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WEEKLY MUSCLE BUILDING EXPERT *Interview Series*



How To Get A Big Bench Carl Lanore Interviews Mike Westerdal of CriticalBench.com On Super Human Radio

CL: In honor of the new year, I'm doing this show. I'm also doing it for selfish reasons, for myself as well. Because, I have a bench press like a girl. I've got a great deadlift and I'm got a great squat, but when it comes to the bench press, I'm embarrassed in the gym.

So, given that it's the new year and lots of people are making resolutions, I decided that we're going to do a show dedicated to how to build a big bench press and I

couldn't think of anyone else to have on the show other than Mike Westerdal from CriticalBench.com. How you doing, Mike?

MW: Doing good, Carl. Glad to be here.

CL: Yeah, we're glad to have you, too. And actually, [Critical Bench](http://CriticalBench.com), while it's dedicated to the bench press as an art form, you guys cover a lot more than that. You cover a lot of weight lifting, weight training issues as well. Correct?

MW: Yeah, pretty much everything related to strength training. We even go into body building and things like that as well.



CL: How did the website get started?

MW: It got started...in college I was playing football and I had one of the better bench presses on the football team and I just put up a website as a hobby, part of a class, just learning how to build websites. And I wrote my program down of the one I was using in college and that's kind of how it started. It's just got bigger and bigger and eventually I was able to quit my full-time job and do something I love, like this, full time.

CL: So, what year are we talking about that...

MW: It's about 10 years ago. We're talking finishing college in '99.

CL: Wow! That's amazing. So, in 1999 this was just like a combination of something you enjoyed doing, plus something that you had to do for a class, build a website.

MW: Right. It was completely a hobby.

CL: Wow! Talk about... It's amazing, isn't it? Ten years later you're doing it full time.

MW: I never would have imagined.

CL: Now, on the football team, how big was your bench back then?

MW: I had a 400-pound bench.

CL: Wow! I mean, that's really a big bench press for just about anybody. That's amazing. That's amazing. So, all your teammate were like, Mike, man, how did you get your bench up that fast, that high. And they all wanted to know what you were doing.

MW: Yeah, that's pretty much how it started. Some of the younger guys, I mean, I learned from some of the older guys and there was a handful of people around the same strength level. But, we all trained a little differently than what the coaches had us doing. They all had us bench pressing like three, four times a week, doing the same routine and all the underclassmen were just following suit. You know, you get a little stronger no matter what you do, but then some of the more knowledgeable guys kind of started doing their own thing. They'd leave and go to the local gym and do some workouts there instead. And all those guys started getting even stronger, including myself. I just kind of put it all down on paper.

CL: Okay. So, obviously that's what we're going to be talking about. Now, this is part one of a two-show series, because we can't cover it all in one show. So, we're going to be doing this. The goal of this show is to take average, non-competitive guys and allow them to build a 300-400 pound raw bench press. Correct?

MW: Correct.



CL: Okay. So, we're going to do this in two shows, like I said, and Mike actually laid it out, because he's the guru here. So, part one, which is today's show, we're going to first address the common mistakes that people make, the things that they may have learned from common gym experiences or gym rats who tell them do this, do that, and so on. And that's where we're going to start.

So, the first thing on the list that you sent me, the number one mistake that people make, you claim, is over-training. Why don't we talk about that first?

MW: Yeah, sure. I mean, most people that have problems with their bench press, they're very, very motivated about it and they really want to improve it. And that kind of causes problems because it makes people work really hard and makes them want to lift several times a week and it causes the number one problem I see in the gym, is over-training.

I think what people really need to learn, to understand, is that your muscles and your body, they're actually growing and repairing itself when you're resting, not while you're training. So, just because you train more often and harder, doesn't mean that you're going to get better results.

CL: Now, there's a consensus out there of powerlifters who say if you want a big bench, you're got to spend a lot of time under the bar. Maybe that's misinterpreted by a

lot of other people thinking you've got to spend a lot of time under the bar, multiple times in a given week, as opposed to just focusing a lot of your routines in the bench press. Would you agree with that?

MW: Yeah, I'd have to agree with that. And it also depends on what kind of powerlifters you're talking to. I mean, you have...not everybody knows, there's geared powerlifting when you use powerlifting equipment. That takes a lot more time just to put in with those bench press shirts and things like that. And that's not really what we're focusing on. For just regular people going to the gym, the benching, they want to get stronger, once a week or twice, max, would be the most you would want to be bench pressing a week. You don't really need more than an hour at the gym at any time, in my opinion.

CL: Okay. And you know what? I want to throw something in here because my audience, we talk about steroids and stuff like that, and I think this is a big mistake for even drug-using athletes out there, that they don't give themselves enough time. They think that by using drugs, that that means they can train with greater frequency. And the central nervous system really does need time to recover.

MW: Exactly.

CL: That's where a lot of the strength is developed. So, that's a rule that applied no matter who you are, in my humble opinion.

MW: Yeah, I mean, that's definitely something you've got to take into account for strength training versus bodybuilding. If you're talking bodybuilding for looks, and you're not pressing the big poundages the same way, you'd need to rest your central nervous system. Just being under heavy weights, you've got to let your nervous system heal up.

Same thing with your bones and tendons. You get people getting all kinds of tendonitis problems. If you get strong too quick, your bones can break. Your tendons have to catch-up. And like you mentioned, people using drugs are especially prone to this. Their muscles are getting so fast, so quick, their bones and their tendons aren't able to keep up, and that's when you get injuries, too, just from a safety standpoint.

I think it's motivating, too, if you only bench press once a week, then you have to wait a whole other week before it's time to do it again. Instead of like two days later you know you're going to be right back at it again. So, it kind of makes you not try as hard sometimes.

CL: Well, I'll tell you something else, too. When I was working on my deadlift, as my primary goal, and increasing my deadlift, I really started to pull some very, very heavy

weight. I knew that I was over-training because one of the things I started to experience was I would start to obsess about the workout that day before and I would start to get anxiety on the way into the gym. I would think, oh, man, I hope I don't blow a heart valve today. I hope I don't pull my...I just hope I don't injure myself.

And when you're feeling that level of angst and anxiety, your body's talking to you. It's say, you know what? You need to back off a little bit. That doesn't mean necessarily stop the deadlift at that weight, but you need more time off so that psychologically you start missing it again.

MW: Yeah, definitely.

CL: Yeah, so that's a really good point.

MW: And I train...personally, I compete in powerlifting and I train at a powerlifting club called Tampa Barbell. There's a couple guys in there that can deadlift 800-pounds, and they only dead lift once a month. The guy that's actually the strongest deadlifter in our gym, he only dead lifts off the floor once a month.

CL: Ok. The rest of the time he's doing accessory work?

MW: Yeah. He'll actually do a another kind of deadlift exercise. It might be like stiff-legged deadlifts on a different week. But, just basic back workouts, good mornings, things like that. But, the actual deadlift exercise, he's only doing once a month.

CL: That's really interesting. That's really interesting. And that's a good point. That's a good point.

Okay, the next thing you have on your list is pre-fatiguing muscles, which obviously has come from the bodybuilding segment of resistance training. Would you agree?

MW: Right.

CL: So, let's talk about that.

MW: Well, I mean, if you're at a gym, you read a lot of stuff in the magazines and you're watching people at the gym and there's nothing wrong with these methods, like pre-fatiguing and stuff, to get muscle pumps and to build muscle. But, when it comes to strength training, it's something you've got to watch out for.

The first thing I'm going to talk about is the warm-ups. That's a big mistake I see when I'm in the gym, people doing way too many warm-up sets before they get to their actual working sets. So, let's say most people are pyramiding up, so they start with a light warm-up of ten, then they go to a couple of sets of eight. You see, a few sets of

these, by the time they get to the heavier weight that they're going to be doing for like three reps, they're already tired from all the warm-up sets they've been doing. They've kind of already blown their load.

CL: Right, right. And I guess you've got to make a decision. What are you there for? Are you there to get a great pump or are you there to move a lot of weight? I mean, I've had this conversation because of a routine that I've been experimenting with and I talked about it on my show one day. And I said, you know, you've got to look at training like you do work. If you had a job at UPS lifting boxes, before you left for work, would you do things to fatigue your back before you got there? Before you leave for work, would you like lift the furniture in your house a dozen times so that your back is really sore when you get to work? Like, you're not going to be able to lift as much as you want then, once you're there. So, that's a really good point.

Okay. What about the workout splits?

MW: Oh, still got one other...

CL: Oh, go ahead, I'm sorry.

MW: Well, just the muscles that are involved in the bench press, everybody knows it's your chest. You're using your shoulders. You're going to need your triceps towards the end of the lift when you're locking-out. And then, you also use your back for stabilizing the weight. So, you see, the way people setup...this kind of leads into the workout splits, like you were saying. You'll see people training shoulders or triceps and then go to bench pressing. If you're already tired-our your shoulders and your triceps, how are they going to help you now when you're benching?

It's a different exercise, but you're using the same muscles. And it's not just in the same day, you shouldn't be doing shoulders or triceps even the day before you're benching, preferably not even two days before you're benching.

CL: Would you agree with the 72-hour rule, or you think that even...when you start lifting every heavy weight, that even goes out the window?

MW: Seventy-two hours, that's like the minimum. I prefer to have them like three days apart.

CL: And again, that comes from the bodybuilding culture, because they're looking to stretch that muscle, the casing around the muscles to get a really good pump so that they have...their muscle is getting larger as opposed to strength. And obviously, there's a lot of guys who'll do shoulder work and tricep work before they do bench work because the attitude is, if your shoulders and your triceps are weak, then your pecs have to do all the work. But again, you've got to make a decision. Are you in there to

build a big bench or are you in there to build what looks like a body that can perform a big bench?

MW: Right, and those things even go hand-in-hand sometimes. If you look at some of the old-school powerlifters and Olympic weight lifters and Strongmen from back in the day, these guys were lifting heavy weights and they're huge. I mean, you can get big, too. It's not like you're just going to get strong and you're not going to grow muscle. When you're lifting heavy weights, that's a great way to put on muscle mass. And maybe later you're going to go into your fat burning or high reps for cutting. But, I think you can get big muscles from lifting heavy, too. I don't think many people would argue with that.

CL: And that's a good point, because there is a school out there that thinks that muscle growth and muscle strength are two very, very different things, and you have to make a decision on which one you want to go after. But, the truth is, through super-compensation, which is what the body does every time you lift heavier and heavier weight, the body super-compensates so the next time it doesn't get challenged to the same degree and that's obviously strength occurring.

MW: And you can even get the best of both worlds. I mean, with your first exercises, your primary movers, your compound exercises, like chest day. If you're doing bench press, use heavy weight and do low reps for that, but then, afterwards when you're done with that, you can go into your systems exercise and do some of the higher reps on some of the isolation or assistance exercises and that way you try to build some size with that. Build the strength with the prime movers.

CL: Hey, Mike, we're going to take a quick commercial break. When we come back, we'll pick up with the rest of the list. You're listening to Super Human Radio. We're talking today with Mike Westerdal from CriticalBench.com. Stay tuned, we'll be right back.

CL: Just a reminder if you go to SuperHumanRadio.com, we've got a couple of free things we're giving away to listeners. Again, you look for the banner ad for ITBX, you can get a free trial sample of IBNX. It's a topical ibuprofen product so you don't have to swallow your NSAIDs you can rub them right on and they go to work on seconds. Also, we have a free sample from Applied Nutroceuticals of Drive. Drive is their non-stimulant-based, pre-workout supplement. Since it's non-stimulating, you can use it before workout in the evening and still get a good night's sleep. You can get a free sample, trial sample of Drive. And then, we also have Anafit's Cardio Breeze, which is a stimulant-based product that is designed to make your cardio sessions less arduous and just go by a lot faster, in a breeze, as they say. Again, go to SuperHumanRadio.com, look for the banner ads for IBNX, for Cardio Breeze and also

for Drive, and they will send you absolutely free samples. You don't even have to pay for shipping and handling.

Anyway, we're talking today with Mike Westerdal from [CriticalBench.com](https://www.criticalbench.com) about how to build a big bench, and this is part one of a two-part series. And today, we're addressing the mistakes that people make. So, Mike, we addressed just now the things that pre-fatigue muscles, and that's a mistake if your goal is to build strength, as opposed to just hypertrophy.



MW: Right.

CL: The next item that you had on your list is self-doubt. This is a big one for me, personally, actually.

MW: I think it's huge. It goes so much further than just working out. It can effect everything in your life.

CL: Well, I mean, but especially...the bench press is unique in that... Look, the deadlift, you can drop the bar. The squat, you can even let the bar roll of your back. I mean, the truth is. But, the bench press, it's like the freakin' guillotine over your head.

MW: Yeah.

CL: And, you know, I don't train with partners. Not because I'm anti-social, but it just doesn't work out. I like to train when I want to train and I don't want to make a commitment to somebody because my schedule changes up and I can't be there. So, I train by myself and I have to resort to dumbbells all the time. And the dumbbells in my gym only go up to 140.

MW: Right.

CL: So, I mean, getting under a bar scares the crap out of me, personally.

MW: Yeah, that's understandable. Without a training partner, you definitely have to back off a little. Instead of going 110%, you maybe have to go 90% and that's just for your own safety. Unless you can get into like a power rack or something like that.

But, what I was talking about with the self-doubt, which you were kind of explaining a little bit. In the gym, I've worked as a personal trainer as well, so having trained clients and just hearing the way people talk, people asking you for a spot at the gym, they'll pretty much always follow it with some kind of disclaimer, saying, "Hey, do you mind giving me a spot? I'm not sure if I'm going to get this," or "I don't know how many reps I'm going to do, but I'll give it a shot." Or, something like that, something negative, and that's just what I'm trying to say is, don't be negative about this. You've got to have a good attitude going into it and it seems like common sense. But, I want to talk about your subconscious mind a little bit.

The things that you say out loud and the things that you think, that's what your brain hears, and then that's what your body winds up doing. So, if you're affecting how your body performs by the way you think, why not program it with positive things? Visualize yourself doing really well on the bench press, or if you can't do that, at least don't say negative things. Don't talk about how you're not going to be able to do it. I'd rather you don't say anything than say something like that. It's like planting a negative seed in your mind right before you're about to do it.

If you do that anywhere else, like if you're giving a presentation at work where you're going to say to people that you're probably going to mess-up and lose the deal...

CL: That's what I was going to say. You're leaving yourself a way out because you are afraid that you can't complete your goal, so you're kind of giving yourself a back door, so to speak.

MW: But, do you really need the backdoor? Because, if you don't get this bench press, who cares? I mean, you don't fail. It's just working out. You're just training. So, whether you get it or you don't get it, you're still putting the time in, you're still getting the work as you're working out. I mean, it doesn't really matter. You're not a failure as long

as you keep trying and you keep getting stronger. So, don't be afraid of failure, that goes together with it, because you're not a failure until you quit.

CL: Okay. So, you have to be positive about it, regardless of what the outcome is, you have to be positive. Get under the bar, don't say anything negative, don't leave yourself a backdoor, just do the lift. That's it.

MW: Exactly.

CL: Okay. All right.

The next thing on your list is lack of goals. Now, don't we all have goals? We get in the gym, we want to lift 350-pounds.

MW: Yeah, I mean, if you have an exact number and an exact goal and an exact plan of how to get it, that is a goal. But, you'd be surprised how many people just show up to the gym and they haven't even decided what kind of workout they're going to do yet, or they kind of get there and see what everybody else is doing and just kind of hop in. Or, you say, what is your goal? "Uh, I want to just get stronger, lose some fat, increase my bench and run five miles."

CL: Right.

MW: I mean, you can't have all these conflicting goals. You've got to decide what you want and then you've got to make a plan on how to achieve it. With any goal, you've got to have a specific goal in mind. I want to know how much you want to increase your bench press by, and I want to know how long you're going to take to do this. It's got to be something you can track, so week-by-week you can see if you're on target or not.

CL: That's a good point, because even in large corporations, there's an old saying, if it can't be measured, it's can't be managed. So, that's very critical. And I think everyone really knows this, but again, I kind of feel like this goes back to self doubt. If I make this commitment to myself, that I'm going to... Because, goals have to be... You know the old saying, how do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. It's a big, insurmountable thing, but how do you do it? Well, you do it one piece at a time. So, in other words, if your goal is to bench press 400-pounds, and you're stuck at 255, then you have to do it in increments. You've got to say, well, my most immediate goal is getting to 265 or 275, and chunk it up like that.

MW: And that's setting a realistic goal. Short-term goals leading to a long term goal. So, you don't want to, say if you bench 200 now, that in two months you're going to bench press 450. That's unrealistic. It's not a goal that can be accomplished.

CL: Right, right.

MW: I mean, when you set a goal, another thing you're supposed to do is write this goal down on paper so you can materialize it and you post this everywhere you can. You hang it on your refrigerator, you put it on a post-it near your computer, and you tell your friends about it. People are supposed to know what your goal is, and that's so you don't have that backdoor, so you can't just quit, because now ten people already know this is what you're working for.

CL: Yeah, I like that one, because... You know what, when I...back in '98 when I set out to lose weight, I told as many people as I could, because I had read that in a book about setting goals, that you can't erase it. Once you start telling people... if you keep it to yourself, it's like you can rewrite it as you go along, but if you tell people about it, it's almost like you've made this commitment.

MW: Yeah, exactly. It's a commitment. People are going to ask you how it's going.

CL: Yeah, exactly. So, that's a really important one as well.

Now, the next one actually is one that perplexes me as well, and what I'd like to do is we have to take another commercial break here in a couple of minutes, but what I'd like to do is go ahead and take the break early because this one, I feel like, we need to dedicate some time to, and that is rep ranges. Because, I think there's so many different schools of thought out there on rep ranges, and what people should be doing with rep ranges and so on and so forth. And I think it gets confusing. I think a lot of people, they start out with...when they set a goal they start out with one method of reaching that goal, and then somewhere along the line they end up switching it up again and changing over.

So, let's do this. Let's take a quick commercial break. When we come back, we will pick up with Mike Westerdal from CriticalBench.com and we're going to be talking about what rep ranges you need to be training in in order to have a bigger bench in 2009. Stay tuned, we'll be right back.



NFPT is giving away two free personal trainer certification courses at SuperHumanRadio.com, two of them. The drawing will occur on the January 30th show, and I can tell you right now, the odds are good of getting one. You need to go over to SuperHumanRadio.com and enter to win an NFPT certification course. Each one is worth \$475. So, check that out at SuperHumanRadio.com.

And of course, if you ever want to reach me, you can reach me by email at OnAir@SuperHumanRadio.com, or you can reach me by calling the Super Human Radio hotline at 206-222-2218.

My guest is Mike Westerdal from CriticalBench.com and we're talking about how to build a big bench for 2009. I want to have a big bench in 2009. It's the one lift that I've really neglected and it's time for me to start paying attention to it.

Now, Mike, this is one that perplexes me: rep ranges. I mean, where should I be training if I want a big bench?

MW: Well, this is going to vary based on who's asking. If you were asking, would you consider yourself an expert or an advanced lifter, or more moderate?

CL: Well, I've been training seriously since 2000-2001, but I have not been training my bench press seriously, because it's one of the lifts that I just... I have painful shoulders, first of all. I mean, my shoulders, whenever I start lifting or whenever I start using a straight bar to do bench presses, I get in this groove and for some reason my shoulders end up hurting. Maybe I'm executing the lift improperly.

MW: Yeah, it's a very common issue. But, I mean, with the... I think we're going to cover that in part two of the interview.

CL: Right. Okay.

MW: But, as far as you having lifted for a good amount of time, if you haven't done any low rep type training, before I would recommend something like that for your case, I would say you would want to start maybe with something around 5 reps.

CL: Okay.

MW: What have you been training with typically? Eight to ten?

CL: No, I've been doing this new program right now. I'm using 140 dumbbells, but that allows me to kind of alternate my grip a little bit so I don't have to get in that groove. And I do triples, but I do as many triples as I possibly can in 15-minutes. And usually I get about 12 sets of triples out. That's what I've been working with recently.

MW: I think that's an awesome rep range, and I think that's right on track. That is the rep range that I would recommend for people trying to get stronger, is heavy, heavy triples. Now, I don't know what your goal was when you were training with that program. The only thing I'd say, you need to rest longer between sets so you're fully maximized and ready for a full strength second set. But, maybe those were the heaviest dumbbell they have, so for you to get a good workout, maybe you just pick up the tempo a little bit.

CL: Well, I've actually been experimenting with this routine where you do movements for 15 minutes and the idea is you progress when you can do more and more sets in that 15 minutes. But, this is not for strength.

MW: Density training?

CL: Yeah, exactly. It's like a density training. Exactly.

MW: Okay.

CL: And it's more for cardio. In my opinion, I'm getting a greater degree, a blending of cardiovascular, aerobic and anaerobic thresholds seem to blend about half way through the 15 minutes, because I'm pumping hard, I'm breathing heavy, you know what I mean? It's almost like I'm doing cardiovascular.

MW: That's a great workout. I've done those myself.

CL: Yeah. I like them.

MW: You should add up the number of reps you're doing and the weight you're moving.

CL: And then you times it by the number of weight and it tells you how much you've worked that day. Yeah.

MW: You've done a lot more work than you have with three sets of ten, if you add it all up. And in a shorter period of time.

CL: But, see, I want a big bench. I want to be able to lay down and put 340-350 on the bar and do a couple of reps with it, and I'm not going to get there with what I'm doing now.

MW: Yeah, I mean, obviously you're going to have to start using the barbell and you'll have to figure out what's the matter with your shoulders. But, the rep range for strength, you want to be doing less than five reps.

CL: Okay.

MW: And the reason for this, as we touched on a little earlier, is because you're training your neurological system. Your central nervous system has to adapt to these weights. And that's the system that you're training. So, it's not so much the muscles, it's getting your body used to this heavy stress, so with reps less than five.

My favorite happens to be triples. And then, as I get closer to an actual competition, you might go down to some doubles or singles for your sets.

CL: Right. Okay.

MW: That's pretty agreed upon that lower reps are going to build strength and then higher reps build hypertrophy. And then you have even higher reps that work your energy systems and are more for cardio.

CL: Yeah. And you know, it's really interesting because we come back to, the key component of strength is the nervous system, it appears. And I don't think enough is done...there's enough attention paid to things that help the nervous system recuperate and actually strengthen the nervous system.

One of the things that I used to experience when I was squatting heavy and deadlifting heavy, was what I started to call noise in my head. It was like I would get under the bar to squat and my adrenaline would come up and I'd have like 1,000 things racing through my mind, like, un-rack the bar, walk back properly, keep my back straight, gee, I'm nervous. What if I get too far down in the hole and I can't come out? It's like all these things like they just hit you all at once. And I used to call it noise. And I learned that if you can get rid of a lot of that noise in your head, you're stronger.

So, the things that you're saying here about the nervous system that eliciting strength, the three rep range because we're really training to kind of elicit a response from the nervous system. I think a lot of it really does come down to the brain, the spine and the nerves as they run through the body.

MW: Yeah, definitely.

CL: it's amazing.

MW: Just comparing a powerlifter to a bodybuilder, you take two full-grown men and you have one guy that's absolutely huge and another guy that doesn't look at big and the smaller guy that's the powerlifter is actually stronger, and it's the way they train. The bodybuilder trains to look big, whereas the powerlifter trains to actually be strong.

CL: Right.

MW: And if you want the best of both worlds, you do what we talked about earlier, you train your heavy exercises with heavy triples and then you move on to your isolation assistance stuff and do some higher reps to make the muscles bigger.

CL: Right. I remember one day I was actually judging an event here in Louisville and I can't think of the guy's name. He came from Indianapolis, a black guy, powerlifter, a really, really nice, very, very low key guy. And he was about 178...yeah, I think he was 178 pounds and he pulled 700-pounds in the deadlift that day. And I happened to be sitting on the side and I was a side-judge, and I remember watching. He didn't have a shirt on and I remember watching as he lifted the bar, the muscles in his back... It was almost like when you watch those war movies where they drop a bomb and you see the shockwave go out into the dessert. You know what I'm talking about?

MW: Yeah.

CL: It was like the shockwave went up from his lower back, up into his lats and his... I mean, it was like a flashbulb, boof. It was just the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. If I could have caught it like in one of those high-speed cameras where you could play it back... You could see muscle fibers becoming recruited in groups in his back. It was just... I was like, man! And that's muscular efficiency. This guy is reaching a lot more muscle fibers in his body than most people are, and that's why at his weight he was able to pull that weight. It's really an amazing thing.

The nervous system is really overlooked when it comes to strength. I mean, people need to pay more attention to it, really, in my humble opinion.

MW: Yeah, I mean, you can't really stereotype a bodybuilder versus a powerlifter, because they often train a lot of the same exercises and do different routines and

obviously there's some extremely strong bodybuilders, just comparing the top bodybuilders to the top powerlifters.

CL: You know, Ronnie Coleman is an example of an extremely strong bodybuilder. I think Ronnie Coleman could have...

MW: He's got a powerlifting background.

CL: Right. I was just going to say that. He came from powerlifting and he's kept a lot of that mentality as he's build his body. I always wondered if he would go back into powerlifting someday, actually.

MW: Yeah, you've got Johnnie Jackson, I think that's his name.

CL: Yeah.

MW: He's in the magazines now, saying he's the strongest bodybuilder.

CL: Yeah. I don't buy that. I think Ronnie is stronger than him. Maybe pound-for-pound, maybe if you looked at his weight class versus Ronnie's weight class, Johnnie Jackson is stronger. But, I don't know how he can claim that he's the strongest bodybuilder in the world, because.... I mean, for crying out loud, I mean... Ronnie Coleman was front squatting...what was he front squatting back in those videos, 600-pounds and stuff?

MW: Yeah.

CL: I mean, it's like...

MW: Something ridiculous.

CL: I mean, come on.

MW: These were crazy videos.

CL: I mean, I feel pretty confident that Coleman could probably easily deadlift 1,000-pounds.

MW: Yeah.

CL: And that's probably...that's a pretty top lift in this day and age, right? I mean, for the...

MW: Without wearing a deadlift suit, no one's ever done it.

CL: Really? He did...what did he do in that one training video he did? I want to say he deadlifted 800-pounds for two reps and all he was wearing was a belt.

MW: Wow.

CL: So, I mean, I've got to believe he could pull 1,000-pounds.

But, anyway, okay. So, let's get back to the subject at hand. Another mistake that people make that you'd like people to focus on is neglecting their back muscles. Now, this is counterintuitive. Why would I want to worry about my back muscles if I'm doing a bench press?

MW: Right. And you don't see it in the mirror, too. So, you don't train it as hard. But, that's more of a joke. Most people definitely are training their back, but...

CL: No, I know.

MW: As for me, I really like bench pressing, so I definitely worked really hard on the bench press where when back day rolls around, I might cut a few sets off or cut the workout short and over time, that stuff adds up to you and you think, how does that affect your bench press? Well, we talked about that a little bit earlier, too. You do use your lats to stabilize the weight on the way down, in the bench. It creates a shelf for you as well, as you're lowering the weight. So, actually half the lift controlling the weight on the way down, you need to have a strong back.

CL: Right, right.

MW: If you train your back really good and really hard, that should help your bench press as well.

CL: So, would you train... Now, there's some common opinions out there about training the back in the same plane as you do the bench press. So, you would do like rowing movements in that same...

MW: Like lat pull downs, rows, things like that.

CL: Right, because that's kind of the opposite direction of the bench press. So, you would agree with that?

MW: Yeah, definitely.

CL: Okay.

MW: Lat pull downs and rows would be great exercises to do. And if you could even copy your bench press form, that same way you bench, and then grab the lat pull down bar with the same width, the same grip, and keep your elbows in the same direction and just do the exact opposite of a bench press, lean back a little bit.

CL: Now, here's one that's not on your list, but I'm just curious what your opinion is. What role do you think the brachials and the forearms play in a raw bench press? Do you think they play any role at all?

MW: That stabilizes, too, on the way down. So, hammer curls are a great bicep exercise for anybody trying to get a bigger bench.

CL: I was just going to say that, because I've always...when I've looked at bench presses when I was judging and spotting, I would look and I would always think to myself that when you see the load...when they unrack the bar and the load hits them, you can see their brachial muscles really straining as they're bringing the bar down.

MW: Exactly.

CL: That would be an important group, as well, not to overlook. So, but again, the key here is to build a big bench, you have to think about the other compensating muscles, if you will, that are also aiding in the lift. It's not just shoulders and chest and triceps.

MW: Right. We're going to talk about that in part two, also. But, you've got to find out what you're weakness is. If you've got like stabilization problems and shaking all over the place, you might have to put a little time in with a little bit higher reps before you can get to like the lower reps. And if you have problems bringing the bar down under control, that could be your stabilizers in your back. If you have problems locking it out, you know you've got problems with your triceps. If you get stuck right on your chest, you need to work the actual chest muscles a little more. You've got to break the lift down into all different segments and figure out exactly what your weakness is and then address that.

CL: Now, the last one that you have here is too much cardio. This is a perplexing one because I know that a lot of powerlifters are guilty for almost using the sport that they choose to just become...Italians, we call them gavones, you know, just like swallow everything that's relatively close to them and say, well, I got to because between tissue leverage and I got to keep my weight up, and all these other excuses.

MW: Yeah, exactly. It's excuses.

CL: But then, there's the other side, there's the guys who want to look like Mariusz Pudzianowski and be like ripped to shreds and be really strong. So, where does cardio even fit in?

MW: I mean, you've got to find a balance and it's going to be different for everybody based on your metabolism and how your body responds and what your nutrition is like. But, the only constant thing we have is the training. I don't know how much sleep you're

getting. I don't know how you eat. So, you just can't be doing a lot of heavy cardio right before you're about to go working out. Obviously, that's a no-brainer.

I mean, you see people actually running on the treadmill and stuff before they work out. I mean, that's day one. That should be common sense not to do that.

CL: But, I do ten minutes of warm-up cardio. I don't do anything insane.

MW: That's different. That's warm-up.

CL: I mean, I do ten minutes and it's nothing arduous. I mean, I just do ten minutes to bring my body temperature up a little bit.

MW: Yeah, that's good. You're just warming-up.

CL: Okay. You're not opposed to that, but you're saying like putting in a 45-minute, like elliptical at a full tilt pace and then expecting to go and lift weights.

MW: Yeah, forget about it.

CL: Okay. So, where does cardio fit in?

MW: Well, you do need some cardio. You want to work your heart muscles, obviously, and keep your body fat levels down. What kind of cardio you want to do, you just have to limit this to how your body responds. I'm talking maybe three days a week might be good, for someone else, four days a week might be good. But, then you've got other people, they email me, they're following my bench press program and they tell me that they run five miles every morning. They do this like six days a week and then they're wondering why their bench press isn't going up. I'm like, you're lucky your bench press is even staying the same, rather than going down.

I mean, if you want to get your cardio in, it doesn't always have to be like fat burning heart rate where you're going for an hour. Try doing some sprints or something or some high-intensity cardio once or twice a week and then you could throw in... A lot of bodybuilders, they do like 45-minutes of walking on the treadmill.

CL: Yeah. I'm a big fan of walking, especially... I've found that if you want to lose weight, the best thing that you can do is walk first thing in the morning, before your first meal, and you don't have to do anything insane. I'm talking about 20 minutes. I tell people, walk out the door, walk ten minutes in one direction, walk ten minutes home, and go have your first meal.

MW: Yeah, you're doing it on an empty stomach, you're burning fat, you're waking up.

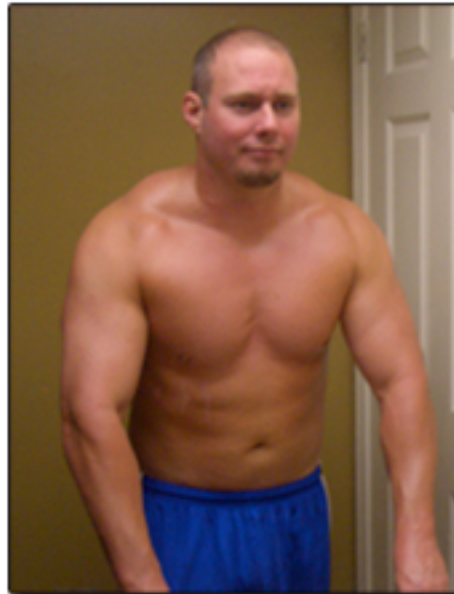
CL: You've fasted...you're eight hours fasted, you've been sleeping, so you're fasted. Your body is already shifted into using fat as its primary substraight for energy at that moment in time.

We're talking today with Mike Westerdal from CriticalBench.com. Visit his website, CriticalBench.com. There's a lot of great stuff on this website, more than just building the big bench press.

We're going to take one last commercial break and when we come back we're going to finish up and wrap-up the show with Mike. Stay tuned. We'll be right back.



155 Pound
Punching Bag!



230 Pounds
of Muscle

Welcome back to Super Human Radio, listening to Ice Cube over here. My guest is Mike Westerdal from CriticalBench.com, and we've been talking about the mistakes that most people make while performing or trying to increase their bench press, that are actually counterproductive. And episode two that we're going to do with Mike, we're going to be talking about the exact things that you need to do in order to build a big bench press. So, you're not going to want to miss that episode either.

Now, Mike, I mean, in your opinion, is the bench press the most important lift that people can... I mean, there's a lot of theories out there that the deadlift and the squat and...where does the bench press fit in, aside from the fact that it's one of the three lifts that you have to perform as a powerlifter?

MW: Well, I'm biased, obviously, as owner of CriticalBench.com, and it's my favorite lift. But, I'm going to have to say it's one of the top three, right there with the squat and the deadlift. Because, most people don't realize, we're going to talk about the set-up in the next episode, but it is a full-body exercise.

I mean, if you do it right, you can even get sore in your quads, your tris, your back, your shoulders, your forearms can even get sore, your grip. I mean, if you put everything into this and do it the right way, it can be a full-body exercise. So, I'm going to put it in the top three. My favorite top one exercise.

CL: Okay. Can I ask you, now are you still competing?

MW: Yes.

CL: Can I ask what your bench is today?

MW: Yeah, I'm actually competing equipped, so I wear the bench press shirt. The last meet I did was in December and I got 622.

CL: Wow! That's really impressive. Now, how much does the shirt actually help? And I've asked this question to so many different powerlifter. Is it different for everyone, what the shirt adds to the lift, or is it pretty much across the board? If you have a raw lift that's here and you add a shirt and learn how to lift in the shirt, that your bench press will increase by this percent?

MW: Yeah, I'm not going to say that it's the same for everybody. It's almost like a completely different lift. I mean, lifting in a bench press shirt, that's almost a completely different exercise than the raw bench press. They're not even the same. I mean, there's different kinds of shirt, there's different plies or layers of material. The way the lift is performed is so different.

It takes actually...some people can put the shirt on and right away maybe do 50-100 pounds more. You've got someone else who practices in it for a year-and-a-half and can never even get it right. So, I mean, it really, really varies. But, the range could be...somebody putting it on and being able to do less, to someone like Ryan Kennelly, as an example, probably gets maybe 300-pounds out of it.

CL: No kidding!

MW: The only reason I say that is because the all-time raw bench press record, I believe, is around 715, and the all-time equipped record is just over 1,000.

CL: Which is Ryan.

MW: Right. The most you can get is about 300 pounds right now.

CL: Who is the all-time raw bench presser?

MW: I think Scott Mendelson still has it.

CL: Yeah, he's amazing, man. I met him in... I was at the Olympia this year and we stayed at the same hotel and we were riding up in the elevator and we had a chance to chat a little bit. He's really a very, very nice guy, really nice guy.

MW: Yeah. I haven't met him, myself.

CL: Nice guy. So, here's the deal. I'm going to just summarize, okay, so we can wrap this up and pick it up where we're leaving-off in the next episode.

If you want to build a big bench press, first you have to stop making the mistakes that could be hindering your progress. And as Mike has laid-out today, the top seven mistakes, the first thing is over-training. You should be only training your bench press perhaps once, maybe maximum twice a week. Correct?

MW: Right.

CL: Okay. Don't do silly things that pre-fatigue muscles. This isn't about bodybuilding, this is about strength building. So, don't do too many warm-up sets and also, pay attention to your workout splits. Don't work a muscle group that's going to be critical for you to lift, to perform that bench press that day.

The third thing is self-doubt. No negative talk, lay down on the bench, do the best you can, don't give yourself an out, don't give yourself a backdoor. Don't start setting it up for you not to attain your goal. Which leads to number four, which is make sure you're setting goals. Write down. If you're starting at 225, then your first plateau goal should be maybe adding 25-pounds to your bench press. When you get there, then you can go from there. But, you have to have goals. If you're not setting goals and you're just... It's like leaving on a trip across country and not knowing what state you're going to end up in, and not having a map. But, you just know that you're going to go across country. I mean, that might have been a worthy goal back in the '60s when the hippies were around, but for the bench press, it's not a good one.

And then, obviously, the rep ranges. Mike likes the five or under, preferably he likes doing triples. I tend to believe that that's a good rep range, too, because you're managing fatigue then. Would you agree with that statement, you're managing fatigue when you're doing lower rep ranges?

MW: Yeah, and you've got to take some time between sets, at least three minutes, maybe five minutes between sets. We didn't mention that.

CL: Well, let's talk about that for a second. That's a very important point. I stand to feel that you should rest in between sets as long as you need to, until you psychologically feel like you want to get under the bar again. That's what I like to do in between sets when I'm trying to lift heavy, personally.

MW: Yeah, I mean, first make sure your breathing is completely back to normal, and then make sure you're mentally ready, like you said.

CL: Right, right. Okay. Then, the sixth thing on the list is don't neglect other muscles, like the back muscles, and even the brachials and hammer curls for the brachials and rowing movements for the back muscles, because they play a large role in your bench press. You're never going to get a strong bench press if your back muscles are not up to the job. Would you agree with that statement?

MW: Definitely.

CL: Okay. And then lastly, too much cardio. A little bit of warm-up cardio is a good thing, but doing 45-minutes on the treadmill and then expecting to go into the pit and start lifting heavy, you've pretty much taxed your body already. You've used up a lot of energy stores and now you're expecting to go and lift heavy, and you just can't do it. Can't do it.

All right, so Mike, I'm going to have you back on the show in a week, and when you come back we're going to cover part two of this interview, which is the actual tips to increasing your bench press. And these are the things that you've taught for years that have been successful for your clients as well. And I'm sure you have lots of clients with big benches, right?

MW: Yeah, definitely.

CL: Otherwise, the website wouldn't be called Critical Bench, it would be called MediocreBench.com.

MW: Right.

CL: Okay. Visit Mike's website, CriticalBench.com, check it out. He's got lots of great information there, more than just bench pressing. I mean, if you're a strength athlete, whether you're a football player or you're an MMA fighter, and you depend on strength, you can always find great information about building raw strength at CriticalBench.com.

You guys cater to the Strongman competitors as well on that website, right?

MW: Yeah, we just put up two Strongman interviews toady.

CL: Cool. Who are they with?

MW: Let me just remember real quick.

CL: Yeah, take your time.

MW: Ori from Iceland. He's the World's Strongest Man competitor. And then we have another guy, Paul Newhouse who's an lightweight Strongman. He's going for his pro card this year.

CL: Really? So now, these are the kind of guys that we would see like on these Metrex, ESPN 2 shows that they have...

MW: Yeah, these are the guys that are trying to get onto those shows, yep.

CL: Those guys are amazing, man! When they pull the truck and stuff like that. I mean, I look at that and I'm like, oh, my God!

MW: Yeah, it's insane. It makes powerlifting look like a joke.

CL: Well, you know what the interesting thing is, I mean, these guys are just... I mean, Paul Newhouse his name is, right?

MW: Right.

CL: What an appropriate name, because he's probably as big as a house. I mean, these guys are big! I mean, they're like superior examples of what human beings can look like. It's like...they're just monsters.

MW: And there's just two weight classes, lightweight and heavyweight.

CL: And what's the lightweight class like?

MW: I think it's 230-pounds and under is lightweight in Strongman.

CL: Wow! Is Mariusz Pudzianowski still a big competitor in that sport?

MW: I see him on TV still. I haven't really followed it, the latest competitions, but I think he's still one of the top guys to beat.

CL: And he's a big crowd-pleaser, because he's got a body like a bodybuilder. I mean, he's very, very lean.

MW: It's like how Arnold was, I mean, he's totally ripped and one of the strongest people in the world.

CL: Yeah, that's really cool.

All right, well, anyway. Listen, I want to thank you very much for taking the time to come on the show today and talk about how to build a big bench. This is really an issue of mine as well in 2009. I do want to have a respectable bench, once and for all. You know what? I'm always proud to go to the gym on back day and leg day, because I can move heavy weight with the best of them. And then, I'm always timid to go in on chest day because I'm throwing around 140-pound dumbbells and I'm like, man, I really want to get under the bar and put a few plates on and go at it, and I just can't. Well, there you go. I'm negative talking, Mike. See, if you were here, you could smack me.

MW: You can, you can, and we'll address it next week and find out what we can do to improve.

CL: All right, good. Listen, Mike, thanks for being on the show. Don't forget to visit CriticalBench.com and we will have another episode for you tomorrow. So, we'll see you then.

Make sure you check out Mike's "[Critical Bench Program 2.0](#)" and learn how to Get Strong and Get Big!:



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