

Natural Advantages
Bending for Your Body Type
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I have to admit that my fascination with this topic started with my own nail bending abilities. For several months, I trained using a reverse grip (aka “terminator style”) and then later with an underhand grip and had moderate success, but it wasn’t until I learned how to bend double overhand that I began to really bend some big steel. What struck me as odd is that I am not a very good bench presser and a mediocre overhead presser, yet I was becoming successful bending with a style that uses primarily upper body pressing strength. What was even stranger to me was that guys who were bench pressing 500 or overhead pressing 300 were not able to apply that strength to the nail in a double overhand position, even with good coaching.

Then one day while reading the Gripboard, someone mentioned that Pat Povilaitis, unquestionably the world’s best unbraced bender and who uses a double overhand (“DO”) bending style, has deadlifted well over 600 pounds at a bodyweight of about 170 pounds. Pat, as you know, has been bending Ironmind red nails longer than anyone whose last name isn’t Brookfield. Eric Milfeld, another tenacious DO red nail bender, pulled 623 while weighing a lot less than 200lbs. It occurred to me that their world class bending ability DO might have something to do with the upper back strength that they developed from deadlifting, but that theory was later revised. I decided to spend some time researching red nail benders and asking them a few questions to determine if there was a common link among them, especially among the DO nail benders.

I spent 2 days on the Gripboard using the private message system and email to get in touch with every red bender possible, especially those who bend double overhand. I asked 3 questions:

- 1) Do you bend reds overhand?
- 2) What is your best deadlift?
- 3) Do you think your body type is suited for deadlifting?

The reason I asked these questions is because I wanted to see if there was a link between a person's body type and what style of bending they are successful with, as I was quickly suspecting. What I did not suspect or anticipate was that there were 21 red nail benders who visit the Gripboard, a number far greater than I thought. That just goes to show that the exchange of information and inspiration available on the Internet is huge. Here is the raw data I came up with:

- 21 red nail benders (some not certified by Ironmind)
- Out of those 21, 17 bend DO
- The average deadlift for those 17 people is 495lbs (rounding up to actual barbell plates)
- Out of those 17, all but 2 said that they believe they are built for pulling because they have relatively long arms.
- Out of those 21 red benders, 5 of them can bend reds DO and with a reverse grip.
- 2 of the red benders can bend them DO and double underhand ("DU")
- Only one person, Pat Povilaitis, has bent red nails using DO, DU, and with a reverse grip.

By and large, the guys with longer arms that are suited for deadlifting also excel at double overhand, but a few also practice other styles and are strong with that. In general, guys who are built more for squatting and pressing report having more success bending DU. However, several guys who bend primarily underhand can bend well with DO, although DU is more of a natural movement based on their relatively shorter arms

and larger chest.

I started out looking for a link between the upper back strength of deadlifters and their ability to bend big steel DO, but that soon gave way to the long arms theory because it just made more sense. During my conversations with people, a lot of them mentioned that they were not good pressers, but comparing raw bench numbers to DO bending isn't as relevant as comparing body types to bending styles. One guy on the Gripboard has benched 585 raw but, based on my knowledge of his abilities, seems to do better at reverse grip than DO for bending and has not bend a red nail as of this writing.

Another theory that has popped up since first posting my findings on the Gripboard was that perhaps relatively wide shoulders would help with DO bending. The four people who mentioned this all bend double underhand, and have relatively short arms. In that case, having a wider upper back should compensate somewhat for the shorter-armed body type.

One of the reasons I think that long arms suited for deadlifting work for DO is because of the extra leverage gained on the end of the bar. DO is mostly about transferring upper body power through the arms using the best possible leverage, and long armed benders have more leverage than those with shorter arms, who are better suited for pressing. Also, having longer arms and holding the nail in a DO grip high under the chin requires less shoulder girdle flexibility than those benders who have shorter arms. This isn't to imply that guys suited for pressing will not be successful with the double overhand style, but they will simply have to work a little harder than their ape-like peers.

Dan John, champion highland games athlete and track & field thrower, has a great analogy for weight lifters who are trying to decide whether they should pull their deadlifts conventional or sumo: "Apes pull conventional, Trolls pull sumo." In this case, apes bend DO and trolls bend DU.

The vast majority of DO benders use leather wrapping as well, which is used to dull the pain of the end of the nail pressing into the palm.

I was going to post a spreadsheet of my findings with names, deadlift poundages, and the like, but a couple people have asked to keep their stats private - which I respect. So I decided not to publish the sheet at all since the missing stats would show a different result than what I'm saying here and I did not ask permission from everyone to publicly show this info anyway.

Just having long arms is not enough to bend a red nail with the DO style. As with any sport, you need to first develop the proper technique and then develop the specific strength. What is specific strength? Specific strength is not something that can be gained in the weight room; it can only be acquired doing the action you are trying to get better at. So if you want to be a better nail bender using the DO style, then just bend. If you are a highland games athlete and want to throw the heavy weight for distance farther, you just have to throw the heavy weight for distance to get better at it. Nail bending is unlike any lift you can do in the gym, in my opinion. It stresses the outer pectorals, rotator cuff, traps, and lats all at once. You can do exercises in the gym to specifically isolate and strengthen these areas, but nothing short of bending nails will hit them all at once.

Do you want to find out whether your body type is better suited to bending DO or DU but don't deadlift for whatever reason? Here is an easy way to find out. Stand in front of a mirror with your shirt off. Now that you have scared off small children, stand up straight with your arms hanging down by your side. If the crease of your elbow is in line with your belly button, then you have long arms suited for pulling and DO bending. If the crease of your elbow is between your pecs and your belly button, then you may be better suited for DU bending.

So the conclusion to this is that bending by your body type using your natural leverages and strengths should prove to be more successful than sticking with a certain style because you've always bent that way. In short, people whose body type are suited for deadlifting will most likely be strongest using a DO grip on the nail, people whose body type are suited for squatting/pressing will most likely be strongest using a DO grip, and people with an average build who may not be especially well suited to press or pull should have equal success in whichever of the three bending styles that were mentioned here.

For those interested in the deadlift numbers by guys who feel they are suited to pulling and work out regularly, the highest mark is 744 and the lowest is 455. 9 of the guys pull over 600.