

Understanding Mechanics

by Jason Dover, CF

Recently I had the privilege of interviewing two of the Southeast's well known knife makers, Neal Baggett of Baggett Knives & Robbie Hunziker, CJF of Hurricane Forge. While neither wanted to divulge all of their trade secrets, they did give us some insight into their craft & some helpful sharpening tips.

Baggett & Hunziker both use an A2 steel, which requires a heat treatment that starts with Hardening (Preheating, Austenitizing, Quenching & Tempering) & finishes with Annealing—a process that alters the microstructure of the steel to change the strength, ductility & hardness. Both craftsmen prefer a Digital Box over a conventional oven in the heat treatment process to achieve an even heat.

In the process Hunziker likes to use a 1"x30" belt sander to put an edge on the blade, keeping the back of the blade flat. When choosing a rouge or buffing compound, Baggett encourages users not only to look at color but to consider the grit number. Baggett uses the rougher 400 count grit before the heat treatment & afterwards a 1,000 grit compound when refining the cutting edge. More specifically he recommends using a green 1K grit first, then a white 1K grit. The reason— the green compound had a binder that is stiffer & retains longer while the white breaks sooner & is more of a fine cut. Baggett also suggests when using a buffer with the contoured edge of his knives, hold the edge to match the correct radius.

Hunziker produces a standard knife at different lengths as well as a Frog knife. The Frog knife recommended for use only on the frog & in defining the bars of the foot. He stresses the importance of frog balance when trimming not only for sanitation but also to gauge what needs to be removed from the remainder of the foot. Robbie expresses his passion & importance of keeping a sharp knife "When I'm trimming a frog & I hear it squeak" when slicing along the commissures "It's better than sex".

Baggett suggests when maintaining a knife, it should be touched up regularly & if you want to know if your knife is sharp, use the sheet of paper test. If your blade can cut clean through the 3-4 thousandths of an inch, you're sharp. Baggett also educates us that "a knife is a wedging tool, meant to peel & slice". He says you can always tell when a farrier's knife is dull because his thumbs & fingers are bandaged. "Once you've used a sharp knife you'll never go back", says Baggett. Hunziker agrees your blades should be as smooth as glass. Both prefer buffers to traditional files, as files can leave scratches in your blade that mirror in the foot.

Since our hoof knives are one of the first tools we pick up & reflect our craftsmanship, we might consider giving it greater care instead of using it as a combination hoof-pick.