

# Starting Strength

## Intermediate Programming for the Upper Body Lifts

by

Nick Delgadillo

If you're going to take a proper approach to programming, you'll start with the Starting Strength Novice Linear Progression, absorb the fact that stress has to increase over time and that the ability to recover from stress increases over time, and then go through your training log to make sure you've done the program. After this, you'll pick up *Practical Programming* and actually read the book instead of just jumping to the program examples, and then you'll make changes as required, gradually and as few at a time as possible, with the goal of adding weight to the bar in a time frame that's appropriate for your level of training advancement and for each specific lift.

As you're running your LP, you're improving your ability to produce force (getting stronger) and improving your ability to recover from the stress each workout provides. As that process is happening and programming changes become necessary, it's critical to manipulate the fewest variables possible while keeping in mind that stress must increase.

With the big lifts like the squat, deadlift, and (to a lesser extent) the bench, adding weight to an inherently stressful lift, even at a reduced volume may continue to drive adaptation for a good amount of time. This is absolutely not the case for the press because the limiting factor in the press is not how much weight you can lock out over your head for most people. There are other factors involved including:



**1. The upper limit for how much you will ever press is much closer to the load at which you start training the press than it is for any other lift.** If you started your LP with a 75 lb press, you will have a hell of a time pressing much over 200 lbs without lots of programming changes along the way. But, you may have started your LP with a 95 lb squat and could reasonably be expected to squat in the mid to high 300s with very little modification to the NLP. The press will move from novice programming through to advanced programming much sooner than any of the other lifts.

## *Intermediate Programming for the Upper Body Lifts*

**2. The press needs to be practiced.** Because of the long kinetic chain and the need for proper position and balance under the bar, the press is the most technique dependent of the 4 basic lifts you'll learn on day 1 of the program. You need to practice pressing heavy, especially as you reach late intermediate and advanced levels of programming for the press.

**3. The press is not heavy.** I don't mean that "heavy" presses aren't hard, I mean that a 135 lb press for a 200 lb man or a 70 lb press for a 145 lb woman does not represent a huge stress. Even if it's done a bunch of times.

So, the bad news is that if you want your press to go up, you're going to have to press more. The good news is that you can press a bunch and not tear yourself up. That may actually be bad news too.

Depends on the person, I guess, but the point is that a lack of improvement on your press is not a recovery issue, it's an adequate stress issue. When you fail the 4th and 5th rep of your last two sets of 5, it's because the loads you're using are not heavy enough to make your press stronger, and you're not good enough at pressing to control the last two reps under fatigue conditions to be able to add more weight next time. Most people at this point switch to 3 sets of 3 in order to get more weight on the bar, end up getting frustrated, and the downward spiral continues until you end up with an overpriced press programming template you bought from an Instagram profile.

I realize this is confusing, but to put it simply, if you've lowered your overall volume on the press to go from a 135 lb press to a 150 lb press, and you weigh 200+ lbs, how much more stress does that 15 lb increase at a drastically reduced volume represent? Especially considering that your other lifts are continuing to go up and your recovery ability is further improving. This is a likely explanation for the hard wall most of us experience fairly early on in training the press.

What, then, is the solution? A common approach is to put the upper body lifts on the Texas Method because the Texas Method is harder, right? So you open up *Practical Programming* and look up the Texas Method, do some calculations and start alternating a bench focused week and a press focused week: 5x5 on the main lift for the week on Monday and 1x5 on Friday, light work on the secondary lift for the week on Wednesday. The following week you alternate the main lift. By now, you should be able to immediately see why this is a problem. You've gone from adding weight to the bar three times every two weeks on the press during the LP, to adding weight to the bar one time every two weeks on press intensity day. Yeah, you've got some 5x5 volume days in there, but how hard is a 5x5 volume day for a guy pressing 150 lbs for a couple of triples on intensity day every other week? You're in the Seventh Circle now and Dante and The Minotaur look on pityingly, wondering what your next move will be.

In most instances, changing to a Texas Method setup for the press and bench is a good idea, but you actually have to make it harder than what you were doing on the LP. Let me get to the point and suggest the following:

**Run a compressed Texas Method for your upper body lifts.** There will be no light days, you'll just do all of your volume and intensity work for both lifts in the same week. The initial setup looks like this:

Monday: 5x5 Bench Press @ 90% of Friday's planned intensity day weight.

Wednesday: 5x5 Strict Press @ 90-95% of your last completed set of 5 at the end of your LP.

Friday: 5-7 Press Singles @ 2-5 lbs more than your last "heavy" press workout AND 1x5 Bench.

## *Intermediate Programming for the Upper Body Lifts*

You'll have to play with the loads a little bit, but it's okay to start a little bit light. Don't stress out about it too much. Now you're benching and pressing twice a week, getting practice on heavy press singles, and increasing overall upper body stress. How many singles you do on Friday for the press depends on how bad your press is. If you're a decent presser, do five. If your press is seriously behind, do 7. Doing the strict press on volume day makes things a little bit harder to make up for the lighter weight. This also helps you work on bar path issues with a lighter weight while still making the volume day hard. You won't need more than a couple minutes rest for the singles or for the 5x5 strict press. Rest normally for the bench press.

This kind of setup is very well suited for a 4 day split. Once you start doing upper/lower splits, try this:

Upper Day 1 - Strict Press 5x5, 1x5 Bench Press

Upper Day 2 - Press 10x1, 5x5 Bench Press

You'll have to adjust the volume bench day load taking into account the heavy press singles. Thanks to Andy Baker for injecting this idea into my brain. This is a modification of a program I saw on Andy's website involving heavy singles peaking over six weeks. For you, just add weight to the bar every week.

When adding weight to the press singles across every week stops working, the next change will be to give yourself a range of weights to hit for the singles. For example, if your PR press is 230 lbs, you'll hit 10 singles between 215 to 225. As more of the singles get closer to 225 week after week, move the range up by 5 lbs. Now you're training the press both like a heavy barbell lift once a week through the volume work, and you're practicing heavy press singles like you would a snatch or a jerk on your intensity day. It works great.

Stop being frustrated with your progress on the press. By focusing on training and practicing the press through the use of 5x5s and heavy singles every week, you'll be able to get it unstuck. Your progress won't be fast, but you'll see progress. And you'll get better at reproducing a good press with a heavy weight every time you step out of the rack.

---

[Starting Strength](#) : [Articles](#) : [Videos](#) : [Podcasts](#) : [Training](#) : [Forums](#)

Copyright 2019 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.