

Masterclass Four

Welcome to the fourth in a series of articles specifically written for novice and developing powerlifters. The aim of this series is to deliver advice and information as a starting point for new lifters, who are trying to find their feet in the sport.

It is recommended that before you make any major alterations to your technique or start lifting heavy weights competitively you should consult an experienced coach or senior power lifter for more specific advice.

Assistance

Improvements to your strength within the three 'core' lifts can be achieved by the use of assistance exercises. The type of exercise you select to support the main lift is entirely down to the individual and is a very personal decision.

We all have strengths and weaknesses and therefore should design an assistance program personal to your own development. Exercises should be selected that relate to the 'core' lifts like the ones mentioned in this article.

I've selected these particular exercises because they are ones that I've had personal experience of in the past. If you have a favorite assistance exercises and would like to share this in the BDFPA website coaching section, then my contact details are below.

Squat

Back squatting twice a week is pretty tough going, so you could try varying your technique in your second session. For example you could do front squats where the bar rests on the front of your shoulders, instead of the back of your shoulders.

The poundage is lighter for front squats, and the weight is distributed onto the Quad muscles at the front of the leg. The weights are lighter than back squats (commonly around 60%-70%) which reduces the weekly impact on your body.

Another popular variation to the squat is the 'High Bar' squat, where the bar is purposely raised to the highest possible point on the shoulders. This places more pressure on the smaller supporting thigh and back muscles making the lift more difficult.

Once again this should be attempted with no more than 60%-70% of your maximum squat poundage. It is especially recommended that people new to this exercise start off with lighter weights first.

Leg Extensions are another worthwhile exercise especially for people who have had knee injuries in the past. These are a seated machine exercise, where the lower leg from the knee down is raised up to the front.

They are good for strengthening thigh muscles and encouraging stability in the knee. This is especially useful if you're planning to squat with large weights. Leg extensions are used more for maintaining than for building strength.

Bench Press

Close grip bench pressing can be a good alternative to doing a second bench press session during the week. This exercise involves moving your handgrip inwards from your normal position.

This will make the press more difficult, and place pressure onto your triceps. Strong triceps are essential to building a strong bench press, and close grip will work your chest and triceps in combination.

Dips are another very useful combined chest and triceps exercise, which will help develop their strength for bench pressing. You should grip the dip bars and perform a movement that breaks ninety degrees at the elbow joint.

Specific triceps exercises such as Press Downs, or French Press are also very useful for complementing the exercises above. It's important to use Pressing exercises, as they are closer to the Bench press movement.

You should aim to isolate the triceps muscle as much as possible when doing these exercises, as this will help build more strength. Be sure to increase weight in small increments to avoid picking up injuries.

Shoulders

Shoulder strength is also important for Bench Pressing, and Standing Military Press is one of the best ways of doing this. Pressing to the front of your shoulders presents far less risk than pressing behind the neck, as the rotator cuff is not exposed.

You should press the bar above your head to full lock out, without assistance from the knees. Any assistance from the knees will defeat the object of the exercise to build strength.

Another very good shoulder exercise is One Arm Press, used a lot in the past by Bulgarian weight lifters. The aim is to press a dumbbell from your shoulder, again without movement from the legs.

Only one side is trained at a time, and the other arm is used as a counterbalance. This makes this exercise very difficult and therefore very effective at building strength. It is particularly useful for people who have suffered shoulder, or chest injuries in the past as each side is forced to fend for itself.

Deadlift

The Deadlift takes the most out of a lifter of any exercise, and therefore assistance work should maybe be kept to a minimum. Lifting out of a rack, or off blocks is sometimes used as an alternative to the full movement off the floor.

As the height of the rack can be altered, this allows for partial movements. This means that a particularly weak area, or "sticking" point can be worked on. If you struggle to finish at the top of movement this allows you to work those last few inches.

An alternative exercise to lifting out of the rack, or partial movements could be straight legged deadlift, which works the hamstring area more than when deadlifting itself. Once again be sure to start with lighter weights to safeguard from injury.

Remember, design a programme that suits you.

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Special thanks to BDFPA Chief Technical Officer Andy Davies and International Referee Mike Leadbetter for consulting on the Masterclass Articles. Lifters can find a list of causes for failure of lifts in the BDFPA handbook. (Pages 69 -72)