

The Slaying of Goliath: Bending a Red Nail

John Brookfield

Author of *Mastery of Hand Strength*,
The Grip Master's Manual, and
Training with Cables for Strength

From time to time, there are certain barriers that come along in the world of strength, or in life in general, which look impossible to surmount. For example, years ago people said the 500-lb. clean and jerk was impossible, as well as the 1000-lb. squat. We now know that goals and achievements like this are possible. Some of the barriers in sports or the world of strength can even appear much harder or more distant than the ones I just mentioned—especially if we are facing a feat of strength where an object is our Goliath, instead of a weighted bar. An object holds more mystery than a stack of weights, which can be measured in simple

pounds. For example if someone lifts 450 lb. of plates with his teeth versus a 300-lb. anvil in the same way, to most people the anvil would appear more difficult.

In simple terms, if we can measure the difficulty of a task in our minds, we don't seem to have so big a mental block as with a task that we can't relate to or understand its difficulty. With this in mind, let's look at the most recent Goliath that has just been slain: the IronMind Red Nail. This nail is not even a nail at all; it is simply a 7-inch piece of 5/16-inch round steel bar that is the same dimensions as a 70-penny nail. For many years, I was the only person who was able to bend this 7-inch piece of steel. As a trial one day in front of Steve Jeck, I succeeded in bending the Red Nail with an inch cut off. This, of course, made the Red Nail about 6 inches in length. I have also bent the Red Nail with around an inch and a half cut off. I did not try to go any shorter than this, and I do not honestly know if I

could have or not. For many years after, people felt that bending a Red Nail was almost impossible.

We just recently found out that bending a Red Nail is very possible when Gavin Holle of Wales bent it quite easily for Randall Strossen. This seemed to shock some people in the grip world with almost disbelief. I had quite a number of e-mails and even a few phone calls about this event. Everyone asked me the same thing: what did I think of this news and did I believe it really happened? My reply was a simple one, yes, I believed Gavin Holle bent a Red Nail, and I was surprised that someone, or even several people have not been bending Red Nails all along.

This is not to take away from Gavin or anyone else: the Red Nail is a good accomplishment, but it is not as difficult as many people would lead you to believe. I understand that just recently Gavin has fully bent a Red Nail cut down to six inches in length and that two of his brothers (Craig and Jay) have also bent Red Nails. Just recently a friend of mine, Steve McGranahan, bent four Red Nails in about 15 minutes. The first one took him about 15 seconds to bend. One of the nails bent a little off center, which made it more difficult. Now that you know that the Red Nail can be bent, we will probably hear of a handful of others succeeding in the near future.

One very important point that I would like to make is that these nails can and are being attempted and bent in different ways. I did not pay much attention to Gavin Holle's bending the Red Nail until he used the word "folding" the nail instead of bending it. Even this did not overly grab my attention until I looked at the photos in *MILO* [September 2003, Vol. 11, No. 2] and in the 2004 IronMind catalog (page 41) and saw the position that Gavin's hands were in. His hands

were, of course, up at his chest holding the nail, but what struck me was that his hands were out at the ends of the nail. Usually when bending short pieces of steel, one would have his hands touching or meeting at the knuckles, toward the center of the steel; if you were watching someone bend a nail this way, you would not see a gap between the person's hands. You would also not be able to take your finger or fingers and touch the middle of the nail, because the bender's hands would be there, and there would be no space between them.

The way that Gavin is bending the nail is a completely different style of bending from mine. He is basically grasping the Red towards the ends and pressing or folding the nail into a U-shape, just as he originally told Randall Strossen when he modestly described what he was doing. This does not at all diminish his accomplishment—it is just an entirely different technique. In fact, years ago the Charles Atlas course on dynamic tension showed about ten feats of strength, one of which was bending spikes up at chest level with your hands toward the ends of the steel bar. From here, the instructions were to press inward and downward on the nail, causing it to collapse or to fold. I have toyed with this technique a bit. It has a complete different feel from what I usually do. It also puts more pressure on the chest and shoulders than on the wrists and hands. It becomes, without question, more of an upper-body motion than one at the grip-strength level. This method of bending feels somewhat uncomfortable at first; however, with some practice and experimentation, you will probably find slightly better leverage in this position over time.

My way of bending steel, from the 5-inch to the 7-inch size, is to hold it close to my body at about waist level and bend the ends downward. I grasp the nail so that my hands—specifically my index



John Brookfield bends a couple of Red Nails in short order.

Courtesy of John Brookfield.

fingers and thumbs—are touching; in other words, my hands are butting up against each other. In this style, the bending is done mostly with the wrists and hands, both to start the bend and to keep it moving. Also, you will notice that there is not much leverage in this position; it relies entirely on lower-arm strength to start the nail.

Also with my technique, you don't have to use as much cloth or padding because your hands are not pressing directly on the ends of the steel. In the first position, like Gavin, you must be careful while pressing on the ends of the steel if it is sharp like a nail; in fact, a hardened or thick nail like a 70- or 80-penny nail could be quite dangerous to bend if your hand were directly on the point. The pressure required to bend a nail like this could easily force the point through the cloth or padding and into your hand. Also be careful even pressing too hard into the ends of an IronMind Red Nail if it is not bending because this can cause nerve damage in the palms of your hands.

To attempt folding or bending the Red Nail at chest level, wrap the steel in the cloth, with the cloth balled or overlapped on the ends. Make it thick enough to comfortably pad the ends, but not so thick that you can't get a good

feel for the Red Nail. Do not use gloves or leather to try and bend the steel. You want to toughen and get your hands used to grasping the steel without extra help other than from the cloth. From here, hold the Red Nail with your hands touching your chest, keeping your hands toward the ends, but not on the ends. Try to press downward and inward on the Red nail to fold or collapse it. The part of your hand by the pinkie or little finger can be touching the ends of the nail; however, once again, avoid placing the palms of your hands directly on the ends of the Red Nail in this technique.

You can get extra leverage on the steel once you get a feel for it, due to the fact that you are actually making the nail a little longer. This gives you a tiny advantage over the technique with your hands together and your knuckles touching.

Try both methods if you are truly determined to bend the Red Nail. If you have great power in your chest and shoulders, this may be the way for you, and if you are more interested in bending with lower-arm strength, try keeping your hands together at waist height on the Red Nail. **M**