

Starting Strength

The press is the oldest upper body exercise using a barbell. The day the barbell was invented, the guy that invented it figured out a way to pick it up and put it on his shoulders and shove it up over his head. After all, it is a logical thing to do with a weight.

Equipment has changed quite a bit over the past hundred or so years. We now have barbells that load with plates, racks to set our bars in that adjust to various heights so that we don't always have to clean them to our shoulders first, and even plates made out of rubber in case we need to drop the weight. But pressing the barbell overhead is still the most useful upper body exercise in the weight room.

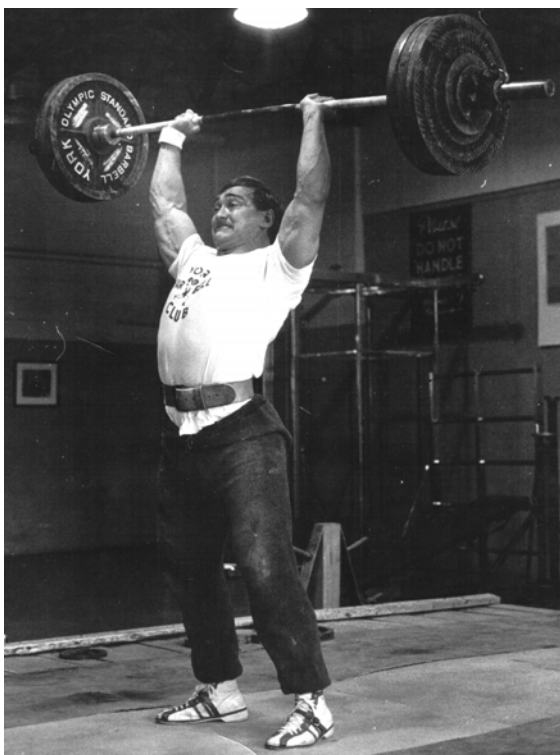


Figure 1. The press was and is a mainstay for upper body strength development. In this photo circa 1969, Bill Starr, now retired NFL and NCAA strength coach, presses 350 in the gym.

the importance of the overhead version of the press among those training primarily for strength. The final nail in the coffin was the elimination of the Clean and Press from Olympic weightlifting competition in 1972. The exercise has continued its decline in both popularity and familiarity, to the extent that today one is quite likely to hear a seated behind-the-neck press described as a “military press.”

Back then, the standard test of upper body strength was the Press, or more correctly, the Two-hands Press. The popularity of the bench press has changed this, to the detriment of athletes and lifters that never obtain the benefits of this more balanced exercise. Bench pressing, a contest lift in powerlifting, actually became popular among bodybuilders first, when large pectorals became the fashion in physique contests starting in the 1950s. Powerlifting incorporated the bench press as a standard contest lift in the mid-1960s, thus diminishing

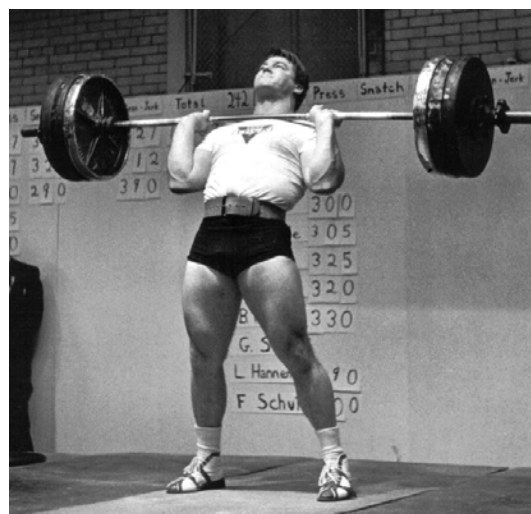


Figure 2. Tommy Suggs demonstrates a moderate degree of layback in this 1968 National Championship photo. The press was eliminated from Olympic competition due to difficulties in judging. It was not uncommon to see lifters “lay back” and press. Vasily Alexyev, the noted Soviet Superheavy did a more extreme version, akin to a standing bench press.