

Starting Strength

The Quest for a Stronger Overhead Press

by
Bill Starr

Recently, there has been a revival of interest in the overhead press. And not just as an auxiliary movement in a fitness routine, but rather in trying to make this lift extremely strong. As it was when I first got interested in weight training, which in turn led me to the sport of Olympic lifting where the overhead press was one of the contested lifts. At that point in time, everyone who trained with weights did overhead presses as a primary exercise: Olympic lifters, of course, and bodybuilders, strength athletes and those who trained for overall fitness.

The overhead press was the most popular exercise in all of weight training because it was the lift that served as a gauge of upper body strength. Or more accurately, a person's overall strength. Whenever someone wanted to know how strong you were, he asked, "How much can you press?"

However, several events occurred in the early seventies that changed how people trained their upper bodies and ended up relegating the overhead press from a "must-do" exercise to one that was only done occasionally and with relatively light poundages.

Perhaps the biggest blow to the overhead press came when the International Olympic Weightlifting Committee voted to eliminate the lift from official competition in 1972. The reason given for this decision was that the overhead press was causing a large number of lower back injuries. This wasn't true. It was used as a smokescreen to get rid of the press. The real reason it was dropped was the judges at international contests were using the press as a political tool against their hated rivals.

"But," you may be thinking, "hasn't the press always been part of Olympic lifting? Why was it now such a controversial lift?" Because the press had been transformed from a pure strength move to a dynamic one in the early sixties by a middleweight from El Paso, Texas, Tony Garcy. I trained with Tony at the York Barbell Club, and his style of pressing was so revolutionary that it was difficult to change from the conventional form to the more explosive form he had invented. The foreign coaches and athletes quickly saw the advantage and it was soon referred to as the Polish-style press. When a lifter utilized the new style, the bar would explode off his shoulders and be locked out in a nanosecond. It was extremely difficult to judge. Did the lifter start with his knees bent? Were they fully locked at the finish? If the judges would have had instant replay, perhaps they could have made the correct call, but of course they didn't, and very quickly international judges began using the press to enhance the chances of those they wanted to do well and destroy those who posed a threat to the team title. In 1967, at the Little Olympics in Mexico city, Joe Puleo should have won the lighthweight class, but

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two judges, one from Bulgaria, who was very outspoken in his dislike for Americans, and one from Australia, who was trying to get his number one officiating card, passed absolutely everything and were particularly generous with the Russian, Belyaev. They passed obvious knee kicks and ridiculous back bends. Puleo's presses were all cleanly done, but as a result of the crooked judging, he ended up with the silver. This ended up costing the U. S. the team title. There were many more such episodes, but you get the point. It had gotten out of hand and the only solution they could come up with was to eliminate the lift altogether. The decision would have an impact on everyone who took up weight training after that.

While this was going on, Joe and Ben Weider took the control of the sport of bodybuilding away from the A.A.U. Again, some may be wondering, "What in the world does that have to do with the overhead press?" One of the first things that the Weiders did was to get rid of the athletic points, a vital part of scoring at the top meets in the A.A.U. Up to five points could be obtained by achieving success in some sport, and since bodybuilders were including heavy presses in their training, most entered Olympic meets to earn those valuable points. It made perfect sense. They were going to the meets anyway because that's where the physique competitions were held, after the lifting. Plus, being seen for nine attempts on the platform allowed them to be viewed by the same people that would be passing judgment on them later on.

Without the need for athletic points, the top bodybuilders stopped doing heavy presses, and this naturally trickled down to those aspiring athletes in the sport. That was strike two for the press.

Strike three was the rapid growth of the new sport of powerlifting, which was much easier to do than the more complicated Olympic lifts and used the bench press for the test of upper body strength. Powerlifters saw no reason to do any overhead work, which meant the press was no longer a part of their routines.

The seventies was also the time when strength training for athletes, particularly in the sport of football, became extremely popular. Many coaches and athletic directors were well aware that the press had been dropped from the sport of Olympic lifting for health reasons and wanted no part of that can of worms. Finally, the influx of highly-designed machines caused many more weight trainers to shun the overhead press.

The result was that in a span of only a few years the standard of strength for the upper body shifted from the overhead press to the flat bench. If any pressing was done at all in a routine, it was done with light weights and relatively high reps. The once mighty and proud overhead press had been relegated to ancillary status.

Except for a handful of die-hards like myself. The overhead press was one of the very first exercises I did when I got into weight training. No one taught me how to do it. I used photos from magazines to guide me and picked up the various form points along the way. Like just about every other beginner, my initial goal was to be able to press bodyweight. This took me three years, then I bumped my goal up to 200 lbs, which took me another year to achieve. And so on throughout my career. Fully one-third of my training for Olympic lifting was spent on the overhead press and even after I stopped competing, the overhead press continued to be a primary movement in my programs. In truth, one of the reasons I quit Olympic lifting was because I didn't enjoy the meets after the press was dropped. A large number of my fellow competitors felt the same, and they retired as well. To me, the press, snatch, and clean and jerk were the perfect combination to determine who was the strongest and also who possessed the most athleticism.

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As I began my career as a strength coach for professional and collegiate sports teams, the press always had a place in their routines. Even now, as I do a high-rep program in deference to my age and susceptible joints, overhead presses are done at least twice a week.

In the last few years, more and more aspiring strength athletes have contacted me for advice as to how to do the dynamic form of overhead presses, and how to make them stronger – *really* stronger. There are a number of reasons why this is happening, which I will not go into, but I am happy that it is because I believe the overhead press is a great exercise. Those approaching me for information are setting high goals too and this I think is great. They're talking of pressing 250, 275, and even the magic number: 300. They, too, were my goals as I moved up the strength ladder, and I recall my joy when I finally reached them. One thing I point out to all ambitious athletes is that they need to be patient. Gains do not come fast, except at first, on the overhead press. I mentioned that it took me three years to press my bodyweight, 185, and another to move on to 200, so anyone who is serious about obtaining any pressing goal has to be willing to put in a great deal of work.

Another thing any athlete who wants to press a heavy weight has to understand is that the lift is easy to learn, but difficult to master. It is very hard to press a heavy weight. Few think in terms of athletic attributes when considering the press, but the move requires a very high degree of timing, coordination, and balance as well as a generous supply of strength. It is, in my opinion, a high-skill lift which is as hard to master as the snatch and clean and jerk.

I believe it will be helpful to know what some of the lifters pressed before steroids came along. Drugs completely changed the landscape so should not be part of the picture when someone is clean and trying to get his press stronger. Dave Sheppard pressed 325 in 1958 as a 198er, Tommy Kono did 322+ in 1959 and 350 in 1961 as a 198er. As a 181er, he pressed 316+ and as a 165er, 292. Stan Stanczyk pressed 286 as a 181er in 1948 and John Grimek, weighing just under 200-lbs, pressed 350 at an exhibition in the late forties.

I trained with Linwood Gilliland at the Dallas Y, and as a 198er he held the National YMCA record at 310, set in 1957. My pre-steroid presses weren't in that lofty category but as a 181er, I pressed 255, 75 pounds over my bodyweight and I seldom had the highest press in my class. There were several in my weight division who did more than 255 and there were even some in lower weight classes who out-pressed me.

But since the overhead press fell from grace, I've never seen anyone press 75 pounds over bodyweight, and very few, for that matter, who could handle bodyweight. Yet I know it can be done because I saw it done countless times and did it myself. It's simply a matter of putting in the necessary work in the weight room.

The first step, naturally, is to practice the form of the press until you have it down pat. Keep in mind that your form doesn't have to be precise in order for you to press heavy weights. The closer you can come to copying Garcy's technique the better, but some of the greatest pressers of the sixties didn't convert to the more dynamic press style. Bill March, for one, didn't use a dynamic start or explode the bar upward. No, he merely elevated the bar from his shoulders to lockout like it was traveling up an elevator. His 390 press weighing 236 at the '69 Seniors in Chicago is considered the greatest pure press in American Olympic lifting history. At least by me.

I went over form points for the Garcy-style press in my recent article, [The Olympic-Style Press](#), so I won't bother going over them again. But it would be a smart idea to have that article if you want to learn how to do the dynamic form of the overhead press.

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I'm repeating this often-told story because it fits so perfectly. Norb Schemansky was approached by an eager fan and asked, "How do I get my press stronger?" Ski replied, "Press." Good advice: the press needs to be worked often and diligently. When the lift was part of Olympic lifting competition, most lifters did presses at every session in the weight room, and they often worked them to limit no less than once a week. It's the kind of lift that has to be leaned on, much like the squat. This means that if you want to move the numbers up on the press, you will need to work them at least twice a week. If you're also doing some of the exercises that I'm about to recommend, you can get by with pressing heavy once a week.

A set and rep formula that has proven to get results for myself and my athletes over the years is as follows: two, or for some, three sets of five as warm-ups; then three sets of triples with the same poundage. Slowly expand this to six work sets of three, and unless you're going to add in one of my recommended exercises for overloading, do a back-off set of ten.

A sample workout might look like this: 115x5, 135x5, 165x3x3-6 sets with a back-off set of 10 with 145. The key to making this work is that you cannot add to the top-end work sets unless you make every single rep in the routine, not counting the back-off set. Should you only be able to make two reps on your final set with the work weight, you need to use that same amount at your next pressing session. If you are successful, increase the top-end sets by five pounds. And so on and on upward.

Eventually, you'll plateau. Otherwise, everyone would glide right up to a 300-lb, press as smooth as silk. Naturally, this doesn't happen or there would be thousands of 300-lb pressers across the country, and this certainly is not the case. That's where my exercises come into the act. They'll help to jolt the muscles and attachments that are involved in pressing and make them stronger. Stronger muscles, tendons, and ligaments translates to moving more weight overhead.

The number one exercise on my list for improving the press is weighted dips. I had been training for two years before I came across dip bars in a weight room and I began dipping right away. I did so because I had read about Marvin Eder, who was perhaps the strongest bodybuilder ever. He never really received much attention because Hoffman linked him with Weider, and since Hoffman controlled both Olympic lifting and bodybuilding, he was basically blackballed in *Strength and Health*. But *Iron Man* was much more open and ran articles on him.

His lifts were beyond belief. In the early fifties, long before any type of strength-enhancing drug came along, he did a dip with 434 lbs added to his bodyweight of 198, for a total of 632 pounds, and did seven reps with 400 pounds around his waist. The overhead press was his favorite lift and that's why he dipped so heavy – to improve the press. And it did just that. He overhead pressed 355 at 198 and could bench press 575 pounds. Only Doug Hepburn, a heavyweight, could handle over 500 in 1953.

I've always done weighted dips and encouraged my Olympic lifters to do them as well. The one that did the best was Steve Dussia, when I was coaching at the University of Hawaii. Steve, a 181er, and clean, did five reps with 200 lbs, and a single with 250. Add in his bodyweight and it comes up to dipping with 431 pounds. And it brought the desired results. The press was no longer part of the sport then, but the strength Steve gained in his upper body from dipping carried over to his jerks very directly. And I felt they helped stabilize his shoulder girdle for snatches and cleans as well.

If someone has never dipped, I have him do them without any weight until he can do four sets of twenty. Then I have him add resistance. Initially, this can be a dumbbell held between the legs.

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This works up to a hundred pounds, then a belt is needed. (The dip is available at most weightlifting supply stores and is basically a leather lifting belt with a chain and hook attached to it.) There is a fair amount of form involved, so it takes a few months of doing weighted dips before most get the feel of what they need to do.

Since most dip bars are set rather high off the floor, climbing up a steep step with 100+ pounds strapped around your waist can be a problem. Getting down after a grueling set can be downright scary. So do this: pull a bench in close to the dip bars, load the plates onto the belt, stand and lean into the bar and assume a firm grip. Then ease off the bench onto the bars. Take a moment to make sure you're not swinging. Not at all. To help with this, lock your knees around the weights and hold them tightly in place. Now you're ready to dip.

How low should you go? Just as low as you possibly can. The lower you go, the more muscles and attachments come into play. Ease downward, don't just fall into the bottom or that will be the end of the set. When you're as low as you can go, punch upward, making sure your torso is perfectly straight and you're not swinging around. Come fully erect, pause long enough to make certain your body is positioned correctly and do the next rep. Never look down when doing a dip. Look straight ahead or slightly upward and when you hit the sticking point, which you will eventually, look way up. This will help you keep the weights right under your shoulders. Should you start swinging, even a little bit, stop and reset. Twisting, swinging, or dipping in a jerking motion is very stressful to your shoulders, elbows, and wrists.

When you complete the set, simply step back on the bench. This is much easier and safer than trying to find the step when you're exhausted, and will allow you to handle a great deal more weight. The routine I give my athletes changes every week. It brings results because the low reps hit the attachments while the higher ones strengthen the muscles. It's a three week cycle. Week one: five sets of eight with weights plus a warm-up set done free hand. Week two: a warm up set free hand then five sets of five, followed by a back-off set. Week three: warm-up set, two sets of five and two or three sets of three to limit, followed by a back-off set. The back-off sets will be with fifty pounds less than you used for the top-end set and needs to be done to failure. I've had some athletes who handled fifteen reps on their back-off sets and these really boost the overall workload.

Here's a sample routine for someone who can do 100 lbs. for three. Week one: free hand warm-ups, 20 reps. Then 25, 45, 55, 55, 55 for eight. No back-off set on days of eight. Week two: same warm-up idea, then 25, 50, 60, 70, and 80 for five, plus a back-off set with 30 for as many as you can do. Week three: same warm-up free hand, then 25 and 50 for five, followed by 75, 90, and 100 for three and a back-off set with 50 to failure. These jumps are merely guidelines. What you want to do is handle as much as possible on your final set at each session. So if you do five with 80 and realize that you can use more weight that day, go ahead and jump the numbers up for one more set.

After a couple of these cycles, go after a PR single. This does a number of good things: it makes you utilize precise form, identifies your weaker area in the movement, hits your attachments even more than the triples, and elevates your confidence. But always put form ahead of the numbers. The movement, both up and down, must be done in a controlled, smooth fashion. Never crash downward. You can help your cause greatly by locking your legs snugly around the weights. If you begin to swing like a pendulum you're inviting injury, so if that happens, stop and reset. Almost everyone discovers, to their delight, that dipping with weights is easier than doing them free-hand. This is because the hanging weights help you to control the movement better.

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One final comment on the weighted dips before I move on. You have to progress to where you're using at least a hundred pounds for three before these will have an influence on your overhead press. So work hard to get to that level, and then it will be smooth sailing.

The next exercise is to help with the start of the press, which I aptly call Press Starts. It's basically a way to overload the groups which are responsible for driving the bar off your shoulders, so that's what you will be doing. Our imaginary athlete can press 200 lbs. After he finishes his pressing routine, he will load the bar to 225 and drive it just as high as he can off his shoulders for three reps. The reps have to stay low on this exercise because each time the bar returns to the shoulders, it slips out of the ideal position just a tad. For some who have difficulty maintaining a solid starting position, doubles work better than triples. Now load the bar to 250 and do another set and if that goes okay, move to 275 for your final set. Three sets is enough since you've already done a lot of pressing. But Press Starts work best right in behind the press sessions because the muscles and attachments are well warmed up and the line of flight is already fixed in your mind.

However, in order for these to work, you must drive the bar up in the exact line you use when you press. Otherwise, you're not hitting the desired muscle groups. And you don't want to get in the habit of giving the bar a knee kick to set it in motion. Your form has to be exactly the same as it is when you press. Two other key form points: when the bar reaches its apex, keep pressure up against it and try to hold it there for a few seconds, the longer the better. And when you lower the bar back to your shoulders, do it slowly and it will serve as a negative.

After only a couple of sessions on these you'll discover that the next time you press, the weights feel surprisingly light on your shoulders. That tells you that you're doing Press Starts correctly.

Press Starts will strengthen your start and push presses can improve your finish. On these, you will use a knee kick to drive the bar off your shoulders. However, you don't want to drive it all the way to lock-out. You want to be able to press it out for the final four inches. If it goes all the way to lock-out, it will help your jerk, but not your press. Again, the line of flight has to be exact or it will not carryover to the press.

Three are the order for the day for these also, but I can't really provide you with any set numbers for the sets because individuals vary a great deal on these. If an athlete has a strong finish already, he will be able to handle a great deal more than someone who is having trouble with his finish. If your finish is strong, don't bother with these and spend more time on your start. But if you feel you need them, do three or four sets of three and work to max. Keep in mind that after you knee-kick the weight upward, you must relock your knees before you press the weight out the final four inches.

What else? Very steep inclines are beneficial. They work if the incline is really steep because the angle is close to what is used in the press. On these, I utilize the same routine that I outlined for weighted dips: 8s, 5s, and 3s plus an occasional session with singles to max.

Doing pure isometrics and/or isotonic-isometrics is a great way to get the press to move upward. In fact, they are both excellent exercises to get any lift to move in the right direction. However, there is a great deal involved in learning how to do either of these pure strength movements correctly. Much more than I can cram into a few pages, so I will save them for another article on Rip's website.

That will give you time to learn the technique on the recommended exercises and make you more ready to gain immediate benefits once you do get in a power rack and begin doing isometrics or isotonic-isometrics.

It's well worth the effort to go after a heavy overhead press. The strength gained in the upper body is extremely convertible, much more so than any other shoulder girdle exercise. It can be done

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with a limited amount of equipment, a bar and plates, and in a small space. And you do not need a spotter so it can be done even if you train alone. Contrary to what some writers are stating in fitness magazines, it's perfectly safe when done correctly. Just like nearly every other exercise in the book.

So add presses to your strength or fitness or bodybuilding routine. I think you'll be pleased with the results.

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