper body exercise in the seventies and continues to hold that lofty position currently.

To back up a bit. Was the Olympic Committee justified in banning the overhead press? Were a lot of lifters getting hurt doing the exercise? No, in both cases. The elimination of the press was about politics, not about the safety of the athletes. Did some lifters have injured lower backs? Of course. There were also a lot of them with injured upper and middle backs, hips, legs, knees, wrists, elbows, and shoulders, but none of those misfortunes had anything to do with the press. The lower back took a huge battering at every session. Heavy squats, snatches, cleans, jerks, high pulls, shrugs all took their toll on the lumbar. Pressing was stressful, of course, but no more than heavy jerks or drop snatches or hang cleans.

It needs to be pointed out that lifters did not start out by pressing a heavy weight. Nor did they lay back very far in the beginning either. As they got stronger in the press, their lower back strength increased at the same rate – if they were paying attention – and the ability to lay back to urge the bar through the sticking point was learned slowly, over a rather long period of time. As soon as my athletes have established a solid strength base on the Big Three, I add in overhead presses and good mornings. One of the most difficult parts of the press for anyone to learn how to do correctly is to lay

The Olympic-Style Press

back slightly. It's largely a matter of timing and it takes many hours of practice to get the move down perfectly. And as they're learning the skill of laying back, their lumbar are improving in strength, both from the pressing itself and the good mornings.

Of course, if an athlete fails to strengthen his lumbar and is somehow able to lay way back early on, then he will have problems with his lower back, but that is not the fault of the exercise. Any movement, no matter how tame it may seem, can be risky when done with sloppy form.

Although there were a few coaches like myself, who believed in the value of the overhead press and taught it through the lean years, it never has made a full comeback. Yet, the overhead press has become more popular lately due directly to two books by Mark Rippetoe, *Starting Strength* and *Strong Enough?*, where he once again elevates the press to primary status where it belongs. He has also preached the doctrine of the press at the many clinics and seminars he gives across the country.

But wouldn't you know it, just when it appeared that the press was once again going to be a mainstay in strength routines, along comes someone who does a song and dance with anatomical and kinesiological terms and concluded that the overhead press is potentially harmful to the shoulder joints. Aaargh! Here we go again. Doug Brignole comes from a bodybuilding background and I seriously doubt if he ever pressed very much and certainly is way off base when it comes to strength training. He even goes so far as to say overhead presses cause problems with the rotator cuff.

Totally absurd. The very best way to insure that you keep those groups that make up the rotator cuff strong and healthy is to do overhead lifts: presses, push presses, and jerks. Holding a weighted barbell overhead for several seconds hits the rotator cuffs directly. Lifting a weight overhead forces those muscles known as the scapular control groups, lower trapezius, lats, and serratus to work. These also get worked with heavy pulls, but a double dose of exercise that hits them directly is even better. Whenever someone tells me he's feeling a twinge right where his rotator cuffs are located, I have him do overhead presses to strengthen the weak area. Standing dumbbell or barbell presses done with fairly high reps, 15s and 20s, and if the injury is not advanced, the presses solve the problem in a matter of a month or six weeks.

I do not agree with the assertion that the overhead press is an unnatural movement. The shoulder joints have evolved to move in a vertical position, so it naturally follows that if an athlete wants to improve strength in his upper body, he should add resistance and do that movement. Hand a child an object and tell him to lift it overhead and he will do a perfect press.

Now the behind-the-neck press is a horse of another color. I have been lobbying against this exercise since Nixon was in the White House. That movement does place a huge amount of stress on the shoulder joints, as does any behind the neck exercise because the shoulder girdle and joints are not designed to rotate in that manner.

If Doug wanted to be helpful to those who train their upper bodies hard, he might try leaving the overhead press alone and concentrate on pointing out the many hazards of the flat bench. Unlike the overhead press, the shoulder girdle does not move naturally during the execution of this exercise. It is a safe exercise when done correctly, but this is seldom the case. The lure of a big number causes athletes to use sloppy technique, including excessive rebound of the bar off their chests and bridging when the bar hits the sticking point. In addition, the bench press is frequently overworked and the joints involved – shoulders, elbows, and wrists – pay the price. Add to this is the fact that few who are enamored with the flat bench seldom do anything significant for their upper backs. Eventually, those muscles supporting the shoulder joints in the front become much stronger than those in the rear, and when that happens, these athletes begin to experienced pain in the rear portion of their shoulders. If

The Olympic-Style Press

they do not respond sensibly to the early warning signals and continue to pound away on the bench press, the pecs will tighten and shorten and at the same time the muscles that support the rotator cuffs become weaker in a process called “reciprocal inhibition.” In short, if any upper body exercise should be dropped from a routine, it’s the flat bench, not the overhead press.

One more point before I get off my soapbox: if it’s true, as Doug suggests, that the overhead press, and by extension, the push press and jerk, are potentially harmful to the shoulders, why weren’t there any such problems when everyone who trained with weights was doing a great deal of overhead lifting? There were no such things as rotator cuff problems. Of all the lifters I competed with, trained with, or just sat around and compared lies with, none had a shoulder injured due to overhead work. Sure, there were shoulder injuries, but they came from missing a heavy snatch behind them or letting a jerk carry them way out of the proper position to finish it. Plus, they were hammering away on their shoulders with the power cleans, full cleans, power snatches, full snatches, heavy high pulls, shrugs, and crazy movements such as drop snatches.

If overhead work damaged the shoulders, every old Olympic lifter would have had an operation by now, and that’s not the case. There have been countless hip, knee, and back surgeries, but very few for the shoulders. This, however, is not the case for those who competed in powerlifting or who did a shitload of flat benching when they were younger. I realize that this is anecdotal evidence, but to me it’s more valuable than studies that are not based on any scientific data, but mere conjecture. I also use anecdotal evidence in regards to the overhead press and rotator cuff injuries. When the press was the standard of upper body strength, prior to 1972, rotator cuffs weren’t even heard of. Ask somebody where they were located and they’d be stumped. They’re not even mentioned in my kinesiology and applied anatomy text, which was published in 1967.

The rotator cuff problem can be directly linked to the flat bench and corresponding lack of work for the upper back. Bring the overhead press back as a substitute for the flat bench and rotator cuff injuries will be a thing of the past.

Enough. If I haven’t made my point by now, it’s not going to happen. Not everyone will be interested in trying to learn the Olympic-style press, but for those who would like to take a crack at it, here’s the lowdown.

While learning this movement, take the bar off a rack rather than cleaning it first and use only an empty Olympic bar until you get the feel of what you’re trying to do. Foot placement is critical. Set your feet at shoulder width with your toes pointed straight ahead. Your feet have to be in this position so the weight can be shifted from the balls of your feet to your heels and back again to the balls instantly. So don’t turn your feet outward at all.

Fix the bar across your frontal deltoids as you would in a conventional press, at a point where the sternum meets the clavicles. Arm position is most important. Your elbows should be tucked in close to your body and squeezed against your lats. This forces your elbows to be set low, which is where they need to be. Your wrists must be locked and straight. If this poses a problem, wrap them with trainer’s tape to make sure they stay straight. Tuck in your chin and look straight ahead. Do not follow the upward flight of the bar with your eyes.

To insure a rock solid base, do this: grip the floor with your toes. At York, we used the analogy of a bird sitting on a tree limb. Now extend your pelvis forward and form a bow with your body. The bow starts at the back of your heels and ends at the back of your head. This places the weight out front on your toes. Tighten every muscle in your body with special attention to your abs and glutes. Think of

The Olympic-Style Press

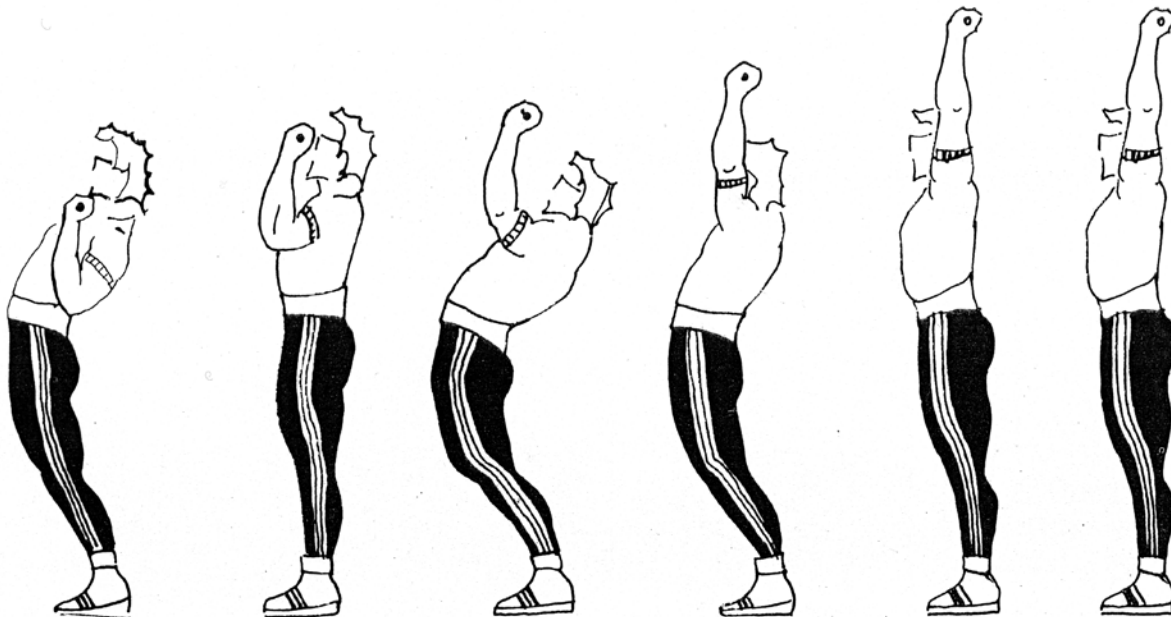
yourself as a coil: a powerful coil of steel. Now here's the part that makes the Olympic press different from any other version of the lift. Your legs should be straight, but not locked. This may sound confusing and I admit it is, but you can check it out yourself. You can stand with your legs straight, yet the knees aren't locked. This is how they teach you to stand at parades in the military. Locked knees impede circulation if held that way for a long period of time. Keep in mind, if you relax any muscle group, you will not be able to put a jolt into the first move.

Pull yourself into a tight coil then drive the bar upward just as hard as you can and at that same moment, lock your knees. This will send the bar shooting upward in a blur. Without any hesitation, drop back into the same position you had at the start. This is the essence of the Olympic press. At the start, the weight is pushed forward to the balls of your feet. When you drive it upward, the weight shifts to your heels, and when you make the move back to the bow, they shift once again to the balls of your feet. At the conclusion of the initial drive your body will be completely erect and eventually you'll be able to incorporate your traps into that first move to add even more of a punch to the bar.

As you quickly convert from being fully erect to a second bow, you have to keep pressure on the bar. Otherwise, it will stall and if the weight is heavy, you may not set it in motion again. As you drive the bar to the finish, come erect under it so that when you finish, the bar is sitting in a solid overhead position in a line directly up from the back of your head.

As I mentioned before, the Olympic-style press is really a quick lift. You are, in effect, hurling the bar upward off your shoulders in one smooth, coordinated movement. Learning how to transfer your weight from front to back and again to the front in a nanosecond while maintaining pressure on the fast-moving bar and keeping it in the proper line of flight requires much more in the way of balance than any other form of pressing. Balance wasn't a major factor with the conventional press, but it is with the more explosive version, as many quickly discover. I had forgotten just how much it affected the lift until I watched a video of lifters pressing in the late sixties and saw how many lost their balance while pressing a heavy weight, including myself.

To me, this is a good thing. Doing any exercise that requires a large number of athletic attributes helps to improve them. Then they can be utilized in other sports activities, and every sport involves



The Olympic-Style Press

some degree of balance. Which is one of the reasons I include this style of the overhead press in all of my athlete's programs, both male and female.

A strong start is essential in order to press a heavy weight and it also must be in a precise line. If the bar runs even a bit forward or backward, the second phase of the lift is going to be adversely affected. If the bar is driven too far out of the proper line, the lift will not be made at all, so this move has to be practiced over and over until every rep moves in a tight line upward. Coil, bodyweight forward; uncoil, bodyweight back; and recoil with bodyweight forward once more. All these moves with the start, middle, and finish.

When done correctly, the bar jumps from your shoulders to overhead in the blinking of an eye. Remember, you don't lean back. You extend your pelvis forward until you're curled into a tight crunch with the bar fixed right over your power source. And after the start and your return to that same position, the bar is still over the powerful hips and lower back.

An Olympic press involves every muscle in your body. Should you doubt this contention, try pressing when some muscle or joint is dinged. You simply cannot handle any amount of weight. So it's a complete exercise that works the ankles, legs, and hips that serve as the base for the movement, then the entire back including the traps, and all the groups that make up the shoulder girdle and arms get in the act. It's a great exercise for any aspiring athlete in any sport.

One final point. When you lock your knees on the start, do so with authority. Those who watched the ski jumpers at the Vancouver Olympics saw how the athletes snapped their legs straight at the moment they hit the end of their takeoff to give them more power to soar upward. That's how you should lock your knees on the drive of the Olympic press. Drill on the various form points and you'll find that this is an exercise that enhances athletic attributes while making your upper body much stronger.

Starting Strength : [Home](#) : [Articles](#) : [Forums](#) : [Discuss this Article](#)

Copyright 2010 The Aasgaard Company. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by copyright law.