

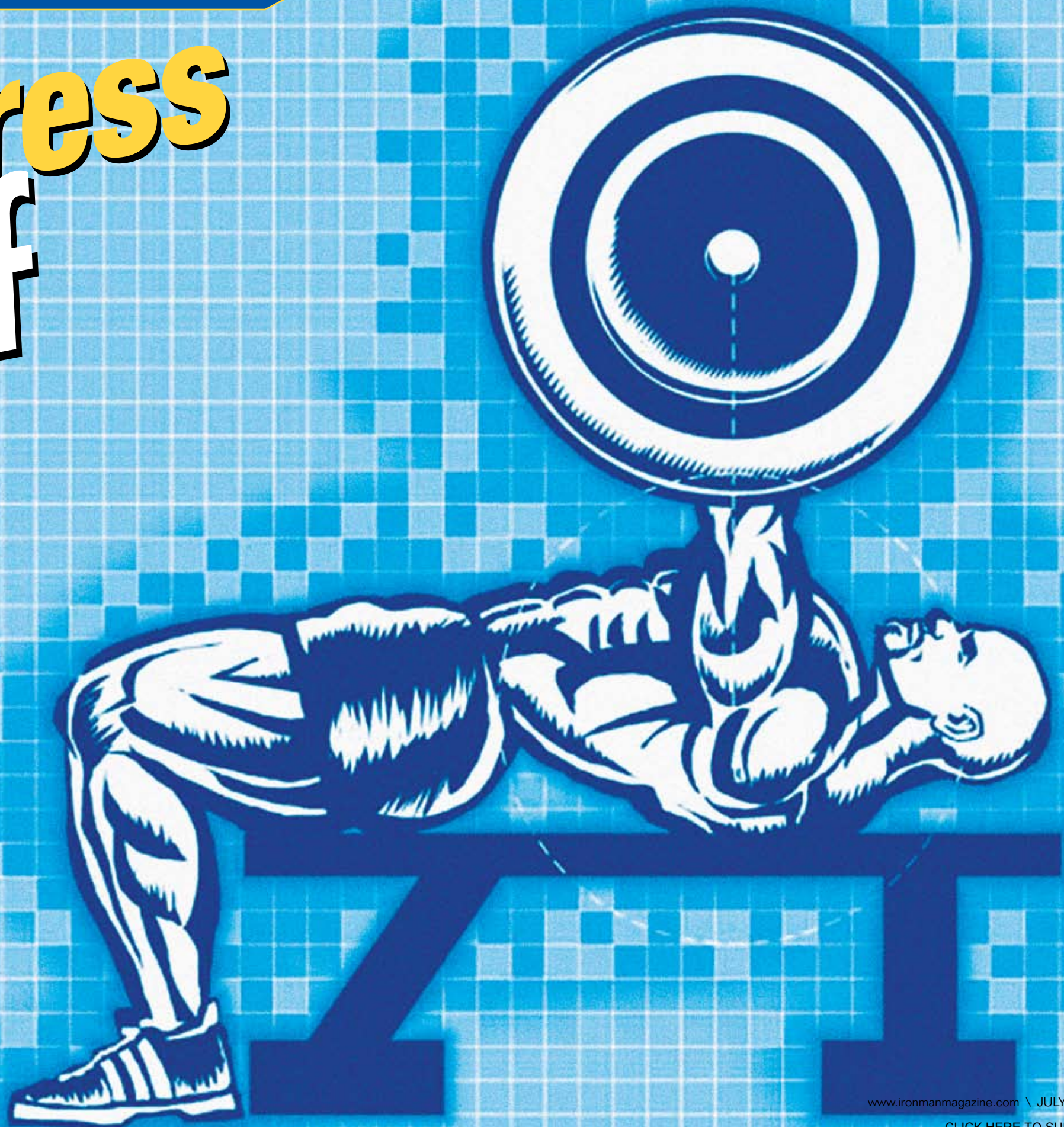
Bench Press Blastoff

With
Positional
Isometrics

• by Christopher Pennington •

Is it time for something new? Is it time to face reality and stop avoiding the painful truth? Has your bench press stalled? I've been there. At the time I didn't want to admit it, but my chest training had hit a major plateau. I simply wasn't getting anywhere. To make matters worse, the changes I made to my program didn't help either. I tried extra rest days, fiddling with the number of reps and sets and increasing my protein intake. Unfortunately, nothing worked. My body just wasn't responding. I needed something more—something new, something drastic! Enter positional isometrics.

Illustration by Jake Jones www.BodyBuildingUniverse.com



What Are Isometrics?

When you perform a normal rep, three types of muscular contractions take place: concentric, eccentric and isometric. An easier way to understand the different phases of a rep is to think of it as having a positive, negative and static portion.

During a bench press the concentric, or positive, phase occurs when the bar moves from your chest to the lockout position. The eccentric, or negative, phase takes place when you lower the bar from the lockout position back to your chest. The isometric, or static, phase is when no movement occurs. That phase is tough to spot during a “normal” rep; however, when you perform a bench press, the static phase occurs briefly two times: 1) after you lower the bar to your chest, at the point where you begin to push it back up; and 2) at the lockout position, right before you lower the weight. In other words, it occurs at the end of the eccentric phase, when the bar is on your chest, and at the end of the concentric phase, when the bar is at arm’s length.

As you can see, during a normal bench press rep you spend very little time in the isometric phase. That’s one reason why isometric training is so tough and works so well. Positional-isometric work places an enormous demand on your muscles by forcing them to contract in a way that they’re rarely called on to do. They’re forced to work on their own; you can’t use momentum to help cheat the weight up. Because of that, isometric contractions are brutally hard. The catch is, since you hit the isometric position only at the top and bottom of the bench press, you have to create your own “stops.”

A Brief History of Isometrics

Olympic weightlifters have long used isometric exercise as supplemental work in their training. They found that the intense muscular contraction they got from isometric training dramatically increased strength. They’d train the key lifts statically at several positions in a

power rack, and the strength they built with the static work would increase their strength when they performed a lift dynamically through the whole range of motion. [For more on the history of isometric training, see “Only the Strong Shall Survive” on page 224.]

Another form of isometrics that was used initially for increasing the strength of athletes comes from sports scientist Tudor Bompa. It involves inserting several isometric pauses in the middle of a rep to increase the difficulty. While performing a rep, you’d stop and hold the weight still for six to eight seconds, then continue the movement.

The first person to popularize the use of isometrics for increasing bench press strength was powerlifting great Chris Confessore, who performed the technique to bring

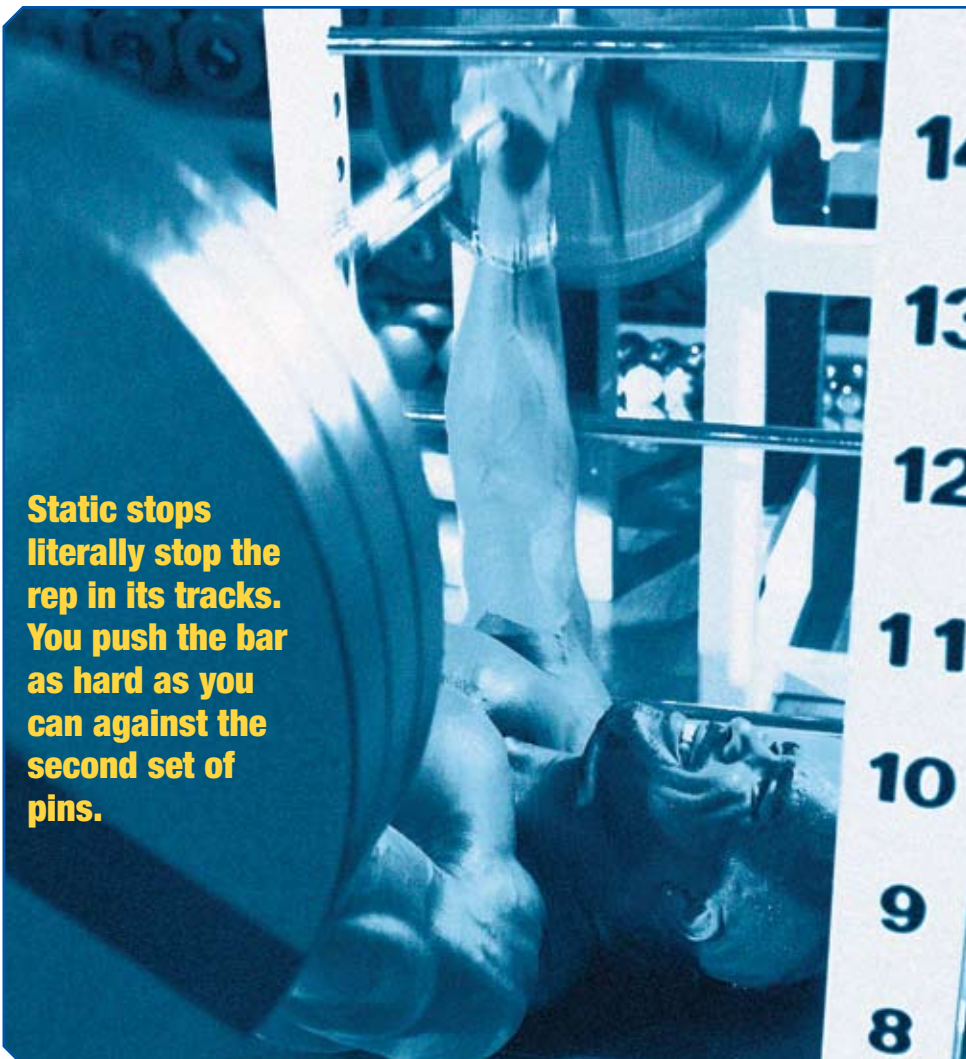
up a sticking point in his bench. I’ll bet a few bars were bent during those workouts!

Given isometric training’s obvious success in building strength, it may seem odd that trainees rarely talk about isometric techniques. The reason is the sheer difficulty of performing them. Positional isometrics are not fun. In fact, they’re grueling, and your muscles will ache after a hard workout.

Positional Isometrics: The Workouts

There are two ways to perform the movements, static stops and static holds.

Static stops. These involve setting the pins in a **power rack** at the specific position where you



Static stops literally stop the rep in its tracks. You push the bar as hard as you can against the second set of pins.

Neveux \ Model: Aaron Brunfield



Neveux \ Model: John Cowgill

For static holds you simply stop the rep at certain points and hold the weight still for three to 10 seconds.

want to work. You place the first set of pins just above your chest, where the rep starts from a dead stop. The second set goes to a higher position on the rack; that's where the isometric contraction will occur. As the name implies, static stops literally stop the rep in its tracks. You push the bar as hard as you can against the second set of pins.

Two methods work well on these. The first is to focus on one position during each chest workout. For example, you could set the pins at the midpoint of the range of motion and perform all your stops there. Then at your next chest workout you'd set the pins, say, six inches higher and work that position. You pick a different position at each workout until, after several weeks, you've covered the whole range of motion.



In the second method you train the whole range of motion statically, point by point, in one workout. So you have a choice between using many stops in one position in a single workout or using fewer stops per position but hitting the muscles from many more angles. Are you a little confused? Don't worry; I'll give you examples of workouts that feature all the different variations. Regardless of which you choose, as long as you push with all your might during the stop, you'll experience an intense muscular contraction.

Static holds. These are much different from static stops. You don't need a power rack because you do them within a normal bench press rep. You simply stop the rep at certain points and hold the weight still for three to 10 seconds. For example, during the eccentric phase, while you're bringing the bar down to your chest, you insert two holds, one at the midpoint of the stroke and one right above your chest. That method isn't normally used as a workout on its own but as a way of finishing off the muscle after the regular workout is completed.

I used all the different variations in my chest workouts during this period to blast my way out of the rut I was in. Note that the only drawback to static stops is the need for a power rack. If your gym doesn't have one, use the static-hold method exclusively. If you lift in a home gym, owning a power rack is a must. If you don't have one, go out and get one now. I conducted private-training sessions for years in my home gym before I opened up a larger facility, and during that time my power rack was the single most important piece of equipment I owned.

Increasing Bench Press Strength

Here are the workouts that can launch your bench press strength to new levels. They'll increase your strength and get you very sore in the process. So you get the best of both worlds, muscle strength and muscle growth.

Version 1 Positional Isometrics: Multiple Static Stops— Multiple Positions in Single Workout

Warmup: Perform the general warmup you'd normally do before any training session.

Bench presses 2 x 6
Don't use a six-rep-max weight. Use a weight that is closer to a seven- or eight-rep max; you want to work the muscle yet save

yourself for what's to come.

Bench presses 5 positions

- 1) Pins set directly above chest
- 2) Pins set halfway between chest and midpoint of rep
- 3) Pins set at midpoint
- 4) Pins set between midpoint and completion of rep
- 5) Pins set right below point where arms are straight

At each position perform three stops—eight seconds apiece with a minute's rest between stops. Take two to three minutes' rest when

**Static Contraction vs. Partial:
A Muscle-Building X-periment**

If you've tried static-contraction, or isometric, training and didn't get the results you were after, or you just don't like straining without movement like you're frozen in an eye-bulging time warp, we've got a solution that can build muscle faster (it certainly did for us). We used a form of static contraction for a number of weeks, but it just didn't feel right—kind of unnatural. Plus, we didn't get the size we were looking for. Yes, we did build some strength with it, which we believe is because static contraction is ideal for developing the nervous system. If you're looking for a bigger bench press, we suggest you give Christopher Pennington's Positional Isometrics ideas, discussed in "Bench Press Blastoff," a try. If, however, you're after muscle size, you may want to try our adaptation, which involves some movement. We believe that without some movement the muscle fibers aren't taxed sufficiently for growth stimulation. And a lot of scientists agree, including Dr. Phillip Gardiner of the University of Manitoba: "The nervous system is tuned to performance of tasks, not just generation of force, so it can be easier to get complete recruitment of muscles if something moves."

We found that to be absolutely true, which is why we moved from static contractions to partial pulses, or X Reps. They simply force more fiber recruitment rather than only building neuromuscular efficiency. We used our X Reps at the end of a set to positive



Models: Steve Holman and Jonathan Lawson

failure, and we usually performed them at the max-force point. Where is that? Generally, it's where the target muscle is somewhat stretched but not completely elongated, as full stretch actually weakens muscle contractability. For example, on the bench press it's right below the middle of the stroke.

So to use X Reps on the bench press, you do a set till you know you can't possibly get another full rep, and then you lower to just below the midpoint and pulse. You want to have an on-the-ball spotter, be in a power rack or use a Smith machine because when you fail, the bar is coming down. You should be able to pulse five to six times in the max-force-point area.

We found that one X-Rep set was enough. We usually did a few progressively heavier warmups, one positive-failure set of eight to 10 reps and then one final set to failure that included X Reps. Our strength gains were good, but our size gains were off the charts for us. We made some of our greatest strides in muscle size in only one month by using the technique on one set of selected exercises.

Another way to use the power-partial technique that we've been experimenting with is what we call X Overload. You perform a set to failure, then quickly add weight to the bar, which gives you a little rest. Then you immediately get back under the bar and perform a heavy X-Rep overload set, doing only the power partials. Once again, a spotter, power rack or Smith machine is mandatory for safety reasons. X Overload worked especially well for us on our last set of Smith-machine incline presses.

If you want to see what power partials did for us, check out our before and after photos at www.X-Rep.com (Jonathan's are on page 77). If our results are any indication, X Reps could be the mass-boosting technique that will put some freak on your physique.

—Steve Holman and Jonathan Lawson
www.X-Rep.com

changing the pin position for your next set of stops.

Through experience I've found that using the longer rest periods between positions results in better gains. It's important to have enough energy to push with all your might. You want the intense fatigue to come from a strong isometric contraction, not from a lack of rest and recovery between stops. This workout will get your pecs, triceps and front delts cooking!

**Version 2
Positional Isometrics:
Multiple Static Stops—
Single-Position Workout**

Warmup: Perform the general warmup you'd normally do before any training session.

**Bench presses 2 x 6
Bench presses 1 position**

1) Pins set at position to be worked
Do 10 stops of 12 seconds each, with one to 1 1/2 minutes' rest between stops

Bench presses 2 x 8

The key to getting good results from a single-position stop workout is to make sure you're doing enough work at that angle. It's also important to perform the full-range bench press before and after the isometric-stop sets.

**Workout 3
Positional Isometrics:
Multiple Static Holds for a
Single Exercise**

Remember that you don't need a power rack for this version, as you simply hold the rep at several points along the exercise without pushing against pins. The key to making static holds work is to use a lighter weight than what you would normally use for benches.

Bench presses 3 x 8
(two minutes between sets)

Bench presses (static-hold) 3 x 4
Eccentric phase: Do 3 holds of 3 seconds each
Concentric phase: Do 3 holds of 3 seconds each



Model: Jonathan Lawson

In both the eccentric and concentric phases you perform the holds right below the lockout position, at the midpoint of the rep and

right above your chest.

Start with a weight you can normally get 10 reps with. That's really important, as the only way you'll be

You may want to attack other bodyparts, like biceps, with isometric work to jack up nerve strength.

able to do the static holds is if you use a weight you can easily handle. As your body adjusts to static-hold training, you can begin to play around with more weight.

I got such great results with positional isometrics that I set up a power rack in my own gym. If you use the technique regularly, you'll be amazed by your progress. Use it to take your biceps training to new heights. It's a tough technique that you can apply to many muscle groups to jump-start gains!

Editor's note: Chris Pennington is a private strength coach who specializes in the development of athletes. **IM**