

To sculpt shoulder muscles (deltoids) that look like cannonballs, most people use some kind of overhead pressing movement. But which is better for building great shoulders, the barbell or dumbbell shoulder press?

We tested 10 highly trained athletes through electromyogram (EMG) analysis, which measures the amount of work done by a muscle by the amount of electrical potential it produces. We assessed muscle activity in the front and middle deltoid heads. The athletes performed both the barbell shoulder press (with the bar lowered to the front of the head) and the dumbbell shoulder press using 75% of their one-rep max (1RM) for four reps.

Within both moves, the front and middle deltoid heads were recruited at the same time, with the middle head being stimulated to a greater degree than the front head. However, the barbell press activated the front delts to a greater degree, and the dumbbell press involved the middle delts more.

In the barbell press to the front, you can lift more total poundage because your elbows travel to the front of the body, placing more emphasis on your front delts. With the dumbbell version, your elbows travel out to your sides, recruiting your middle deltoids to a greater extent.

Ed. Note: My recommendation is if you want big rounded shoulders focus on dumbbell presses, as your front delts get enough work when doing the bench press. Doing pyramid sets, ie; a light warm up weight of about 20 reps, followed by 2 heavy sets, your third set being the heaviest, allowing you to do about 6-8 reps. Then do continuous further sets with incrementally smaller dumbbells without resting, until you can barely lift your shoulders. Then to finish your shoulders do some light 5-10kg bent over side lateral raises. This should really work your shoulders well and force them to grow. Remember to use strict technique throughout to ensure no injuries – shoulders are prone to injuries if you start jerking and throwing the weights around.