BARBELL SAFETY BASICS
By any comparison of physical activities, barbell training is safe. Safety starts with correct lifting form. There are, however, certain practices, setups, and equipment issues that can make barbell training potentially dangerous. Fortunately, nearly all accidents in the gym are preventable. Below we will cover how to minimize the risk of injuries in your gym with proper gym etiquette, spotting practices, and setups with a special focus on bench press safety. Staying injury-free means you get to keep training.

**SAFETY AND ETIQUETTE**

Heavy plates, solid metal structures, platforms, and people. The opportunities to smash a toe, bang your head, trip, or hurt yourself in any serious training space are legion. You cannot make a gym absolutely safe, but you can be responsible with your equipment and remove unnecessary hazards. Mostly preventing accidents means following basic gym etiquette.

- Keep platforms clear: unused plates, fractional plates, belts, and bags tend to clutter these spaces and grab at lifting shoes.
- Load and unload your plates evenly. One side of the bar should only ever outweigh the other side by a 45lb or 25kg plate. Forgetfulness and loading accidents tend to happen at the end of a workout. (Ask us how we know!).
- Respect the set: When someone is lifting between your Point A and Point B, don’t try to parkour your way around them. Wait until their set is done and stay off their platform.
- Watch your head! Some of the worst accidental injuries happen because you put your plates under the bar, bend down to pick them up, stand up, and WHAM!
- Put your plates away when you are done! (Please, don’t be that guy!)

**SPOTTING BASICS**

Of the four main lifts, only the squat and bench press should ever be spotted. For the overhead press and deadlift, the lifter is on his or her own. That’s safer for everyone.
Spotting the squat requires *two spotters*—more spotters are unnecessary and fewer serve no purpose. The single spotter, handbra spot from behind is neither appropriate nor effective. Tell the handsy training to back off. If you do not have two spotters available, then skip on down to the section on lifting by yourself.

If you do have spotters, there are a few things you and they should know:

- The spotters’ job is to *help the lifter get the bar back into the rack*. If the lifter fails, then the three-person team finishes the lift and gets the bar back into the rack. Never dump the bar and leave your spotters holding the weight.

- Spotters go on the sides of the bar. One spotter per side. Each spotter should be ready to take hold of the plates. Facing the lifter, the spotter’s arm nearest the barbell reaches under the bar to grab the far side of the plates. The arm under the barbell acts as a safety, catching the bar in the crook of the elbow. The other hand grabs the near side of the plate, giving the spotter control over that side of the barbell and a strong position to assist the lifter.

- If the lift goes well, the spotters will never touch the barbell. The time to take the barbell is when the bar should be going up but it starts going downward instead. The downward movement indicates a failed lift. The spotters should step in together to help the lifter stand back up.
More catastrophic injuries occur while benching than during any of the other main lifts. Most of these injuries would be prevented or substantially mitigated by a spotter. Here’s what you and your spotter need to know:

- **Communicate:** tell your spotter if you want a hand unracking the bar and how many reps you are performing. Make sure your spotter knows not to interfere with your lift unless you need help.

- **Aside from a handoff,** the spotter should not touch the bar unless the bar is going down when it should be going up or the lifter otherwise indicates to do so.

- **Teamwork makes the dream work.** As with the squat, the spotter’s job is to help the lifter get the bar back into the rack. Don’t expect your spotter to row the bar up for you and place it back into the rack.

- **Risk vs. reward.** Spotters are like pizza: the perfect one is hard to find, but even a bad one is still pretty good. Find someone amenable, explain their job in simple monosyllables and then hope they don’t steal your rep. A few stolen reps are preferable to being pinned to the bench by your neck.
**Can I bench without a spotter?**

Yes, in a power rack with safety spotter arms set at the correct height. Know that you are taking on much more risk for this lift. The setup must be safe, and it is your responsibility to make sure it is before putting a loaded bar over your face, throat, and chest. It is up to you to decide how much risk you are comfortable with. If no spotters are available and you are not comfortable with your bench setup, it is okay to skip benching that day and come up with a Plan B.

**Lifting by Yourself**

**The right equipment**

A power rack (or power cage) made from study stuff and with functioning safety spotter arms or straps are absolute necessities for safe training by your lonesome. We also recommend a high-quality barbell, lifting belt, lifting shoes, and a platform.

Your rack should be bolted to the floor or platform on which you are standing during your lifts.

**Racking and unracking the bar**

The lift starts before you unrack the bar. Take the bar out of the rack with focus and intent, as if that is Rep One of your set. When you put the bar back into the rack: CRASH! The bar into the uprights of the rack, then slide the bar down onto the hooks. Do not try to aim for the hooks; you will miss eventually.

**Double-check your spotter arm height**

Every time you lift, you must check the height of the spotter arms with the empty bar. You should be able to set (not drop) the bar down and crawl or wiggle out from under the barbell with all your teeth, bones, and joints intact.

**Don’t be completely by yourself**

Sometimes our training schedules are subject to the oddest hours of the day, and this can’t be helped. But someone should know where you are and what you are doing.
BENCH PRESS SAFETY

**Thumbs Around**
A proper bench press grip is a thumbs-around-the-bar grip. Ignore the bros benching with thumbless grips. Celebrate your primate status and use your opposable thumb. A thumbless grip (called a suicide grip) adds no benefit to the lift and makes the possibility of dropping the bar much greater. Note also, that it is not your spotter’s job to catch the bar if you drop it.

**Rack and Unrack with Straight Arms**
With or without a spotter, your elbows should be locked straight any time the bar is traveling over your face and neck. At the end of your set, completely lock out that last rep before sending the bar back to the rack.

**Do Not Collar Your Weights (And Don’t Do the Roll of Shame)**
The last line of defense. If you fail your set, you do not have spotter arms set up, and your spotter has left you to fend for yourself, you can still dump the plates off one side of the bar if there are no collars. Some people will roll the bar down their abdomen, despite there being a bunch of things located in your soft supple abdomen that you do not want to be squished or torn. Keep the collars off the bar and dump the weights if you have to.

**Check Your Spotter Arms’ Height, Again**
No echo. This is just important.
Bench with a spotter

There is no safer setup than to have a spotter there to assist you.

If you have questions about bench press safety, contact the Barbell Logic Team (support@barbell-logic.com).