

The Roark Report

The Iron Man Hand Grippers

It was small enough to be carried “in the coat pocket”, but effective enough to strengthen your “...hand, wrist, forearm, biceps, latissimus, etc.” — or so the 1904 advertisement in *Health & Strength* magazine claimed for the “Nutcracker Gripper.” The gripper was described as extra strong, was shaped in a “V” with a coiled spring-steel at the vertex. Perhaps buried inside that vertex was the secret of how a hand gripper could aid in developing the lats, much less the “etc.”

Hand grippers have been apart of the physical culture marketplace for all of this century, but no one made much of a fuss about them being extremely difficult, if not impossible, to squeeze shut until December 1964 when Warren Tetting began making an iron-handled gripper for *Iron Man* magazine, and the first of 79 ads began running for their sale. Unfortunately, those ads contributed to the confusion concerning the *Iron Man* grippers. I once telephoned the offices of Peary Rader, trying to determine how many various strengths of grippers were offered. Three or four, I was told, but they had long since stopped selling them through the magazine.

Now, through a study of those ads and through conversations and communications with Warren Tetting and others, the correct, if still confusing, history of this product can be at least partially unraveled.

The December 1964 issue of *Iron Man* magazine announced the “Super Heavy Duty Iron Man Gripper” was for sale at \$4 each. But the “Super Heavy”, so called from the onset, never, in fact, existed. It was actually the “Heavy Duty” version, not the “Super Heavy” as Warren explained — and this is an important distinction. By September 1966, after having been the only gripper offered by *Iron Man* for nearly two years, the ad now announced, “Heavy Duty”, “Extra Heavy Duty”, and “Super Duty”. The “Heavy Duty” —which had heretofore been labeled the “Super Heavy”, was now joined by a harder-to-close pair called “Extra Heavy” and the hardest of all, the “Super Duty” (notice, not “Super Heavy”).

So the original gripper became the easiest of the trio to close. Remembering that *Iron Man* had once described the original gripper as “...so strong that very few of the strongest grips can close them,” you now suspected that only a forceful finger freak could hope for success with the two newest additions. This was a V shape that did not willingly change its taper.

By February 1968, the product was called “*Iron Man Grip Developer*.” The following issue introduced a fourth strength and described the quartet of grippers —incorrectly as it turns out—as “Heavy”, “Extra Heavy”, “Super”, and “Super Heavy”. But the “Super Heavy” did not exist in July 1974 any more than it did in December 1964. What happened is that

Warren had, indeed, manufactured a fourth strength. The problem was that Peary Rader assumed, incorrectly, that it was more difficult than the previous three when in fact it was the easiest of the four. By November 1974 the advertisement was corrected to: “Light”, “Heavy”, “Extra Heavy”, and “Super” (not “Super Heavy”). The “Light” gripper was similar to a gripper you might purchase in the sporting goods section of a department store except that it was all metal. The resistance was too minimal for the iron crowd.

By March 1976, the “Light” duty was omitted from the ad, but reappeared the following issue and remained until September 1976, when it vanished forever.

None of the grippers were advertised after November 1977, because sales became inconsistent and Peary wanted to use the ad space for other items.

So, how hard was it to close the various *Iron Man* grippers? Very hard, excluding the “Light” gripper. The “Heavy Duty” will stop almost 100% of the non-athletic population, and will resist many athletes and blue-collar heavy laborers. The “Extra Heavy” can be closed only by someone who could actually hurt your hand in a handshake if he wanted to do so, and the “Super Duty” may as well have a tongue sticking out at you from the vertex in defiance. I have never personally seen the “Super” closed. Many people are unable to close it with fingers interlocked and both hands at the chest in a “crushing” position.

The largest marketing mistake concerning the grippers was not to identify them in some clear, visual way. I have three grippers and side by side their sizes are apparent, but if I were to offer you the Extra Heavy and tell you it was the Super, you would have no reason to question my claim. No color code was ever used, no initials were ever scribed onto the grippers. No numerical system was ever used (such as #1 for light, etc.).

Warren suspects that in order to close the Super a person would have to be able to close the Extra Heavy 20 to 25 reps. But be careful — after about 6000 reps, the Super may suffer metal fatigue and break. (Wanted to warn you in case you were approaching that mark.)

Lifting News magazine reported in July 1966 that Terry Todd could close the *Iron Man* gripper “five or six reps”. Which gripper? At that time, only the Heavy Duty was being advertised, but Warren assures me that the Extra Heavy and the Super versions existed. Warren says he thinks Todd closed the Extra Heavy, and this fits the scenario because in October 1966 Rader handed a Super to Terry, who, according to Rader, “couldn’t get it half closed”. Even so, there is still confusion. In a recent interview, Jim Witt, former national powerlifting champion and Chairman of the U.S. Powerlifting

Federation, explained that in either 1965 or 1966 he ordered all three strengths from Peary Rader and that the one Todd shut was the strongest of the three. Witt said, "I could shut the easiest gripper and I could come close to shutting the medium gripper, and Wilbur Miller, who held the national deadlift record in the super heavyweight class, could shut it but no-one in the Dallas area could shut the hardest one. So I gave the medium gripper to Wilbur, since he could close it and I kept the hard one in my gym as a challenge. I told everyone that they could have it if they could shut it. And lots of strong men tried it besides Wilbur, like Ronnie Ray and Wayne Coleman and Sid Henry. But when Terry came to the gym one day and I told him about it, he shut it with no trouble for four or five reps. So I gave it to him."

Todd still has the gripper, by the way, and he says that one of the problems in assessing the grippers is that they apparently vary a bit in shape as well as in coil strength. Todd says that the Super he saw in Alliance was wider, which made it impossible for him to reach around it with all four of his fingers and exert his full strength. Todd also thinks that although the smaller size of his gripper fits his own hand perfectly, long-fingered men like Wilbur Miller may be at a disadvantage as their fingers would hit the base of their palms before the handles closed.

In any case, I witnessed the Super being half closed once—half closed meaning the handles being closed to parallel. Scott Studwell, now of the Minnesota Vikings, was a student at the University of Illinois, and on a sunny day atop the hill to the north of the Assembly Hall in Champaign, Illinois, I handed Scott the Heavy Duty, explaining to him that we had not encountered anyone who could squeeze it shut for more than one very difficult rep. Scott closed the handles together so fast and easily that the handles made a clicking NOISE when they closed—a noise loud enough for another friend approaching about five feet behind Studwell to ask what that clicking noise was. Scott gave us a puzzled look that indicated we had been pulling his leg—that such a toy (to him) could not be that hard for others to close. I asked him to try it without using his little finger in the attempt. He succeeded with that. Then I handed him the Super, and he got the handles parallel. Not very long after that, Studwell won the NFL arm wrestling championship.

Were the *Iron Man* grippers the hardest to close that have ever been offered for sale? Ed Jubinville thinks not. He took a Super Duty gripper with him to a spring manufacturer and asked that some springs be made which were stronger than the Super. The manufacturer assured Ed that the gripper that Ed sells is stronger than Tetting's Super. For most of us, this is a moot point. Is one wall stronger than another wall when we

can push neither down? Warren Tetting thinks that to close the Super requires about 220 pounds of pressure.

Tetting still sells all but the Light Duty and can be contacted at 1063 W. 7th Street, St. Paul, MN 55102. Ed can be reached at 89 Harding St., Chicopee, MA 01013. Ed's gripper comes in one strength and is knurled—Warren's come with and without knurling. Please send a self-addressed stamped envelope when writing to these men.

A final thought. Hand strength, in its various demonstrations, seems to be an enigma. Tetting says that in July, 1967, he performed a set of ten wrist curls with 325 pounds, but was never able to close the Super gripper. And Gary Stitch, who was featured in *Muscle Training Illustrated* in April 1984, was able to close with one hand on a weight-loaded parallel squeezing apparatus a stack of plates totalling 310 pounds. Perhaps at that time Gary would have been able to close the Super gripper. Stitch did his grip feat seated so there was no deadlift assistance, just, probably, one of the world's strongest hands. In December 1989, Gary tried the grip machine again and did 230 pounds on it, and feels that he could work up to 250 pounds left-handed. His right, stronger, hand was injured in a skating accident years ago, and arthritis bothers it.

Bibliography

1. *Iron Man* magazine - all issues from December 1964 through November 1977
2. *Lifting News* - July 1966, October 1966
3. *Altoona Mirror*, Tuesday, April 24, 1984
4. *Muscle Training Illustrated*, April 1984
5. Telephone interviews with Gary Stitch, Ed Jubinville, Warren Tetting, Terry Todd and Jim Witt

