Considerations for training the NFL Combine 225 Bench Press Test

The 225 Bench press test is used as the staple strength test at the NFL Combine, as well as Football Pro Day’s around the country. I know: its stupid, it doesn’t reflect football ability, its not specific, etc. But its sticking around, it’s a factor in the athlete profile, and must be addressed. Most positions have a “set point” they need to reach (AKA Wide Receivers usually need 10 reps for this to be considered a non issue) and anything above that is bonus, but our job as physical preparation coaches is to put the athlete in the BEST position to succeed as possible. Leaving reps in the tank because we didn’t deem the test important does not fit that description. In addition, there is NO other safe weight of measuring an athlete’s relative level of maximal strength, and the 225 test has been proven to show a strong correlation to maximal strength levels.

Out of the 6 athletes I have had go to Indy, 5 of them finished #1 for their position in the Bench Press. I have had athletes add as many as 10 reps in 8 weeks of training, including increases from 4 to 14, 10 to 19, 11 to 20 etc. Before we get started, some notes on programming for your athletes:

1. Your athletes come in off a hard season and will not be performing optimally. 25-30% of the training is just trying to restore back to baseline.
2. This test does not train any one specific quality, so training only one or two qualities and hoping for transfer is silly.

In comparing all 50+ of the athletes I have trained for the 225 test, I have found a 94% correlation between incoming maximal strength and 225 reps. This would make you believe that getting stronger is the ticket to improving the results, however that’s not entirely true. Correlation does not equal causation. Adaptation is specific to the quality being trained, and while increasing your maximal strength WILL lower the threshold you are training at and thus allow for more reps, its extremely difficult to do especially with already strong athletes in a short period of time. We need a lot of bang for our buck in terms of return, and we do not have time for a plateau, so we must change variables frequently, and we must train often.

If you look online for e-books or workouts for the 225, you are going to find most are one of two things: westside with a repetition day, or just pure westside. Using taglines such as “increasing maximal strength is going to lower the actual training % of the 225 test so you will be able to do it more”, they would have you believe their program will cause the biggest increase in the test. That’s like telling a sprinter if they squat more they will run faster: its not entirely true, but not completely wrong in all cases either. If you are ok with sub-optimal training methods that still get some sort of result, then I believe this article is not for you.

What the 225 measures depends on the athlete. If you have an athlete with a max of 245, it’s a strength test. If you have one with a 405 BP max, it’s a pure endurance test. With a 315 max it becomes a strength endurance test. Keeping this in mind, you can figure out what qualities are most important when training for the test, as well as determining proper sequencing of qualities you are training. The other thing we are looking for is the most bang for our buck in regards to output, and while adding 10lbs to a guys max will help in the 225 test, its not going to have much of an affect on the actual test if it took 4 of the 8 weeks to do it (assuming your athlete has a solid baseline strength as it is). Train the things they are worst at to get the fastest response.

Training the 225 bench press rep test requires a lot of things: maximal strength, speed, extreme short term volume tolerance, strength endurance, top end strength and more. We know why strength is important, the stronger you are the easier it is to move 225. Volume tolerance is extremely important because two athletes who can bench max 315 will likely have different 225 max rep numbers, one is more capable of handling strength endurance better. You can increase the 225 without moving the max number at all simply because one has trained lower intensity endurance and moved their failure threshold higher.

Top end strength is entirely important because it is easy to improve and has a lasting effect on the 225. Very few athletes fail at the top half of the bench, however the stronger you can increase the end range of motion of the bench the less energy will be required to surpass it and can be used on future reps.

The last variable that MUST be trained is speed. Speed may be the most important aspect of the bench, and I don’t mean the ability to do the entire test as fast as possible. Speed dictates how many reps you have left. Think of the last time you benched: were you able to grind out a lot of extra reps once the bar speed slowed significantly? The faster you can do every individual rep, the better off you will be. Train the ability to move 225 fast, don’t enforce the ability to move it slow.

What training for this test does NOT require is repping the 225 every week as some facilities will have you do. With my athletes, we do 225 Rep test twice per year: pretest, and again at NFL Combine or School Pro Day. Simply performing the test every week will lead to a very, very fast plateau and decline in results, and when you have 8 weeks or less to train, every rep you do needs to lead to a cumulative physiological adaptation that increases your ability to perform the test. Change variables frequently and often, but make sure they contribute to the end goal.

How to program for the 225 test:

Know that we must train the test from ALL angles: above, at and below the % trained. We must train the range of motion from multiple angles as well, using board presses. We must also use various implements to ensure continued adaptation: chains, bands, reps for time, dropsets etc.

Here is a simple breakdown of what the test can look like for 8 weeks of training using a quasi-block protocol:

Weeks 1 & 2

Emphasis: Volume

Secondary: Strength  
ROM: Full

Implements: None

Introduction or Retention: Introduce training methods

The phase of this goal is to introduce a very high workload to make sure the athlete can accommodate training 3x per week for upper body, for up to 6 weeks of combine training. In addition, strength endurance is a great way to restore the body’s strength levels back to baseline without the intensity. Dropsets are a great way to introduce high levels of short-term volume while keeping intensity low. Introduce the idea that performing reps FAST is important right from the start. Every set and every rep should be completed as fast as possible, once bar speed drops its all over.

Weeks 3 & 4

Emphasis: Strength

Secondary: Volume

ROM: Full & Partial

Implements: Boards & Chains if desired

Introduction or Retention: None

The goal of this phase is to increase maximal strength through high intensity training. We are going to focus on this now, because as stated, the test is not a maximal strength test. It is a test of strength endurance at a specific weight, we need to train the factors that improve the ability to perform it but are NOT the test early. Sending an athlete in at their strongest is not the goal, sending them in in the best shape to perform the 225 is. Continue your dropsets, increase intensity on strength days and push the limits on creativity and variations.

Week 5

Emphasis: Deload

Secondary: None

ROM: Full

Implements: None

Introduction or Retention: Strength & Volume Retention loads

This week is to back off and allow a short transmutation period to happen before more specific training occurs. We have set the base foundation needed to improve the test with volume and strength, now we need those abilities to occur during specific training for the test.

Week 6 / 7 / 8

Emphasis: Strength - Speed

Secondary: Volume

ROM: Full & Partial

Implements: Bands and chains

Introduction or Retention: Strength Retention

This is the first block of specific training. This is a great time to do a mini-test of the 225: do a test with 2-4 reps left in the tank. This will give the athlete great positive motivation, as they will likely beat their incoming score and have plenty left for more. Using bands and chains allow us to use submaximal weights on the bar, however the total resistance at peak should be at or above 225 and the speed can stay high. This is where we high speed peak. Using speed work for time can be a great tool. Instead of 8x2 @ 40%, do 5x10s @ 235 at top lift, specificity is king!

I have had great success following a block model like this, and in fact have had multiple athletes set all time bench Max PR’s, while not even focusing on “maximal strength”. For more information on my training systems, read more at www.exceltrainingdesigns.com