

OutFront

Getting a Grip

Nicole Ridgway, 06.07.04

If the glove doesn't aid, you must upgrade.

They say clothes make the man. Gloves, though, unmake the wearer. A normal leather glove can reduce hand strength by as much as 24%. It tugs back when you want to make a fist.

Now there's hope. Hillerich & Bradsby, the revered maker of Louisville Slugger bats, has just begun selling nationally a sheepskin gardening glove that claims to reduce loss of grip strength to a mere 8%. A plausible claim, but the next one, backed by an Arthritis Foundation study, might be a stretch: that for arthritic people the Bionic glove improves grip strength 16% over the use of bare hands and improves the ability to twist things like metal knobs by 47%. No, there are no motors or springs inside. It's all done through artful design of the glove's frictional surfaces.

Hillerich & Bradsby released its first Bionic glove, for hockey players, in 1999. A batter's version followed in 2000. "But the gardening gloves are about to blow its doors off," says marketing director Vickie Boisseau. Since 2002 the company has sold 10,000 pairs of the gardening glove at \$40 apiece. H&B is now spending up to a million dollars on marketing the product, more than it ever has spent on a white-ash bat launch. "This is like buying a mink coat," says Bruce Butterfield, research director at the National Gardening Association.

The glove's inventor, 49-year-old Louisville hand surgeon James Kleinert, spent five years and \$1 million ripping apart a ramshackle assortment of gloves and restitching them into what he calls "Jimmy-Joe-Bob prototypes." The outcome combines strategically placed padding with materials cut to improve motion and flexibility. Next up: a heavy-duty work glove, and then gloves for golfers, racecar drivers and equestrians.

