



Straight to the Grip Contest - Grippers

Right now, Grip is still in the infancy of the sport, but I think with more information it will some day blow up, just as Strongman has done over the last few years. I think that if more information were available to the body of strength enthusiasts out there, then more people would become interested and want to take it up. In my experience, I've rarely met anyone who didn't enjoy trying to close heavy Grippers, lift heavy block weights, and bend hard nails. All these things have been featured in recent Grip Contests I have competed in. My objective with this article is to get more information available to the Grip beasts who are wandering about, aimlessly, looking for a direction in which to drive their training – Straight to the Grip Contest.

On March 31, 2007, I was lucky enough to compete and win the Grip Assault Grip contest at the Total Performance Sports Facility in Everett, Massachusetts. It was a small contest – only six or seven competitors. And it's strange that the contest was so small because TPS is a great facility where I know a ton of big guys train. I also know from holding the World Series of Grip in other New England States, that the Region is filled with athletes who are talented at Grip strength. I have seen at least a half dozen strongman competitors lift the Thomas Inch Replica Dumbbell, another dozen

or so close the IronMind #3 Gripper, as well as other top Grip feats. New England is full of athletes that could have done very well, but most did not show up.

The conclusion I am coming to is that there is just not enough information out there. The process of trial and error is not a fun process. What I want to do with this article is give you all the information you need in order to avoid the costly investment of trial and error. You'll be able to skip all that and get what you need to train to be your best.

I want to put together an entire series of articles covering the major events that are included in Grip Contests, and the first installment will be Grippers. Hand grippers are probably the most popular of all the Grip Strength Contest events and they are usually the first event in a Grip Contest, so it only makes sense to start with them.

When I started, I didn't completely understand why Grippers were appearing first in every contest I was reading about, but now it makes sense. Grip contest events often require multiple trips to the platform and multiple attempts per trip, so your hands get tired out fast and the skin gets sensitive quickly. Because of this, it gets more and more difficult to close a top level Gripper. As you get deeper into the contest, your Max Gripper potential can get drained.

Those who follow the day-to-day happenings in the Grip world know who is closing big Grippers like the #3 IronMind Captains of Crush, Beef Builder Elite, Super Elite and the #4 C.O.C. When these types of Grippers get smashed at the contest, it looks a lot better on the score sheet. If Grippers get shifted backwards to a later spot in the contest, you can bet on most of the athletes' performances dropping. Promoters like to be able to show off the score card with monster Grippers getting closed and the fans enjoy reading about it. Plus, when you consider how far athletes must travel to get to the contest and the financial investment they make in registering for the contest, as well as paying for food travel and hotel stay, they want to go to the

contest and murder that big Gripper they have been working on. All of these factors add up to Grippers being the first event, usually.

I only know of one promoter that consistently sets the contest order up so that Grippers are not first, and that is Dave Memont from Total Performance Sports. Luckily, he placed Grippers second in the order this year, but two years ago, at the 2005 Grip Assault contest, Grippers were LAST and not a single competitor, including myself, was able to close a #3 Gripper. We were all too wasted from the rest of the prior events! I anticipated him doing it again this year, so I shifted Grippers last in each workout that I trained them. I did this in an effort to develop the endurance to still have high performance in the grippers at the end of the contest, even after several efforts on the Hub, Rolling Thunder, Vertical Bar, and Thick Bar lifts. This year, with Grippers being second, my hands felt great going into the event, and I closed the #3 no problem.



Besides the order of events, the biggest factor in how difficult it will be to excel in the Gripper event is the kind of set that is being used in the contest. A set is the technique used in partially closing the Gripper with two hands in order to optimally position the Gripper in the gripping hand in preparation for the close.

There are several types of sets that are used in Grip Strength Contests. I will cover each one so that you will become familiar with all of them. Let's start off at the beginning with the Original IronMind Set.

Since IronMind is the manufacturer of the most famous hand strength grippers on the market, all contests used to employ the original IronMind Set. For certification on IronMind's #3 and #4 Captains of Crush Grippers, you used to be able to set the gripper with your off hand up until the point where the handles were one inch apart.

The witness had to be able to clearly see the last inch of Range of Motion (R.O.M.) and the contact of the handles for the athlete to qualify as officially closing the gripper.

The beauty of this technique was that it took hand size out of the picture for the certification process. Since you were permitted to set the Gripper, it didn't matter if your hands were 7 inches, or 9 inches, because everybody could get their fingers into a good position on the gripper handles. Essentially, everyone had an equal shot at certifying on the #3 and the #4 as long as they were willing to put the work in. With the beginning of the R.O.M. taken out of the equation, the toughest part of the Gripper R.O.M., the close, was still there for everyone to conquer.

This setting method was the easy choice for Grip contests. After all, IronMind was the gold standard in Gripper product quality, so why not use their setting technique in contests? My first Grip Contest was the Battle for Grip Supremacy, promoted by Rick Walker in Punxsutawney, PA. There, Grippers were held first, and the athlete could set to parallel and squeeze. If there was a tie, and two or more athletes closed the same Gripper, then they had to go back and do a tie-breaker by performing a timed hold with that gripper. I remember I closed a very tough, wide-spread, single-stamped #3 Gripper along with Rob F. Vigeant. On the next turn, we both missed the Beef Builder Elite, so we were tied. The Gripper attempts lasted 2 minutes, so we were both so wasted from double digit attempts at getting that Elite closed. Thankfully, Rick let us split the points.

I certified as an IronMind Captain of Crush on the #3 Gripper at the end of 2003. In 2004, the IronMind certification was still the only one that existed. In order to get your name 'up in lights,' you had to do so through the IronMind certification. ([IronMind's Captains of Crush Certification](#) page) To this day, IronMind remains the gold standard in Grip Strength equipment.

At that same time, a regular topic being discussed on the [Gripboard](#) was the fact that there was variance between the IronMind number 3 grippers. It was noted that many of the older #3's were more difficult than the ones that were currently being produced. While I have only tried a handful of older grippers, and by 'older' I mean produced prior to 2003, the ones I have tried were definitely more difficult on average. **The fact is grippers vary.** To me, it seems that most of the time that I squeezed a pre-2003 #3 it seemed harder to shut than ones made after 2003. Then in 2005, it seemed to me that they didn't vary as much. These days, the #3's all seem just about the same, and you rarely find a spongy one.

In 2004, the Gripboard athletes reacted to this gripper variance in different ways. It was not uncommon to see threads complaining about the variance in grippers – many thought that a product that garnered so much attention and respect should be manufactured with stricter standards of consistency. On the other hand, there were also the tricksters that would try to shop around to locate the weakest number 3 grippers they could find so that they could more easily certify and get their name on the list.

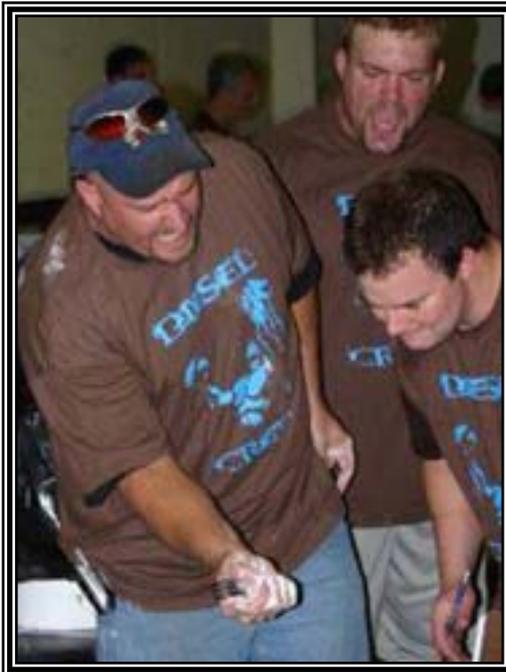
It was due to the variance in gripper difficulty that the Mash Monster Certification was formed. The members tested and put into action a series of grippers that would always be used. The Mash Monster process got rid of the worry of inconsistency by utilizing the same grippers for all certifications. You can check out the Mash Monster pyramid, by click here: [MashMonster](#).

At the time of this writing, there are 6 levels of Mash Monster grippers, each one just a shade tougher than the one before it. Now, it is an even and consistent playing field for all the greats in the Grip world to try their hands at. You can be sure that someone who certifies in 2007 on the Mash Monster Level 2 is squeezing the same gripper that athletes attempted to close in 2005.



The set technique for the Mash Monster certification utilizes a parallel set, also known as the Mash Monster set, MM set, or MMS.

Now what does this certification process have to do with success in a Grip Contest, you might ask? The Parallel set, or Mash Monster set, is the most common set used in contests these days.



For a time, the MM Set started off equal to the old set depth for IronMind Captains of Crush certification. The set depth quickly changed to parallel simply because it was easier to judge set depth. After all, it is a lot easier to judge gripper handles being right about parallel, than it is to make the call of when they are an inch apart. One person's inch can be a lot smaller than someone else's.

Left: Smitty judges Dave Morton at the 2005 Global Grip Contest. The MM set was used.

These days, the Mash Monster set is what you are most often going to perform in Grip Contests. Again, the beauty of this set is that you are able to pre-position the gripper handles. This technique takes hand size out of the question. Using the MM Set, smaller handed individuals do not have to take a back seat to their larger handed counterparts because they too can get an advantageous hold on the gripper handles.

Of course, there are antagonists to the MM Set. Many believe it takes the purity out of the feat by setting it so deep with two hands and then closing it with one. In fact, this

very dissatisfaction with set depth proved to be the cause for a great upheaval in the Grip community when IronMind decided to change their set depth rule.



The one-inch-set rule eventually became a problem for both the Gripboard and IronMind itself. Like I said, not everyone's definition of one-inch matched. With that, the Gripboard decided to change the legal set depth to parallel, leading to the current definition of the Mash Monster set. However, the inconsistency in setting the gripper for IronMind's certification also is what spawned what is referred to as the Credit Card set.

The athlete must be able to pass a credit card, ATM card, or the IronMind-provided Captains of Crush Gripper ID card through the handles as shown to the left. After removing the card, the athlete can crush it home.

The Credit Card set is the ONLY technique that IronMind allows now. As mentioned before, some athletes started abusing the ability to deep set the Gripper for their certification. According to a post I saw on the news section of IronMind.com from several years ago, they wanted to bring some standardization back to the certification process. Their decision was to still allow for a set to be used, but now the athletes would be required to fit a card between the handles after pre-positioning them and before attempting the close.

This set technique has proven to slow down the certifications on the #3 Grippers quite a bit. Following the adoption of the new set rules, only 6 people were certified on the

#3 in 2005 and only 3 in 2006. At this point, 2 have been certified in 2007. Click here to check out the official list of certified #3 gripper closers: [Certified Captains of Crush](#). You'll notice right away the abrupt drop off once the new set was started.

The Credit Card set is not as popular in Grip Contests as the Mash Monster set. Many athletes dislike the technique because they would rather be able to close big Grippers when they pay money to travel to and enter a contest. Promoters also like to be able to say that their contest produced a hefty number of athletes that smashed the #3. Finally, fans of contests want to sign onto the Gripboard and read about monster Grippers getting closed when they peruse the results of a major Grip Contest. It is quite shocking when you read a Grip Contest report and you see that certified #4 Captains of Crush closers finished only marginally ahead of people who currently aren't certified for closing #3's yet! Many athletes dislike this set technique!

To the contrary, the aspects of this technique are not entirely negative. In fact, one advantage is that you work your hand and create strength through a longer, more complete range of motion. This dynamic movement can also promote crossover to a greater number of other grip lifts, including open hand support and pinch lifts, due to the open hand nature of the Credit Card set.

We have covered the three most commonly used set techniques in Grip Contests today. Essentially, the old IronMind set is a fossil. I don't know anybody that trains the one-inch technique anymore. Most athletes are either focusing on the parallel set in order to vanquish the grippers in the Mash Monster series, or the Credit Card set, in order get their name on the elite list of gripsters who have closed the IronMind #3 or #4 gripper under authentic conditions.

My suggestion to you, the prospective grip athlete, is to train using a variety of sets from the beginning. This way, no matter what technique is used at the contests you go to, you will be ready.

Up until now, we have covered the gripper setting techniques that are most widely known in Grip Sports. While these sets allow for the athlete to pre-position the gripper before making the attempt to close the handles together, there are some other techniques that are practiced in which a pre-closing of the gripper is not permitted. These methods are called "no-sets."

Within this category, there are two techniques - the No-Set, and the Table No-Set.



The No-Set technique is very easy to perform. All you really have to do is place the gripper in your hand how you want it, without pre-closing it, and give it a squeeze. The object is, of course, to close the gripper and touch the handles together, but upon trying this technique you will see that it is much harder to pull off because you have not pre-arranged the gripper into a position of optimal leverage. Instead, you have to work the handles the entire way through the range of the sweep.



Now, even though you do not pre-close the handles, you can still place the gripper so that it is in an advantageous position. Naturally, when you attempt a no-set close, you are not just going to haphazardly drop the gripper into your hand and hope your fingers catch it in a good spot. Instead, you should situate it, so that the anchor handle is firmly and squarely set against the thumb pad and the other is favorably in contact with the fingers. This will ensure that the gripper does not



slip around in your hand while closing.

No-set closes are one of my main focuses with grippers at this time, and I can see that I progress much slower with no-sets than I do when using a set.



The table no-set is even more difficult, in my opinion, than the fundamental no-set gripper close. Again with this technique the close will not be assisted by the off-hand. In fact, with this technique only the squeezing hand is allowed to touch the gripper.



This technique is the one that is required for certifying under the Warren Tetting regulations. You can contact Warren Tetting for a specially made gripper which you can then certify on. To qualify, the gripper must start on a table or other hard, flat surface. The athlete must reach down with the squeezing hand, grab one handle and then wriggle the fingers into position to make the close.



To the best of my knowledge, the athlete must video tape the certification attempt and send it to Warren, himself. Beyond that, I am not sure, as I have never looked into this certification, although many Gripboard members have done so.

As far as grip contests are concerned, gripper closing techniques can't get much more pure than the Table No-set. Unless the promoter throws the gripper to the

athlete and they must squeeze it upon contact, or if it is hung from a string and the athlete must try to close it upon catching it.

I don't see those challenges showing up in grip contests any time soon.

I do not recall any contests where No-sets and Table No-sets were the only approaches allowed in the gripper event. For our contest, the Global Grip Challenge, we normally specify the deepest set allowed and then if the athlete would like to use a shallower set it is perfectly acceptable. For instance, in 2005, we allowed a parallel set, but some athletes chose to use a Table No-set grip. In 2006, we changed to the Credit Card set, but we also allowed a no-set to be utilized for those who were afraid of burning up energy placing a credit card between the handles of the gripper.

Again, I think it is good to be well rounded as a Grip athlete and it will behoove you to train using all the techniques throughout the year, but at some point, as the competition draws near, you should transition to a training phase where you specialize on the technique allowed at the contest.

You have to specialize with your setting techniques in order to make the best run at your gripper goals. If the promoter is allowing a deep set, then you should spend the majority of your time working on that deep set, and likewise with a wide set.

Following are a few of the practices I have been using in my gripper training. You will see that a lot of these tips will involve Extension of the Movement (EM), one of the concepts the Diesel Method is based upon. The idea behind EM is to increase the physical demand of the training means by making it more difficult. Then, when you return to the movement pattern of the basic movement, it feels much easier to perform. In training, I often try to make my preparation more demanding than what I will be doing in the contest.

Here are a couple of techniques I use for my specialized deep set gripper training.

Set, Pause, and Smash

For example, in the contest, you have to set the gripper to parallel and then you can immediately try to close it. In training, I set the gripper to parallel and then pause it for an instant, to make the close a bit harder. I don't do this every single time, but I usually split it up 50/50. Try this one out! After several weeks of pausing in training, it's going to feel much easier for you to close a gripper in the contest when you can just set it and kill it.

Train on really heavy grippers



The next time someone asks you to try out your gripper, watch how much they shake when they set it. Most people who have not trained with grippers much are going to shake and tremble when they go for the set. Those who are new to grippers often have to expend a great deal of energy just setting the gripper. This can also happen when an experienced athlete goes for their target or Personal Record gripper at a contest. When you get to the contest, you want to be able to conserve as much energy for the close that you can. You do not want to waste any energy trying to keep your hands steady during the set.



The best way I know of to make sure you are steady with grippers is by working with heavier grippers on a routine basis in your training. At least once a week, I do 5 sets or so with a significantly heavier gripper than my goal gripper. For instance, I set aside time in training to work with my Beef Builder Super Elite, COC #4 (left, above),

and BB Grand Elite (left, below). Setting these a few times makes lighter grippers feel like squeezing jello.

Following are a couple of things I keep in mind for my wide set training

Speed through the sweep

It is very important that once you get your fingers in place on the gripper handle, to squeeze it down quickly. Nothing is going to hinder your chances of making the handles touch than trying to cover the 3 inches between the handles with a slow, grinding motion. It takes too much energy to do this. Get the handles moving, power through the sweep, and utilize momentum to get the handles as close together as possible on the first effort. If the handles come to a halt, then by exploding from the start you should have enough energy stored up to give it another jolt and pin those handles together at the end of the range of motion.

Full range repetitions

Something new I have been doing lately for my credit card set training is employing repetitions with lighter grippers. I have never done much rep training with the grippers until recently. I have been hitting a lot of full range reps with the COC #2 and the BB Master. Full range is the important thing here. Using EM, I open the gripper completely each time, in order to make each rep a bit harder than what will be done at the contest, all with the hopes of being better conditioned once the contest arrives.

There are also a few things you should remember, whether you are practicing a deep or wide set, to keep yourself progressing on grippers

Spend time training with the gripper handles closed or nearly closed

The most important thing to remember with deep set training is that if the handles don't touch, then you won't get any points for your attempt. One thing I try to

remember is to spend as much time with the gripper handles closed or nearly closed that I can. When I say 'nearly closed' I mean that I tried to close it but I just missed it, with barely a visible space between the handles. When I close a gripper down, I imagine myself squeezing it so hard that I am flattening the inside area of the gripper handles.

To take this idea a little further, I try to remember to close every rep. Whether it is a wide or a deep set, I try to finish each effort off by making the handles touch and trying to hold them there for a second or more. This even applies to when I am setting very heavy grippers. I try to make my hands remember what it feels like to bury the handles on all grippers, even ones in the neighborhood of COC #4's and Grand Elites. To me, it just doesn't make any sense to squeeze it down to ¼ inch space and then let it open up just because you didn't touch the handles together. I strive to finish each rep off, either by pulling with my off-hand, pressing the gripper down on my thigh, or by having a partner close the gap when I know I have completely stalled out.

Tape the handle for negatives



A common training method for grippers is extreme negatives, where a heavy gripper is cheat closed with the off-hand and then the gripping hand tries to resist the opening of the gripper handles. This is a great way to create strength and endurance throughout the full range of the sweep. However, I have always found that my hands get highly irritated when performing multiple negatives, due to the knurling digging into my skin. I have found that I can perform many more extreme negatives

in one training session if I wrap electrical tape around the handle on the finger-side of the gripper. There is a lot less friction this way, I can perform more repetitions, and I feel it has helped my endurance tremendously.

These ideas have been great additions to my gripper training lately, and I hope they help you out too. Hopefully, you have increased your awareness of gripper techniques and are accomplishing your gripper training goals. All the best in your training, and as always, please check out DieselCrew.com!



JEDD JOHNSON, CSCS

Jedd Johnson played Basketball and Baseball at Owanda High School in Pennsylvania. Later, he played Division 2 baseball for two years at Mansfield University of Pennsylvania, before taking on strength training as his main interest.

Credentials

Jedd has Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist credentials through the National Strength and Conditioning Association, and is a regular speaker/presenter at the Pennsylvania State Strength and Conditioning Clinic.

The Diesel Crew

In 1999, Jedd and Jim 'Smitty' Smith formed the Diesel Crew and began formulating the Diesel Method, a strength and conditioning system involving the incorporation of various training disciplines. The Diesel Crew is now recognized as the leaders in grip strength.



Jedd has authored Grip Articles for Straight to the Bar. Numerous grip and strongman articles for the Diesel Crew.

Strongman Contests

- 2003 - TPS Massachusetts State Strongman Championships*
- 2004 - TPS Massachusetts State Strongman Championships*
- 2004 - Maryland's Strongest Man*
- 2005 - Wise Wellness Strongman Contest*
- 2005 - Saxonburg Strongman Contest*
- 2005 - TPS Massachusetts State Strongman Championships*
- 2005 - Maryland's Strongest Man*
- 2006 - Stronger Than All II*
- 2006 - Wise Wellness 2006*



Grip Contests

- 2003 - Battle for Grip Supremacy*
- 2004 - Feats with Hands*
- 2004 - Global Grip Challenge '04*
- 2005 - TPS Grip Assault*
- 2005 - Global Grip Challenge '05*
- 2006 - Global Grip Challenge '06*
- 2006 - Backyard Bastard Bash II*



Jedd has put nearly 350 pounds overhead and lifted 400 pound Atlas Stones. He is an IronMind Certified Captain of Crush. He has lifted the 50-pound Blob, pinched two 45-pound plates, deadlifted the Inch Replica dumbbell with one hand, bent the IronMind Red Nail and the Fat Bastard Barbell Co.'s Grand Bastard Nail, as well as several other renowned Grip feats.