

BOW MAKING

with Justin Sutera

PART V



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About the Author

Justin Sutera first got interested in primitive living skills when he was 14 after being introduced to 'The Tracker' written by Tom Brown. Since that time Justin has explored primitive skills deeply (often by trial and error in the early days). He graduated S.U.N.Y. College of Environmental Science and Forestry with a B.S. in Conservation Biology.

While still a student Justin founded ESF Primitive Pursuits Club. Additionally Justin has studied at the Tracker School and worked as an instructor at The Children Of The Earth Foundation before joining Primitive Pursuits as a full time instructor. Justin is particularly passionate about primitive bow (and arrow) making, flintknapping, and hide tanning but truthfully all skills for living with the Earth are of great interest to him.

As a lead instructor with Primitive Pursuits, Justin focuses on teen and adult programming including Wilderness Weekends, the Wilderness Skills Intensive, and the Wilderness Year program.

About Primitive Pursuits

Primitive Pursuits is a non-profit program in partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension. We provide leadership and wilderness skills education to hundreds of toddlers, youth, teens and adults throughout the Finger Lakes region.

Since 2002 it has been our mission to steward the health of our community by fostering life-long relationships with the natural world through exceptional mentoring and nature education.

Through our mission, we work daily to achieve a cultural intervention that will bring back into our modern lives a necessary and healthy relationship with the natural world and within our human communities. experience,

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Introduction

First of all, I want to mention that there are tons of fantastic books and other resources out there on bow making. Many bowyers have done extensive research and really explored bow making as a detailed science. These are amazing resources, and I highly recommend you utilize them.

The information included here is from direct experience and has proven to work, as both my colleague Sean Cornell and I (pictured below) both successfully hunt deer with our handmade bows and arrows.

The intent of this e-course is to make bow making accessible and simple, and provide you with enough tools to put hatchet to stave, but is in no way complete.

Justin Sutera

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Finishing Touches; Bringing Your Bow Alive

Once you are at a brace height, it is time to consider the finish line— full draw for your bow. Talking about full draw can get expansive when we consider proper archery form. For the sake of this course, consider full draw the desired length that you pull your arrow to.

I'd recommend shooting a fair amount first before pinning your full draw down with a number. 28 inches is a typical full draw for an adult male and 26 inches for an adult female, but there is a lot of variation. My full draw is 27 ¼ inch, and a friend of mine's is 29 inches. The more you practice shooting, the more comfortable you will be, and you will begin to settle into consistency. Typically with a full draw, your hand that is on the string comes to a reference point on your face (for me it's the corner of my lip), and this becomes an "anchor point." I can't stress enough practicing shooting and developing consistency for diving into primitive archery. I know many people who have made bows and have not had positive results with shooting. Much of this is due to the fact that they have no consistency in the way they shoot, and there are simply too many variables. A homemade bow, especially at first, is another variable in the mix.

When is it done anyway?

Don't be too quick to call your bow finished! With some of my first bows, as soon as I hit full draw for the first time and it didn't break I was ecstatic. Right then



A picture of what full draw looks like for me. The bow I am shooting is named Long Neck, and the draw weight is 53 lbs at 27 ¼ inches



Close-up of what an anchor point looks like— notice my right hand in contact with my face, and my elbow in a straight line with the arrow.

I called my bow done—it didn't break! It bent to 28 inches! I did it. Turns out, if you're just making a bow so you can call it done, you've missed a lot of the journey.

Definitely take breaks from your bow, set

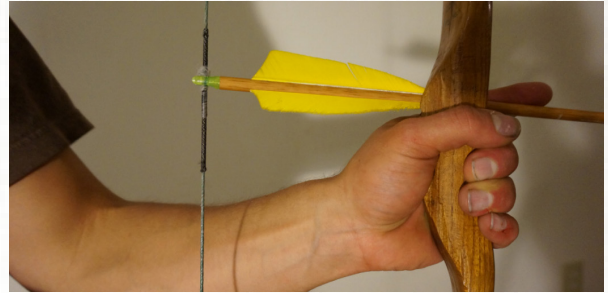
it down for periods of time and pick it up with a different perspective. But hold open the possibility to keep learning from your bow and making changes. I often make many subtle adjustments after shooting for a bit. Also, if you don't like something about your bow, change it! You're responsible here; you can do whatever you want. Now I know some of the things you may want to change, like a heavier draw weight, or tool marks that went too deep, may be out of the question for this bow. But there's always the next one. With every bow you make, you'll learn how to make the next one even better.

Finishes

There are many different finishes you can put on your bow. First off, I wouldn't put a finish on your bow until you've shot it about a hundred times. I used to be quick to call a bow done and slap a finish on, only to find that after shooting a few times and letting the bow settle, things shifted. There's really no rush— just don't take your bow out in the rain before it has a finish on it.

Primitively, I like to use deer fat or bear fat to finish the bow. For this I take a little piece of buckskin and use it to rub the fat into the bow. I like to heat my bow gently over a campfire while oiling it to help drive the oil deep into the wood. Definitely don't get your bow too hot to touch, but warming it up really helps with oiling. Just make sure to let your bow cool completely before stringing and shooting it.

There are several commercial finishes you can use for your bow. One I've used



A close-up of the nock point- where the arrow clips onto the string

and have grown to really like is called True Oil. It is a linseed oil-based finish with hardeners in it so it actually forms a discrete surface on top of your bow. I've opted to use this finish since sometimes I'll spend 6 hours out in the rain hunting with my bow, and I don't have the time for constant attention and maintenance of my equipment.

Caring for your Bow

A good mentor of mine once told me a bow is like an old friend. You don't invite them into your house and make them stand in a corner. You give them a comfortable place to rest. While our bow doesn't need a nice chair, it does need to be cared for properly.

First off, never leave your bow strung. The longest I leave my bow strung is probably around 6 hours and this is when I'm hunting. Anytime I'm not using my bow, it is unstrung. If a bow is left strung it will develop string follow and lose strength. Also never leave your bow standing up in a corner. The weight on the lower limb will cause it to warp over time and could shift the tiller. I prefer to

put two pegs in a wall around the handle width of the bow and rest it there. You could also keep your bow under your bed, or basically anywhere that you may also be comfortable. Don't store it in a hot attic and don't leave it out in a drafty woodshed.

Don't Put Your Bow on a Shelf!

Actually, a shelf is a fine place to store a bow. What I mean though is don't just build a bow and then stick it somewhere and forget about it. A skill truly comes alive when we use it. You will learn exponentially more with your next bow if you have taken the time to really learn from your first one.

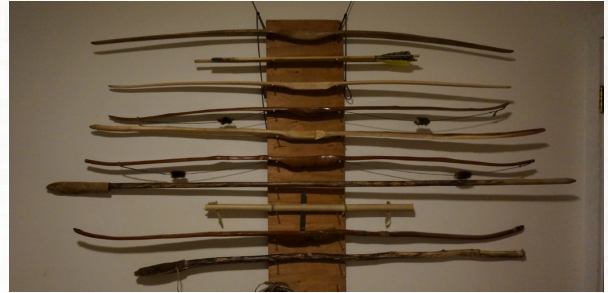
Additional Resources

Here is a list of books which can give you a much more detailed description of bow making. Most are especially useful with a little prior bow making knowledge. So read all you want, soak it in, and remember there are many different ways to do things. Just don't become a theoretical bow maker. Direct experience is the best teacher of all, and the journey is worth it.

Traditional Bowyers Bible's Vol 1-4

The Art of making Selfbows by Stim Wilcox

Bows and Arrows of the Native Americans by Jim Hamm



A picture of several finished bows (along with other primitive crafts) that I hang on my wall. Just an example of where you may put your bows when they aren't being used.





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