



**A visit with...**

# **Kevin Forrester and Forrester Wood Shafts**

*By Robert Lindberg*

**D**uring my introduction to archery I, like many, began with the compound and all the bells and whistles. Then I fell in with “bad company” and began to explore the world of traditional archery. Once I got my first recurve, I knew I had found a home and I began the journey to become a traditional archer. Part of that journey has been to find the right arrow to go along with my bow.

When I first began to shoot my recurve, I continued to shoot the aluminum arrows that I had used with my compound. But I quickly found that, while they flew nicely when they were new, my lack of skill with my new bow quickly introduced me to the issue of “arrow durability.” Aluminums were just not very sturdy, and after one or two encounters

with something other than the center of the foam target, I was shooting spaghetti.

I began to look for alternatives. Carbon was great, but I was drawn to searching for a good wood arrow. I quickly found that finding a “good wood arrow” was just about as hard as getting a 6x6 bull elk to come within ten yards. Some of the woodies that I found were great, but I was lucky to find eight out of a dozen that were straight to start with or would maintain their straightness over time.

I tried cedar, ash, and spruce. Cedar and spruce were straighter, but broke easily. Ash was great on durability but

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*Kevin Forrester in his custom wood arrow shop.*

its straightness left a lot to be desired. Then one day I came across an ad for some hardwood arrow shafts that promised to solve my problems and end my search for the perfect arrow.

I got in touch with Kevin Forrester, of Forrester Wood Shafts, and talked with him about my problem. Kevin suggested that I start out with a mixed dozen, and see what flew best out of my bow and what I liked best for looks. So I got my first dozen shafts, a mixture of mahogany, lacewood, jabota, hard rock maple, red balau, and leopardwood.

Not only were they beautiful (the lacewood in particular caught my eye), but they were incredibly straight. When I put them in my crestring machine, they spun extremely well and the fine lines of my crestring for once looked like they were supposed to. My bow quickly told me that it liked the lacewood and the mahogany best, so I ordered more and have been extremely pleased with them. The last two-dozen mahogany shafts that I ordered only had two that were less than perfectly straight, and those came around quickly with heat and a little corrective bending. Since I discovered Kevin and his shafts, I have probably built eight-dozen of them, often giving them as gifts to friends or as prizes for the clubs I belong to.

I thought that it was time to make sure other traditional archers who love wood arrows got to know Kevin.

**RL:** How long have you been involved in traditional archery? How did you get started?

**KF:** I started shooting a compound in my backyard during the 1980s. After a couple of months of daily practice, I began removing more and more gadgets from my bow, as I found that they just got in the way and slowed me down. I was introduced to the longbow by a good friend of mine who also helped tutor me in the Howard Hill style of shooting.

**RL:** How did you get into making arrow shafts? When did you start, and how did you develop your business?

**KF:** I had always been drawn to making and fixing things at an early age, from fixing cars and boats to making snowshoes, a guitar, and a wood backpack frame in high school. Later, as a young man, I started making things from hardwoods after a freighter carrying lumber was shipwrecked during a storm near the Golden Gate Bridge. I salvaged a 6' long 2x8 and built my two-year-old daughter a rocking horse out of what turned out to be Burmese teak. I naturally graduated to making my own arrows about five years ago, after I took some extended time off from a very stressful job. What I thought would be easy turned into three years of developing the machinery to make hardwood shafts. At first making hardwood shafts was like alligator wrestling compared to working with softwoods.

The motivating factor behind my passion for making quality exotic arrow shafts is the beauty and craftsmanship put into traditional bow making, which also uses exotic hardwoods. With the vast amount of wood products available from other parts of the globe, I believe it is possible to make traditional wood arrows that compete with and even surpass

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Most of the wood I use has a grain that is completely different from North American softwoods, which have a very straight grain. The woods I choose have an "interlocked" grain that results from the fibers growing in an upward but spiral direction. Every few years it changes directions and overlaps in the opposite direction. This makes the arrow stronger, as it is not weakened by "run out" and is less prone to warping, making it much more stable in flight. It also makes an arrow that "spines" the same in any direction, unlike those made from softwoods. These hardwoods are slower growing by nature, therefore they simulate the properties of old growth trees even when they are grown on tree farms. I am very motivated in perfecting what I make as well as trying new types of woods.

**RL:** You have some unusual choices for wood. How did you determine which ones would be the best from arrow shafts? Can you describe your selection process?

**KF:** I'm very fortunate to have a terrific hardwood lumber supplier in the Seattle area. I am able to take my time and go over the lumber board by board, selecting what I need. I choose one board out of ten. I also choose different woods for different projects to achieve the proper arrow weight. One of my tricks in selecting the right board is by listening to the sound it makes when I strike it. A higher-pitched sound means a harder piece of wood.

**RL:** What wood do you consider best for hunting? For target shooting? What wood is best for all around durability?

**KF:** I offer different wood species that will meet the individual archer's needs. For example, if the arrows are going to be used for dangerous game hunting, like buffalo in Africa or Australia, a very dense and heavy wood is best. I often suggest leopardwood or red balau, which can spine out to 130 pounds in the larger diameters. For big game in North America—moose, bear, deer or elk—I recommend red balau (in smaller diameters), rock maple, or a very dense mahogany. These shafts can spine up to sixty-five pounds in 5/16" or up to ninety pounds in 11/32". For small game or stump shooting, where

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*Here Kevin is selecting a board from which he will cut several raw billets for shafting.*

you are going to have a lot of contact with hard surfaces, I find rock maple to be a great choice. For 3-D shooting and competition, a less dense tapered maple, a softer version of mahogany, or even Spanish cedar is a great choice.

Mahogany is an amazingly versatile wood. In its harder versions, it will stand up to just about any use. I also find that other types of mahogany will produce very light shafts that create an 11/32" arrow that is lighter than a 5/16" shaft from another wood. I can often produce 11/32" shafts that spine 35# and weigh 300 grains. Other mahoganies will produce 11/32" shafts capable of a ninety-pound spine and weighing 550 grains. It all comes down to material selection.

**RL:** How do you choose which wood is right for somebody?

**KF:** The wood I use is very different from most of the material on the market. That's why it is important that I talk with the archer, either by phone or e-mail, to get some basic information. Each set of shafts is custom designed for the person, so this process is essential if I am going to get the best match for their needs and shooting style.

I need the bow specification, draw length, what the person is shooting at and what distance they typically shoot. We also need to determine what point weight they are going to be using and the total arrow weight that they are hoping to achieve. The choice of wood and shaft diameter will depend on whether they are hunting, target shooting, flight shoot-

ing, or stump shooting. If the distances of the shots are short, then I may suggest a different sort of material or shaft design than I would for the archer who shoots at longer distances.

In cases where the archer has never shot wood shafts, or it has been a long time since they have, I highly recommend a test kit of seven arrow shafts. They will all be "in the ball park," but usually the archer and his bow will prefer one over the other. Sometimes the choice simply comes down to beauty: nothing is as pretty as lacewood.

**RL:** Describe the process of making the shafts. I know you taper and foot some shafts.

**KF:** Working with hardwoods is extremely difficult. I have actually broken some of my machinery. Each species of wood is run through a different process of applying pressure and heat treating. After determining the needs of the customer, I pick out the board that will best meet those needs. I square the blanks on my band saw, and then run them through my doweling machine. If I am going to taper them, I can adjust my machine to do that at this point. I spine my shafts *after* tapering, which often means individual hand sanding.

Footing is another matter. When I foot a shaft, I leave the forward couple of inches a larger diameter than the rest of the shaft. This accomplishes two things. It leaves more weight up front, so the FOC on these arrows is greatly increased. Secondly it increases penetration, since the remainder of the shaft is a smaller diameter. This allows the



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**Double checking the grain and straightness.**

back part of the arrow to slide through the animal much more easily.

**RL:** What suggestions do you make for your first time customers to help them get started in building arrows with the hardwoods you provide?

**KF:** I really enjoy helping people who are just getting into the hardwood arrow market. It is important to have a

set of arrows that is designed for *that* archer and *that* bow. In our discussion, I try to determine what would be good choices.

Once we have determined that, I like to point out some of the differences between the hardwoods I use and the materials that they are used to using. I rarely get someone who has never built an arrow before; mostly the folks have used softwoods like cedar or spruce. Many of my woods, like the mahogany and red balau, have an interlocking grain, so you don't have to worry about which side of the arrow the nock should favor or where the cock feather should go. That makes it easier to build an arrow that flies well.

The woods I use are very dense, and it is important to use a good sealer before you apply any sort of final finish. I usually use heated teak oil, which I let set for seventy-two hours. After that you can cover them with anything. I don't like the gasket lacquers, because that gives them a hard, shiny finish. I like to be able to see and feel the wood grain when I am done. I'll use any of the varnish type finishes, such as polyurethane or tung oil. Remember that three light coats are better than one heavy one. Then you will need to match your glue for the feathers to the type of finish you have used.

**RL:** I've noticed that the shafts I've gotten from you have seemed exceptionally straight. Can you describe how you get them straight, and do you have any suggestions for those that need some tweaking?

**KF:** I start off with hand-selected wood. I will use one board for each set of arrow shafts to insure consistency. I use both compression and heat to get them straight; it's a process that works pretty well. If you have one that needs tweaking, I would recommend heating the opposite side, then bending it in the direction you want it to go and holding it there until it cools. You can do that by hand or make a small jig to hold the arrow. With the exotic woods I use, since the shafts are made from straight wood from the start, they generally stay straight. So, straightness goes back to material selection.

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**Just a sampling of the many types of wood shafting Kevin turns out for discriminating archers.**

**RL:** Are there any special tools you recommend for cutting the tapers for the nocks and points?

**KF:** Because you are working with hardwoods, the “pencil sharpener” tools work remarkably well as long as you are only doing a dozen and have sharp blades in them. You can use a sander set-up, but it’s really not necessary. If you are using the “pencil sharpener” tool and are putting the point on a footed shaft, it is wise to take a bit of blue painter’s tape and wrap it around the shaft just at the taper to keep the tool turning straight and smooth. That way you won’t have a wobbly point.

**RL:** You have an amazing number of choices at hand, and I’m sure you’ve come to know each one in depth. What is likely to be found in your quiver?

**KF:** It depends on what I am going out to do. If I’m stump shooting, it will be hard rock maple or red balau. For target shooting, I’m probably using mahogany, Spanish cedar, or lacewood. For my hunting shafts, I use red balau. These shafts are 9/32” with a footing of 5/16”. With a four-inch fletching, they fly great and get tremendous penetration. I also don’t worry if I hit the scapula of an elk, because I know they are very unlikely to break.

**RL:** What kind of bow do you shoot, and what weight is it?

**KF:** I still shoot a reflex/deflex longbow, 58-pounds at my draw length. It’s a set up that works well for me.

**RL:** Do you hunt with your shafts? If so, what broadheads do you use?

**KF:** Yes, I do hunt with them. I use a Zwickey Eskimo light two-blade and have no doubt that it will do the job. After thirty years of trying different broadheads, I keep coming back to Zwickey heads due to their ease of sharpening in the field and their strength.

**RL:** What is your favorite game to hunt?

**KF:** It’s a toss-up between turkey and elk. If I am going elk hunting, I like to wait until the late season when all of the guys with their four-wheelers are out of the mountains and the place is left to those of us who will go on foot.

With all the handwork and customization that goes into making these shafts, you’re probably expecting that they are pretty expensive. When you price Forrester shafts against the other materials out there, you’ll find that the prices are very competitive with other wood materials, and definitely less expensive than most carbon shafts. So if you are looking for good wood arrow material, be sure to check out Forrester Wood Shafts.

*Bob Lindberg is a retired Episcopal priest who has been shooting traditional bows for twenty years and has hunted on three continents. He enjoys building arrows, bows, and other varieties of archery equipment.*



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