

Shooting the Longbow

*Some tips
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Equipment

Bows

Longbows, being made from wood, need to be protected from the elements. Even a "varnished" bow can let in moisture due to marks and scratches from regular use. Polish the bows with a wax polish, Danish Oil or even a smear of Vaseline to help keep out the wet which can ruin your bow. Pay special attention to the area where the arrow "passes" the bow as obvious wear will take it down to exposed wood. Keep in mind that a longbow is far easier to damage than a metal recurve riser so treat them with care, dents and scratches can lead to major problems. Check your bow regularly looking for cracks, damage to the varnish or delamination as these will require the attention of a bowyer.

One should also keep the string waxed, most modern strings are fairly waterproof but as the string is twisted and the strands rub against each other under tension waxing helps cut down wear. Apply wax to the string and then rub with a small piece of leather this warms the wax and string and helps the wax to move between the strands.

If you are used to shooting a recurve bow then you will find that the draw weight of a longbow feels different to a recurve simply due to the nature of the beast and therefore if you are used to a 30 lb recurve you might find a 35 lb longbow comfortable.

The bracing height of the bow is the distance from the string to the belly of the bow (the part of the bow facing you when you hold it to shoot). This is often written on the bow (normally 5.5" to 6.5") set your bow up to this height for optimum performance.

Always "warm up" your bow before you shoot, this is done by rubbing the bow with a cloth (maybe with beeswax on) and then repeatedly drawing the bow to half draw and gradually increasing to full draw either in the normal manner or by putting your foot against the grip and holding the string then you can use your foot and hand to extend the bow (when using this technique it is a good idea to have a piece of string attached to the grip and measured to the length of your draw, by holding this in your hand you avoid overdrawing the bow).

A common complaint of longbow archers is that their bows performance seems to drop off after the first dozen arrows or so, this is often due to the fact that the bow hasn't been warmed up properly.

Wood can get brittle in cold weather and less stiff in hot weather so it is a good idea not to shoot on extremely cold days and try to keep the bow shaded in very hot weather. If the bow gets hot you will notice that the cast drops down.

Never ever loose the string without an arrow as the lack of resistance will cause the bow to straighten too fast and possibly break, also do not draw the bow too fast as the shock might kill it.

As the bow gets older it might take on a slight curve. This is called "following the string" and varies depending on size of bow and types of timber used. Do not try and straighten the bow as this can easily damage it.

Part of the bow making process is tillering, this is when the bow is taught how to bend by repeatedly drawing the bow using pulleys, starting with a few inches and gradually building up to the defined draw length. Hence the bow is designed to be drawn from a certain position on the string. Some barebow archers like to draw from a few inches below the nocking point on the string, if you do this on a longbow you stand a good chance of busting the bottom limb.

Bow Stands

Many styles of stands are available to keep the bow off the ground and hence keep it dry.

Arrows

Arrows must be protected from the elements as well, even varnished arrows will lose their protection from repeated use due to hitting straw bosses or stones in the ground. Wax polish, Danish oil or Vaseline should be rubbed into arrows regularly. If your arrows get wet then hang them up by the knocks to let them dry, this tends to keep them straighter. Let fletchings dry naturally and they often spring back to shape, if not then hold in steam from a kettle for a few seconds, shake them out and gently ease back into shape. There are products on the market to use on feather fletchings to try and keep them dry in wet weather.

The spine of a wooden arrow tells you its flexibility and the arrow should be spined to match the bow. Unlike recurve and compound bows the longbow does not have a lump taken out of the side of it to let the arrow pass directly from the string to the target. The arrow has to go around the bow to get to the target, if you are right handed and the arrow is too flexible it will bend too much around the bow and go off to the right of where you aim, conversely if too stiff it will go to the left. The risk of shooting a soft arrow is that it can shatter (before your very eyes) which can be extremely dangerous both for you and those around you.

When you loose an arrow the energy from the string is imparted to the arrow which first has to overcome the inertia of the pile, hence the arrow flexes. So the heavier the pile the more the arrow can flex giving the impression of a lower spine rating and conversely with lighter piles the arrow acts stiffer.

Flight of arrows is governed by pile weight and fletching size, the further you want to shoot the smaller the pile and fletchings that you need. Fletchings act like parachutes causing drag on the arrow which helps to straighten up the flight faster but obviously shortens the range.

Bow arm protection

Longbows do NOT have arrow rests, the arrow rest is your bow hand and hence you need a glove. One of the hazards of feather fletchings is that they can pierce flesh quite easily. So, my advice is always wear a glove on your bow hand (these normally have extra layers built in for protection) and always check the front of your fletchings to ensure they haven't lifted.

A bracer is a piece of leather which is worn to protect the arm from being struck by your bowstring. If you hold your bow and then grip it tight the string will press against your arm, this shows you where the string will strike every time it hits you and also shows where you need to wear your bracer. Traditional longbow bracers cover a lot more of the arm than modern bracers, this is because longbows do not have a shaped grip like modern bows and hence the bow can move in the hand occasionally causing the string to strike somewhere slightly different than usual. Keeping the bow arm slightly bent at the elbow and/or wrist can help to avoid the string striking the arm. Some archers choose to wear a kevlar arm protector under their bracer but this is more to protect the arm against possible bow or arrow breakage.

String finger protection

You hold the bowstring with two or three fingers (one above and one or two below the arrow). To protect your fingers you need a shooting tab or glove. I favour the glove which has extra layers of leather on the finger tips simply because not all longbow arrows have plastic nocks which grip the string, some are traditional "self" knocked arrows. These arrows sometimes need to be held on the string between your first and second fingers and can rub your fingers when you loose them, gloves protect the sides of your fingers and stop this happening, it also allows you to shoot thicker arrows without problems. An important note is that metal nocking points on bowstrings can damage both tabs and gloves, I use dental floss to mark my nocking point or a small piece of tape. If your arrows need to be held on the string then you need to build up your knocking point with dental floss or tape so that the arrows do not "fall off". Keep the leather, tab or glove fingers, oiled or lubricated so that the string slides off easily.

String

Keep a check on the string for wear at the loops and the serving. The loops should not show wear unless the horn nocks are stressing them. You may need to gently file the nocks to remove sharp edges that can cause wear to the string loops. If the string breaks at full draw then the bow can burst asunder (I have first hand experience of this).

Quiver

Something to carry arrows in and there are many styles to choose from.

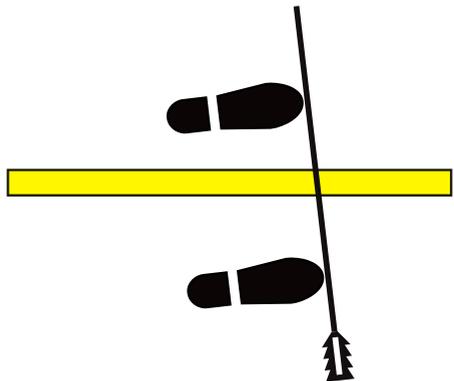
Miscellaneous

Waterproofs, umbrella, arrow puller, spare pens and of course a chair (longbow archers always shoot much faster than others and you almost have time to complete your crossword between ends). You might also need a chest protector and tubigrip for your bow arm to stop clothing getting caught by your bowstring. I also find that a fairly heavy flathead screwdriver is very handy when it comes to getting arrows out of the wooden target stands.

Shooting

Stance

This is a personal preference but the method I prefer is to lay an arrow on the ground pointing at the target (or at my aiming point), unless you are standing exactly in front of the target it will NOT be at 90 degrees to the shooting line. Hence if you stand with your feet parallel to each other and toes touching the arrow your feet will not be parallel to the shooting line (a common mistake for beginners). With your feet parallel you seem to get the optimum draw on the bow (well I think I do) otherwise you will be twisting to shoot or you will be "open" to the target and reducing your draw length. Most longbow archers do not use foot markers although there is no rule against it and it will help with consistency of stance.



The Draw

Longbows do not have such luxuries as bow-slings so if you don't hold onto your bow when you loose then you will lose it. However, if you hold the bow too tight, this is called strangling it, when you loose the string it will strike against your bracer which will not only give you a nice bruise but will slow the flight of the arrow. Try holding the bow against the "ball" of your thumb and keep your

wrist as straight as you can then wrap your fingers around the bow so that it is secure but not gripped. When drawing the bowstring keep your elbow up at least level with your shoulder. If you drop your elbow then your wrist will flex and not only will this spoil your release it will put excessive pressure on the tendons and muscles in your wrist and arm.

As mentioned in the section about arrows they have to bend around the bow, to help this try drawing the string and aligning it with the same side of the bow as the arrow is.

Aiming

Anchor point is the place that you always draw your hand back to, if you are using a glove to shoot and find it difficult to draw to the same place every time then raise the thumb on your string hand and check where it locates on the side of your face.

Aiming point is the place where you put the point of the arrow when at full draw in order to hit your target. If the arrows are spined properly to the bow this point should be above, below or on the target.

When aiming above the target (for longer distances) do NOT raise your arm, just tilt your hips as this keeps your arrow at full draw. If you lift your bow it shortens your draw by inches and at roughly 2 lb draw per inch this will mean you have to aim much higher than you need to in order to reach your target. By tilting your hips you can reduce the adjustment needed considerably.

When aiming below the target you are literally picking a blade of grass to aim at. This problem can be overcome by either using a marker stuck in the ground in front of the target or by using a rubber band on the upper limb which you adjust to line up with the gold when aiming.

Ground markers can be used for point of arrow on short distances or for the bottom of the bow on long distances.

If you are right handed and find your arrows are moving slightly left of the target try moving your front foot forward an inch and see how that helps also experiment with drawing your bowstring to either side of your nose and see how this affects your aim. These are all small adjustments to fine tune your aim and can help when shooting in windy conditions.

A lot of people, when first learning longbow, tend to over-adjust when trying to change their aiming point. This is often seen when they miss on one side of the boss and then miss on the other side. To see how small an adjustment you need to make try holding a ruler at arms length "below" the boss when on the shooting line at say 40 yards - you can immediately see how many centimetres you need to move your aim if you hit white at 9 o'clock with your first arrow for example.

Now do the same with the boss at 100 yards and you will see how many millimetres you would need to adjust so the longer the distance the smaller the adjustment for horizontal direction. However, the height adjustment from say 40 to 60 yards is less than the adjustment required for the change from 60 to 80 yards and so on, this varies depending on the poundage and cast of your bow.

When clout shooting the optimum angle is roughly 45 degrees, get someone to tell you when you are angled for 45 degrees (believe me it's different from where you think), again achieve this by bending at the hips and/or bending whichever of your legs is behind the line. If you start with this it will give you an idea of your maximum, range. Then, to reduce the distance you are shooting, you can either lower your aim which will shoot the arrow lower and faster or you can raise your aim which will let you see the line of flight easier but does leave the arrow open to more movement due to the wind.

The Loose

This is one of the key parts of shooting and can cause numerous problems when done wrong. The best way it was explained to me was that you simply relax your fingers and the string is loose. You don't think about "letting it go" and you don't pull the string with your fingers you simply push back with the elbow of your drawing arm and use your shoulders. When ready you simply relax your fingers, the arrow is away, and you caress the side of your neck. One tip is to try and keep you string fingers in line with the arrow, if not you can catch the arrow and change its flight or even flex it downwards causing it to almost bounce off your hand. Also keep your tab or glove oiled or greased for a smooth release.