THE FOUR-DAY SPLIT ORGANIZES YOUR PROGRAMMING INTO TWO UPPER-BODY DAYS AND TWO LOWER-BODY DAYS EVERY WEEK. WITH A FOUR-DAY SPLIT, YOU CAN GIVE EQUAL CONSIDERATION TO YOUR PRESS AND BENCH PRESS, BUT THIS ALLOWS YOU TO MANIPULATE IMPORTANT VARIABLES, UTILIZE SUPPLEMENTAL LiftS MORE EFFECTIVELY, AND INCLUDE ASSISTANCE WORK THAT CAN DIRECTLY TARGET YOUR BENCHING NEEDS.
There is a persistent myth in the fitness world that variety equals quality in an exercise program, somehow making it more useful for general physical fitness. The idea of muscle confusion and preparing for the unknown by surprising your biology with an unexpected combination or series of tasks has merit to only the most superficial consideration of physical fitness. Instead, we teach four main lifts and a small handful of additional lifts or movements that comprise 90+% of our strength training programs. And we treat strength as the foundation of even the most comprehensive approach to health and fitness. It may seem odd, then, that out of the hundreds of exercises you can perform in any given globo-gym that the bench press makes the cut as one of four main lifts.

Most people who train do not want to be powerlifters. So, why should they train like one? The bench press, in particular, seems to be the opposite of functional fitness, since you actually get to lie down while doing it. It has a short kinetic chain—the parts of your body actually involved in moving the bar. And pushing something away from you with your back entirely supported is not often seen in real life or most sports. Shouldn't we restrict our lifts to those that require balance and coordination?

The answer lies in your biology and the fact that your subjective intent has no bearing on physical adaptation. Often times, functional fitness enthusiasts miss this aspect of training. Their intention may be to cause widespread, general adaptations, improving strength, speed, agility,
balance, and other traits through little more than experience—more like a video game than a scientific process. All your body knows is sensory input + coordinated muscular contractions (with a bunch of auto-regulated steps in between). Instead, our intent must bow to the principles of adaptation: If you want to get strong, you have to train in a way that makes you strong, not in a way that mimics the applications of strength or in a way that you think will make you stronger.

The bench press is one of the four main lifts that comprise any quality strength training program because, in short, you need to lift heavy weights often to build strength; and no other upper body lift trains as much muscle mass with weights as heavy as the bench press. The bench fills a gap where your overhead press is concerned, getting heavier weights in your hands and augmenting your overhead press for greater systemic stress.

Below we give some ideas for programming your bench press when you are in the mid to later intermediate stages of training. Keep in mind that when it comes to programming everything works and nothing works. Timing and well-reasoned, gradual changes will do more for your bench press than any single change or supplemental lift.

**VOLUME AND INTENSITY EVERY WEEK**

There are so many ways to approach programming that we are going to pick a sample framework and stick to it for these examples. If you’ve been following the Barbell Logic Podcast, you won’t be surprised that this framework is a four-day split. Coming out of a linear progression, you will be used to training your bench press and press equally. This can continue as you move into an early intermediate phase of training, where one week may focus more heavily on the bench press and another on the overhead press. For each of the alternating weeks, one day should prioritize the volume of your bench press, and the other should push the intensity of the weight in your hands. This works well for the newer novice, but your options will be limited for prioritizing your bench press until you switch to a four-day split type program.

The four-day split organizes your programming into two upper-body days and two lower-body days every week. With a four-day split, you can give equal consideration to your press and bench press, but this allows you to manipulate important variables, utilize supplemental lifts more effectively, and include assistance work that can directly target your benching needs. Each of these training slots has a goal, and while this can become much more complicated, a simple and effective method of programming is to assign an intensity goal and a volume goal to each of these slots.
This basic four-day split rendition immediately increases the frequency that you are bench pressing and pressing if you are moving from a three day per week program.

The power of a four day split for an intermediate trainee is in its versatility. Including both volume and intensity work during the same week gives you two kinds of stress to adjust. While we do not want to add too much complexity to a program, the more levers and knobs at our disposal, the better able we will be to make minimum effective dose changes in response to actual training. This leads to what is most desirable in a program: steady progress over a very long period.

**SLOW AND STEADY PROGRESS**

Imagine all the examples in this article as waypoints. The map of your training consists of where you are right now—the exercises, sets, reps, and general shape of your program—and a seemingly limitless number of permutations of those variables to which you can take your training. Quality programming will point you, generally, toward progress. Let's talk through all the different levers you can pull and knobs you can adjust in your training to make changes targeted at improving your bench press.

The starting place is simple, bench press two times per week. One day is dedicated to intensity—few total reps at a near-maximum effort load. The other day is a volume day—sufficient accumulated sets and reps to cause fatigue and an adaptive response. Likely you will be doing chin-ups (or a variation like lat pulldowns) and/or barbell rows, but for now, let's keep the focus on the main upper body lifts.
From this starting place, the next step is to slowly increase the amount of volume and intensity stress in the program each week. First, add the appropriate amount of weight to the bar at a given volume. For most people, adding 2.5 lb to 5 lb the volume work and intensity work every week works well. Remember to prioritize sustained progress over speedy progress.

Eventually, you will not be able to add weight to the bar without some adjustments. The next step is to alter the set and rep scheme.

**VOLUME DAY CHANGES**

When you cannot maintain the volume that has been working for you and continue to add weight, the next step is to change the sets and reps so that your volume increases over time. There are different ways to add volume. The most direct is to add one set, going from three sets of five repetitions (3x5) to four sets of five (4x5) to five sets of five (5x5), dropping the weight five to ten percent each time you add a set to your volume work.

There are no hard and fast rules regarding what your volume day should look like, but there exists a realm of commonality into which most intermediate lifters fit: the volume day commonly should remain between three and six reps per set. For most people, it can help to organize your plans by limiting your volume work to five total sets per training slot. This is an artificial limitation, but many lifters will run out of time if they have to do six, seven, or eight sets of volume work in the three to six rep range. Sticking to the three to six rep range, you have additional options for manipulating your volume day work, keeping the volume static (more-or-less) but changing the sets and reps: 3x5 to 5x3 to 4x4 to 4x5 to 5x4 and so on. These small
changes may allow you to eke out a few more weeks of small increases before making more significant changes.

For volume work, the weight on the bar is only one factor and appropriately adjusting the weight to find the correct stress when you change the sets and reps is okay.

**INTENSITY DAY CHANGES**

Intensity changes follow a similar pattern preferring small changes to sets and reps, but with the additional goal of getting more weight on the bar. The intensity day work may start at a single set of five repetitions (1x5) or a 5RM, adding weight until you need to decrease the reps-per-set to two sets of three repetitions (2x3) and then finally to five singles (5x1). Some version of this that is appropriate for your training works well for a long time if you prioritize gradual increases.

Next, the intensity day will start alternating weekly between different rep ranges:

- Week 1: 1x5
- Week 2: 1x3
- Week 3: 1x1

Ideally, you are setting new PRs in each of these rep ranges each week, but even if these aren’t all-time PRs, the intensity should be appropriately close to a maximum effort for that rep range for the day.

**HOW TO INCREASE THE VOLUME FROM HERE**

If you followed all the above suggestions, then your training looks something like the following:
If your volume and stress need to increase, the problem eventually becomes finding room for additional volume without taking your five sets of volume to six sets, seven sets, eight sets, and so on. Instead, increase weekly volume by adding heavier volume work after your intensity work. For upper body lifts, a single AMRAP set often works well to add volume without overextending your training time.
The above changes are not bench press specific. These concepts and suggestions work well for each of the main lifts for many people as they progress through the early to mid-intermediate stages of training. When you start training supplemental lifts and adding other assistance work to your program, however, bench press specificity becomes pertinent.

**Bench Press Specific**

If you were following a programming method like the example four day split above, the need for supplemental lifts generally arises when you have run through all the basic permutations of sets and reps on your volume day, and you need to adjust the type of stress in your program. (Some methods will often bring supplemental lifts into the mix earlier as a means of varying the stress during the week—a 3 day, full-body Heavy Light Medium program, for example.) The bench press supplemental slot will typically follow your overhead press work, taking the place of what we previously used for basic bench press volume. Here you will include volume work in the form of a supplemental lift. Some of our favorites are the following:

- Close Grip Bench Press
- Paused bench press
- Floor Press
- Pin Press or board press
- Bench press with bands or chains

The most basic strategy is to **pick the supplemental lift that is appropriate for your training**. The less advanced you are, the more basic the variation—close grip bench press, paused bench
press, and floor press. Then, train this lift in a manner very similar to a single-lift linear progression. For example, you might floor press for three sets of five reps (3 x 5), starting relatively light because the movement is new to you. Then, make small weight increases every week. As the weight goes up, pyramid the reps per set, going from three sets of five (3 x 5) to five sets of three (5 x 5) and eventually to doubles and heavy singles. Improving and lifting heavy with a new, complementary lift will help improve your bench press.

**ACCESSORY LIFTS**

Perhaps more than any other of the main lifts, the bench press responds well to the addition of assistance work. Assistance work will fall after the supplemental lift of the day on your press and bench press days. In general, the bench press responds to assistance work that builds your triceps, chest, and upper back.

- High rep overhead press
- Dips
- Rolling DB Extensions
- DB Bench Press
- Barbell Rows
- Kroc Rows

Unlike your supplemental lifts, the goal of accessory work isn't to improve your performance of the accessory lift. Rather, accessory work adds the appropriate amount of narrowly targeted stress to your training session with the ancillary benefit of that stress carrying over to your bench press. Accessory work tends to cause much less systemic stress, instead affecting the local muscular area. Accessory work tends to help you train your main or supplemental lifts harder, target specific parts of the kinetic chain with the aim that focused effort will lead to modest improvements, and build muscle mass. Rarely will accessory work revolutionize your bench press overnight, but consistent, muscle-building hard work will help you aggregate gains in the long run.

The strategy with accessory work is not to overthink it: most accessory work should be challenging and should fall in the eight to twelve repetition range per set. You might select a load that allows you to complete twelve repetitions on the first set but will force some drop off due to fatigue in subsequent sets.

So many options, so little time. There are volumes written on bench press programming, many of which will deviate wildly from what we have presented here. We hope this article gives you some ideas for a framework for your training and how to make small changes for great effect. If you take nothing else away from this discussion, remember that when planning your training you should have a goal in mind, a next waypoint for your program. Then plan to take as long as possible to get there, allowing for detours and deviations based on your day-to-day training, the actual weights you lift, and a critical analysis of what works for you and what doesn't. Everything else is just opinion, and everyone has one of those.