

Starting Strength

Mike MacDonald: The Unlikeliest Bench Press King

“A strength riddle tucked inside an enigma wrapped in a paradox.”

by
Marty Gallagher

The pleasant looking young man in the photo is Mike MacDonald. He is 28 years old, stands 5'9" inches and weighed 195 pounds at the time this photo was shot in 1978. Later that same day he bench pressed 560 pounds, raw, paused, in official competition. “Mac,” like John Kuc, defied strength reality; he was an iron bumblebee, in that physicists have determined with great certainty that, from a structural and engineering standpoint, the bumblebee is physically incapable of flight – or should be, based upon intense analysis and factoring in all the known laws of aerodynamics and thermodynamics – yet fly the portly bumblebee does, defying science and logic and seemingly in defiance of Nature herself.

To watch Mac bench press was to witness the impossible. Mike MacDonald was the iron equivalent of the humble bumblebee; he was a muscle-less, bench press grand maestro that lifted incredible poundage using a completely unorthodox Old School training approach that still makes modernists cringe and rant hysterically about the “inapplicability” and “nonsensical” nature of Mac’s training approach. Mike was a rebel: he liked to bench press and he bench pressed often; he lived on a steady diet of single-rep bench presses. He used a meager four exercises to build one of the most awesome bench press resumes in history. Never in the history of strength sports did one small man get so much out of so little.

The bench press is the most practiced of all free-weight progressive resistance exercises, and has been since the 1960s, when the bench press overtook the overhead press as the most practiced lift, the yardstick/benchmark, for real men training in real gyms. A large part of the bench press’s overwhelming popularity was (and is) due to the amazing upper body benefits the properly performed bench press bestows upon its dedicated practitioners.

A cursory glance at the bench press superstars of yesteryear reveals an across-the-board commonality: big-ass muscles. The Kings of the Bench Press are muscular giants: heavily developed in the upper and lower pecs, front delts, triceps and even the lats – an elite bench presser uses the flexed



Mike in 1978: “Mac looked like Jane, lifted like Tarzan.”

Mike MacDonald

lats as a braking mechanism while lowering massive poundage; they will also use the contracted lats as a foundational launch pad for the concentric push phase. Indeed, one need only reexamine photos of the bench greats at their respective peaks to verify our contention that, though they might vary in height and structure, big benchers had lots of muscle!

There have been a slim few “muscle-less” bench press wonders, men with very little (relatively speaking) muscle that have held world bench press records. The two supreme and outstanding examples are Ric Weil circa 1985 and Mike MacDonald circa 1979. Ric was as unimposing as Mac; imagine, Weil, a man so slight that with extended fingers he could not touch the edges of a five pound plate (try it!) Ric broke a dozen world bench press records and this slim 5’5” man eventually raw bench pressed an astounding 551 pounds weighing 180. No one has come close to that mark in the 28 years since it was set. Ric was diminutive, yet ungodly strong in the bench press, for some inexplicable reason.

The unlikeliest of all bench press world record holders was, is, and likely forever shall be, Mike MacDonald. Mike started setting world records when he was skinny as a basketball point guard on an Indiana high school team. The then 179 pound string-bean of a man bench pressed 484 pounds in the 181 pound class for his first world record. Mike eventually pushed his 181 pound class WR up to 522 pounds – with 15.5 inch arms. MacDonald was the first man to set world record bench presses in four different weight classes. In addition to having no muscle, he also was further disadvantaged in that he was extremely light boned: his wrists measured a miniscule 6.75 inches, whereas 8-inch + wrists were and are the norm for bench press monster men. Heavy, thick bones, dense as forged steel, are ideal for moving massive weight; the ideal bench presser has the structure of a rhino, not a gazelle. Mac was a gazelle amongst rhinos.

Over his decade-long career, MacDonald pushed his bodyweight up and down, setting world records at all stops along the way; he went as low as 175 pounds in bodyweight and as high as 232 pounds. Weighing 232 pounds Mike bench pressed an astounding 625 pounds, paused. While Mike looked gaunt and anemic at 180 pounds, he looked trim and athletic at 195. At 230 pounds he looked dumpy, frumpy, non-athletic and chubby. When he was heavy, Mike looked more like an out-of-shape accountant at H&R Block than the greatest bench presser in the world. At every bodyweight he was phenomenal; Mike was a strength riddle tucked inside an enigma wrapped in a paradox. Anyone that ever saw the Minnesota native in action, benching some ungodly poundage, all had the same reaction, “How in the hell does he do that?! How can such a normal looking dude bench press so much?” Everything about Mike McDonald seemed impossible; he was in obvious defiance of Nature and science and logic.

Mike was a Vietnam veteran that came home and began competing in the then new sport of powerlifting. Mike came out of the Minnesota power scene that has produced a veritable parade of all-star strength greats, including Don Reinhoudt, Mel Hennessey, Don Cundy (the first man to deadlift 800 officially), the Gillingham Boys and the late great Jerry Jones. Add Mike MacDonald’s name to that long list of Minnesota strongmen. McDonald had always been freaky strong in the bench press. While still in high school at age 17 he bench pressed 320 weighing 160 pounds, this done sporting a pipsqueak pair of 14.5 inch arms. I stood next to an old time power man as we watched MacDonald set a world record at 181 in Pennsylvania. “Mac looks like Jane but lifts like Tarzan.” It was the first time I’d ever heard that particular strength cliché used.

McDonald, when he was young and light, looked like a blond frat boy. Later in life he looked like someone’s dad watching their 10-year-old daughter at a youth soccer game. You would not even think the guy trained. Then he would lie down on the bench and nonchalantly (he would often wear his penny loafer street shoes) work up to 600 + pounds, without a liftoff or a spotter.

Mike MacDonald

In the top photo of young Mike, he is shown standing behind his patented “cambered bar.” The cambered bar was all the rage in power and strength circles for a short while. Mike invented it because he could no longer perform dumbbell bench presses, his favorite barbell bench press assistance exercise. He was such a strong bench presser, even by hardcore standards, that the heaviest dumbbells were now insufficiently heavy for Mike. He pondered and thought and eventually visualized a bent barbell that would replicate the deep, below-the-chest pre-stretch effect he got using heavy dumbbells. Giant dumbbells are awkward and somewhat dangerous to get into place. They are equally dangerous when the set is done and it is time to be shed of the twin monsters.

The cambered bar died for a couple of reasons: its unyielding nature caused a lot of shoulder problems for an unacceptably large percentage of users. Dumbbells, as they are lowered and raised, allow for hand shifts, adjustments and wrist rotation. Mike’s cambered bar locked the arms and shoulders into place and for many lifters caused undue shoulder and wrist stress. Mere mortals that seek to replicate Mike’s approach can continue to use dumbbells. To mimic Mike’s cambered bar effect, use dumbbells and allow them to sink below the level of the chest at the bottom of each bench press. To make the tough tougher, Mike used excruciatingly long pauses – 5 seconds per rep!

Mike would bench press three times per week. His pre-competition tactic was to concentrate on strict, single-rep lifts using his 32-inch grip width, and hit max poundage three times a week. This was a competition bench pressing that stressed explosiveness. Mike used a grand total of four exercises for his entire upper body training program: the competition-style bench press, usually done for single reps sets. This was augmented in the same training session with partial-rep barbell lockouts followed by the cambered bar paused reps and finally the standing overhead tricep behind the head press. That was it.

Mike McDonald training session

At his heaviest bodyweight Mike performed this workout:

Bench Press: 135x5, 2 sets; 325x1, 3 sets; 425x1; 525x1; 625x1

Sticking Point Lockouts: 475 x 3, 475 x 3 (75% of max)

Cambered bar paused bench presses: 435 x 3 for three sets (each rep paused for 5 seconds; 70%)

Overhead tricep press: 205x6, 255x6, 305x6, 255x6

At his peak Mike MacDonald bench pressed three times per week: that’s no typo. In the 1970s, when Mac was peaking, bodybuilders such as Arnold, Robbie, Sergio and Franco were all training body parts thrice weekly. Nowadays three times weekly for a body part is considered sacrilegious and a surefire way to become “over-trained.” One genius motto of that simpler era was, “There is no such thing as over-training – only under-eating.” To compound his sacrilegious and heretical frequency, MacDonald worked up to a maximum single three times a week. He liked to do single-rep max benches, and he got damned good at them.

He made it work (single reps/thrice weekly benching) by cutting way back on “normal” bench assistance work, eschewing completely certain muscles and muscle groups. MacDonald did no bicep work, no lat work, no shoulder work, no incline presses, no overhead pressing, and he used one tricep exercise. His purposeful paucity of exercises enabled him to train the bench often and max out frequently. MacDonald would blow off a session if there was any residual soreness from the previous

Mike MacDonald

session. If he detected any pec/delt/tricep/lat/trap soreness he would skip the session. If he felt “off” psychologically, he would adjust the max single for that particular session.

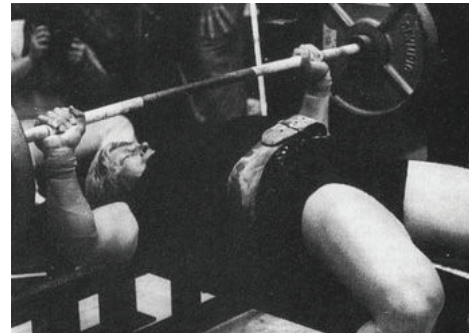
The lone MacDonald exercise that wasn't some type of flat bench press was his unique tricep press that was done standing. This movement resembled a close grip press-behind-the-neck and allowed MacDonald to blast his triceps with big poundage. He would set up inside a power rack, setting the pins at eyeball height. He would take a thumb-less grip, his hands about 12-15 inches apart, and push the first rep to arm's length overhead. He would then lower the barbell down and back, like a behind the neck press, to a point about two inches behind the back of his head. He would then press the barbell straight up to complete lockout. He was bull strong in this exercise and could press 305 pounds for 6 strict reps.

Trainees should substitute long-pause (5 seconds per rep) dumbbell bench presses for Mike's cambered bar bench presses. Mike was a big fan of Texas bench press king Ronnie Ray, and one of Ronnie's favored tactics for finishing one of his marathon bench press sessions was to perform a final single rep, paused on the chest for 30 seconds – with 405 pounds. You can see how Ray influenced Mac's thinking; MacDonald would perform three sets of three reps with five-second pauses on each rep – Mac could use 435 pounds. When he used his cambered bar, Mike wanted to feel “burning and stretching.” MacDonald felt that driving up the cambered bar poundage resulted in proportional increase in his regular bench press.

Here are Mike's bench maximums in the differing weight classes:

- 181 pound class 522
- 198 pound class 562
- 220 pound class 603
- 242 pound class 635 (weighing 232)

Mike's best official lift was 608 made in 1977. It took 29 years for someone to break this raw bench record mark, set by a man that looked like a clerk at Home Depot. Mike won the second most prestigious national powerlifting in 1977 when he won the Junior National Powerlifting Championships. Mike set a new world bench press record with a 539 pound effort. Mike also squatted 655, deadlifted 640 and totaled 1,835 as a 198-pound lifter. He won his weight class and also won the overall Best Lifter trophy.



No tricks or contortions, Mike benches 600 weighing 230 with a 17 inch arm.

How to Bench Like Mike

So what lessons can an intermediate student of the bench press, looking to up his bench press game, learn from Mac? The workout snapshot provides one of many strategies McDonald would use over the course of his training year. Still, it is illustrative of how the best in the world benched prior to a major competition. Like Mark Chaillet, Mac was not afraid of single-rep lifts done in training. He obviously felt that a period of single-rep bench pressing, immediately before a competition, made for an excellent competitive dress rehearsal. Here is a hypothetical five-week competition peaking template; this is for a

Mike MacDonald

170-pound man with a 300-pound bench press (1.77 times bodyweight) looking to become a far more muscular 180 pound man with a 330 bench press (1.80 times bodyweight.)

McDonald viewed the single-rep bench press as an opportunity to work on his bench press technique. So should you. He benched explosively and felt that explosiveness in a single-rep context was a learned skill that should be practiced in the single-rep format. Mike backed up his explosive paused singles with long-pause cambered bar benches: The expert use of dumbbells replicates the results derived front Mike's cambered bar. Dumbbells allow for shifting wrist position on both raising and lowering; this lessens shoulder strain.

I would strongly recommend doing any partial-rep bench pressing in a power rack; set the pins just below elbow height. Take the bench off the support pins and lower down until the barbell hovers just over top of the pins; push upward to full and compete lockout for all three reps. Here is how a hypothetical 170 pound man with a 300 pound competitive bench press would drive upward to the next level in a five week timeframe: use 4 weeks to prep for a new max attempt in week 5. Each week drive the bodyweight upward by two pounds. This is predicated on starting off this 5-week peak cycle lean and light and in top physical condition. The best way to add quality bodyweight is start off a mass building phase coming off of a lean-out phase. Adding quality bodyweight is critical for making this type of routine work.

Five Week Peak, McDonald style:

Week	bench press	dumbbell paused bench	lockout bench press	bodyweight
1	280 x 1	70-pound bells, 3 sets of 3	235 for 2 sets of 3	172
2	295 x 1	80-pound bells, 3 sets of 3	245 for 2 sets of 3	174
3	310 x 1	90-pound bells, 3 sets of 3	255 for 2 sets of 3	176
4	325 x 1	95-pound bells, 3 sets of 3	265 for 2 sets of 3	178

Competition 335 @ 180

The single rep top sets illustrated in the chart would be performed after a through warm-up...

Week 1	135x10, 185x3, 225x1, 255x1 then 280x1
Week 2	135x10, 195x3, 235x1, 265x1 then 295x1
Week 3	135x10, 195x3, 235x1, 275x1, then 310x1
Week 4	135x10, 205x3, 245x1, 275x1, 305x1 then 325x1

Competition: 1st attempt, 300; second attempt, 320; 3rd attempt, 335

We start off this five week mini-cycle at 10% under capacity and end up at 10% over and above capacity. In addition we add bodyweight; 6% in five weeks. This requires a serious commitment to eating. This is another reason why it is important to come into this cycle lean and light and existing on a low-calorie (relatively speaking) diet. This way, when the hypothetical trainee swings into this low volume, low rep, power peaking routine, by having a low caloric ceiling, adding back in calories should make the requisite two pound per week weight gain relatively effortless, at least for the first

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three weeks. By the middle of week three the athlete will have to pay attention to the scale and do what is necessary to hit the weekly bodyweight goals.

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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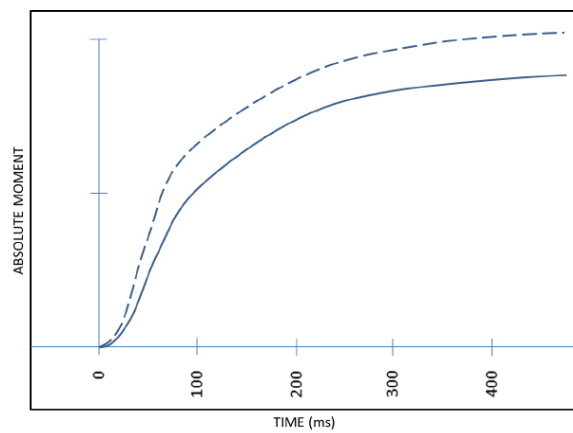


Figure 2.

Mike MacDonald

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