

# Starting Strength

## Grippaldi the Great: How to Train the Overhead Press

*One of the greatest overhead pressers in history tells how he trained*

by  
Marty Gallagher

In terms of being a legitimate muscle publication, by 1971 the once mighty *Strength & Health* magazine had self-imploded. Bill Starr had left and created a creative and directional vacuum. Owner Bob Hoffman and his right hand (hatchet) man John Terpak felt they needed to reassert editorial dominance. As staunch Nixon men, Hoffman and Terpak felt that Starr and the “youth movement” had been a total pain in the ass, and now that Starr was gone they could remake *S&H* into something more “sensible” and “mainstream.” Meanwhile Joe Weider was completely embracing the youth movement while presenting the first wave of physical super-freaks: Sergio Oliva, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Franco Columbo and Robbie Robinson began appearing in regular rotation as cover men on *Muscle Builder*, the flagship Weider publication. Joe was all about the youth movement, sensible be damned.

Hoffman hated bodybuilding. He could not believe that a red-blooded American male given a choice between participating in effete bodybuilding or manly Olympic weightlifting would, in overwhelming numbers, embrace bodybuilding and send Olympic weightlifting down the same long lonesome road as buggy whips, iceboxes and rumble seats. Too cheap and arrogant to seek professional magazine help, he published an increasingly amateurish publication that featured one lame *S&H* cover after another. It was embarrassing: Hoffman would pair up sub-par male physiques with amateur females that knew nothing about how to pose in front of photographers that knew nothing about physique photography.

Meanwhile Weider was literally standing directly behind genius photographers like Russ Warner and Gene Mozee as they captured incredible physiques in epic photos. Hoffman was on a quest to feature “Clean-cut Americans” like Mike Dayton and the eternal *S&H* cover man, Val Vasilef. When it came to winning the hearts, minds and pocketbooks of American youth, it was a slaughter: put Arnold on the cover of one magazine and Mike Dayton on the cover of another; charge the same price for each, and see what happens.

When you compared the two competing periodicals, Weider’s *Muscle Builder* and Hoffman’s *Strength & Health* side by side, the differences was stark. *S&H* was analogous to grey suits and black ties with wing tips reporting to work at 9am on Monday morning to a low-paying stressful job; *Muscle Builder* was the equivalent of reporting to Studio 54 at 10pm in a disco leisure suit worn with a bright

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Hawaiian shirt, unbuttoned to the navel, complete with gold chain, white belt, and white high heel boots with zippers on the side. In the September 1971 issue of *Muscle Builder* the lead article was “Build Baseball Biceps with the Austrian Oak.” This training article was chock-full of surreal shots of Arnold’s eye-popping biceps. Meanwhile – I kid you not – the lead article (and yes, Mike Dayton was the cover man) in the September issue of *S&H* was “Hemorrhoids” by Carlson Wade.

I suppose it was an important subject for 70+ Bob Hoffman and 60+ John Terpak, but for the critical 18-34 year old male demographic this type of editorial inclusion was magazine suicide by slow self-strangulation. If one were to dig deeper into this by-then-pathetic excuse for a magazine, you would come across one inane article after another. How about “Camping for physical recreation”? If that weren’t enough excitement for one issue, how about “Body Odor and Common Sense” or “To the Ladies: Calf Curves.” In the midst of all this nonsensical garbage, on page 27 you came across a gem of an article written by Phil Grippaldi, one of the greatest overhead pressers of all time.

Not coincidentally, the boneheads at *S&H* choose to illustrate the Grippaldi press article with an 8-photo press sequence as performed by Waldemar Baszanowski of Poland, the 148-pound world champion that never held a world press record in his life. While Baz was known for being a world-record snatcher and the last split-cleaner to hold a clean and jerk world record, why the *S&H* brain-trust decided to use Baszanowski press photos (and he used a different press style than Phil) instead of the muscled-up, 20-inch-armed, widely photographed, hugely charismatic Grippaldi pressing to illustrate his own article reeks of utter and complete incompetence.

The article is pure press training gold. Grippaldi walks you thru how he trained for the press, at a time when he was pressing 370 weighing 195 pounds. He would later that same year hit a double-bodyweight press of 396. The clean and press was eliminated from Olympic lifting in 1972: the era of press was over. Phil was as good an overhead presser as ever strode the planet; his training approach is minimalistic and sensible. Phil was built like a brick shithouse. He stood maybe 5-5 and weighed a lean 200 pounds. His thighs were amazing and his torso was muscled-up like a powerlifter. His back was as thick and full as you would expect for a man that officially clean and jerked 442 pounds weighing 195. His most amazing feature was his arms: his gigantic, outsized, ripped, outrageous arms. Genuine 20-inch arms on this short dude with a small waist made his guns appear even bigger. His approach to pressing was extremely well thought out and involved three parts:

- The use of unrelated assistance exercise
- The use of press-related assistance exercises
- The continual honing of the competitive pressing technique

Phil was clever, and in his analysis of the competition press he quickly identified the component parts of the competitive press and created “unrelated” pressing exercises that would isolate one or more of the components; he would rotate differing workouts on a semi-regular basis. For starters, he was a big believer in ab work for pressing. “It is vital right after the clap for the lifter to create acceleration when thrusting of the bar upward.” In the days when the press was part of Olympic weightlifting, the lifter would clean the barbell to his shoulders and wait for the referee to clap his hands – this signaled the lifter to commence his press.

Lifters of the day would “layback” after cleaning the barbell and when they heard the clap they would stand erect with great rapidity. Simultaneously they would exert a mighty push and between the straightening of the torso and the thrust of the arms the bar would be propelled upward to forehead height. At this stage the lifter would lay back a second time and push the weight to full extension. Now, with locked arms, he arose from the layback and waited for the referees signal to lower the weight.

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To enhance the initial upward thrust, Phil sought to strengthen his abdominals. “A lifter must have excellent abdominal and intercostal strength and to that end it is imperative that the lifter employ some of the following abdominal exercises in his routine.” Phil also used another analogy, “Ab work aides in creating the ‘giant spring.’ During the Olympic press the abs and hips must be coordinated to create the initial thrust. On a related note: remember to drive the hips forward as the weight is being pressed. A lifter must isolate and work on his thrust.”

- Roman chair sit-up holding a weight behind the head: this exercise is pure genius insofar as its applicability for a layback presser. If you were to study the Olympic press with an eye on creating some applicable assistance exercises, you would note that during the first phase of the press the lifter lays back, then straightens explosively. The layback-to-straighten phase is all about an abdominal explosive contraction if done right. Phil found he could recreate that same “feel” he had when pressing when arising from the stretched depths of a Roman Chair sit-up. Unlike West Coast bodybuilders of that same era that would perform hundreds of weightless reps in the Roman Chair (Frank Zane reportedly did 500 reps to start every workout), Grippaldi clutched plates to his chest and kept his reps to 20 or less.
- Prone hyperextension holding a weight behind the head: what could be more natural, after performing a set of ab-stretching Roman Chair sit-ups, than to flip over and replicate the same exercise, only in reverse? Phil felt the perfect compliment to the Roman Chair was the Prone Hyper. He would rise way up in the air, chin towards the ceiling, holding a light barbell behind the head or clutching a plate to his chest. The Russian lifters of this era loved the prone hyper, and men like 181-pound class Terminator Ivanchenko would work up to holding a 220 barbell behind the neck. Phil would keep the reps in the 5-15 rep range.
- 70-degree steep incline barbell press: Grippaldi’s number one assistance exercise was the steep incline press. No mention of the poundage used, but no doubt it was bar-bending. Again, from an Olympic press standpoint this exercise makes perfect sense. “I try and duplicate the lowest push point, the lowest layback angle I encounter performing a press in competition.” Lower the barbell all the way down and let it rest on the chest replicating the starting layback position. Imagine in your mind a referee’s clap and at that instant push upward; let the elbows flair slightly (not too much) as you struggle through the sticking point. Phil performed six sets of five reps. Please keep in mind he was using 300+ pounds for his top sets and he likely needed 3-4 warm-up sets to get there, perhaps 135x5, 185x5, 225x3, 275x2 then the work sets of 315x5 and 335x5. A normal human will only need a warm-up set or two before hitting 1-2 all-out top sets.
- Seated overhead dumbbell press: Phil relates, “The dumbbells should be held as if they were a single barbell. I perform six sets of five reps. I jump up in 10 pound dumbbell increments.” One could easily imagine Phil warming up with the 100s. After all, weighing less than 200, this man pressed 350 (or more) 30 + times in competition. We advise traveling “up the rack,” Phil-style, by taking five pound jumps; as in 40s for 5, 45s for 5, 50s for five and again 50s for five – you get the idea. Heavy seated dumbbell presses require good clean technique. Position the dumbbells in front of the bench, snap them to the clean position, sit down with power and never relax leg tension throughout the set. Unless you’re using 150s, no need to have someone hand the dumbbells to you.

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- Push press: Phil would do these by stepping back from the squat racks, dipping and then straightening the knees, jolting the weight to about  $\frac{3}{4}$ s complete – at which point the triceps and front deltoids are overloaded and stressed maximally. Which is the idea. “I think the push press helps me tremendously with my speed and drive.” Phil felt this super-heavy exercise was a push-jerk and required that the lifter handle *more poundage* than they used in the Olympic press. Because it was so taxing, demanding, heavy and potentially dangerous, he recommended less volume and fewer reps: five sets of three reps.
- Bench press: it was unfashionable for Olympic weightlifters to perform bench presses. The rationale was that flat benching tightened the shoulders to such a degree that the downside (inflexible shoulders that destroyed snatching) far outweighed potential benefits (improved pressing power.) *Those in the know simply didn't bench press.* Phil thought that was nonsensical – why can't a large powerful muscle be just as pliable as a smaller weaker muscle? If big and small muscles used the identical stretching and flexibility protocols alike – why couldn't the large powerful muscles be just as flexible as smaller weaker muscles? “I believe that the bench press does not impede the Olympic press. I would recommend performing shoulder dislocates with a broomstick, before, during and after a bench press session.”
- Isotonic/isometric rack pressing: back in the day, partial rep training was very much in vogue. There was actually a lot to recommend about rack work: the concept was simple; take any lift and break it down into three equal rep-stroke parts, bottom, middle and top. In the overhead rack press, the lifter would set the pins so the “1st position” started at the collarbone and ended at the nose. The 2nd position starts at nose level and ended at the top of the head. The 3rd top position push started slightly above the forehead and ended at lockout. The protocol was to move the bar over the 6-10 inch rep stroke for three reps. At the conclusion of the 3rd rep, the bar would be held against the top pin (or held in lockout) for 3-5 seconds. “If the lifter has a sticking point (and we all do), it can be overcome using the isometric rack. I would concentrate on one of the three positions – wherever your particular sticking point is – and do extra rack work. I recommend three rep sets, holding the 3rd rep against the top pin – and not more than four sets per position. Heavy weights must be handled.”

Here is how Phil would “group” his press assistance exercises:

### **“Various Routines for Pressing Workouts”**

<b>Routine A</b>	Seated dumbbell presses	6 sets of 5 reps	10-pound jumps
	Push press	3 sets of 3-5 reps	speed and lockout
<b>Routine B</b>	Steep incline press	6 sets of 5 reps	two all-out top sets
	Olympic press for technique	8 sets of 3 reps	alternate w/ incline
<b>Routine C</b>	Isotonic rack	4 sets of 3 reps	sticking point only
	Seated dumbbell presses	6 sets of 5 reps	10-pound jumps

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Phil would use a particular routine until he felt the progress had plateaued. He would rotate amongst these three programs, depending on how the spirit moved him. He cautions users of this system to always keep in mind that this is an “off-season” program. In Phil’s day, the competitive lifting season would usually start in February with the Philly Open and conclude in November at the World Championships, assuming he won the Nationals that summer and made the world team – which he did nearly every year. In those rare years he didn’t make the world team, his competitive season could be over as early as June. During his campaign season, he would drop all press assistance work and concentrate 100% on his competition press technique.

Regardless of the season, Grippaldi had a pre-workout ritual. “Prior to every workout the lifter should employ stretching and loosening up exercises. I will do, in quick succession, rapid toe touches, frog kicks off a bench, hanging leg raises, overhead squats with a broomstick, dislocates and rapid twists.” Phil was both explosive and powerful, and used pauses in his pressing to build his notoriously explosive start. “Practice pressing with both a short and long clap; pause the bar on the chest between all reps; no rebounding or bouncing.”

Another potential avenue of press progress was direct tricep work. Early in his career Phil did a lot of tricep work; he built his huge arms as a teenager performing lots of narrow-grip bench presses, lying nose-breakers and seated and standing overhead tricep extensions done with a single dumbbell. Phil was known for his machine-like lockout and that early and intense tricep work laid the foundation.

Be smart and learn the Olympic press. Once you do, be even smarter and try some of the training tactics and techniques used by one of the greatest pressers in modern history, Phil Grippaldi.

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**Marty Gallagher** has been a national and world champion masters powerlifter and is widely considered one of the best writers in the iron game. Since 1978 he has written over 1000 articles published in a dozen publications. He has authored more than 100 articles for *Muscle & Fitness* magazine and produced 230 weekly [live online columns](#) for the Washington Post. Gallagher has coached some of the biggest names in powerlifting and witnessed some of the greatest strength feats of the last half century. If you like his style pick up a copy of his masterwork, [\*The Purposeful Primitive\*](#).

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