Ramblin's of a Mountain Man

By Dean A. Hazuka

The Ultimate Edge

It seems there are about as many gadgets out there for sharpening knives as there are people to use them. Some work great, others don't and some have limited uses.

Here are a few I have tried.

Lansky is one of the first names that comes to mind. They have several styles in their line but they are best known for a framework which clamps the knife solid then uses a guide to set the angle of the diamond stone letting you get a consistent angle with each stroke.

That angle is the key. In my opinion most knife edges have way too blunt of an edge.

A recent article on sharpening hunting knives claimed a 25° angle was tough and a 20° angle cut better. I prefer an angle in the lower teens.

Most of the "automatic" sharpeners are set up to maintain these blunt edges.

You know; the wall mount grinders you crank as you draft the knife through or the ones built into the electric can openers. Even the cross stick type.

A blunt edge is great if you want a tough edge for splitting or chopping. If you want a knife to really slice and sharpened easily then you need a blade with a long thin taper. I hate to think how many hours I have spent tapering back the edge on a new knife so it will cut the way I want it to.

The Lansky and another contraption called the Wart Hog are a couple of contraptions that help you get the same angle with each stroke of the stone. These tools are great for getting a new blade sharpened, squared and trued but are you going to have these things with you in the field when you need them?

With a little time, patience and practice I feel most folks can learn to do it on their own. Some like serrated edges because they don't need as much sharpening and that may be true to a point.

Look at a serrated blade. The back is usually flat. I have touched them up using almost no angle and gently honed this back edge.

I don't think much of serrated edges.

To start the sharpening process, you will need a variety of grits depending on steel type, how bad the edge is and how hard the blade is tempered. As we have progressed with heat treating techniques and various alloys of steels the knives are getting harder. This makes for longer edge holding ability but it also makes them more difficult to sharpen.

A good set of diamond hones will handle them all but can be quite an investment so let's just start with sandpaper on a scrap board. Pick up some 120, 180, 220 and 400 grits to start with.

Dig out one of those ugly old knives in the bottom of your kitchen drawer. That old one with the tarnished blade and the ugly wooden handle. Take a look at the blade and if it says I. Wilson, Green River or Sheffield give Charlie or me a call before you start!

For a knife that needs a lot of work start with 120 grit. Fold the paper just over the edge of the board. With slight pressure, draw the edge of the knife down toward you and off the edge of the board. Pay attention how far the back of the knife is from the board. Look at the edge to see if it is shiny on the very edge. If it is, you need to lay the back of the knife closer to the board. Take another stroke. Check again. It should be shiny further up the blade.

I keep adjusting until I get the angle I want and then hold it the same with each stroke. When I can't feel the sandpaper cut anymore, I make another fold over the edge to expose fresh paper. Check it once in a while until the shiny part widens and eventually and evenly it will meet the very edge of the blade. This will take a while. The same is done on the other side and being most of us are right- or left-handed it seems easier to do on one side.

This is the hardest part. Just do the same holding the back of the knife the same distance from the board each stroke and work through each grade of paper. As I get to the finer grits I cushion the sandpaper with a wash cloth.

Do whatever you can to steady your arms and hands. Steady a hand on a table or lock your arm to your side. This will help a lot to make each stroke the same.

Light is very important.

As I get to the finer grits I want to take a stroke on each side. When I get to the end of the 400 grit paper I may notice a very tiny wire edge which folds over from side to side. To eliminate this and put the final touch on the edge, a piece of oil tanned leather works great. An old boot top or any flexible flat piece of leather works fine.

You can lay it on the board or I like to lay it over my leg. Keeping that angle the same draw the blade over the leather. Most times I see tiny pieces of that wire edge pull off. I take a few strokes on each side. If it makes the leather rough I need to sharpen it more.

This is how the old barbers used to strop their knives sharp enough to shave and yours should to. Check it in the light again and make sure you can see no glint of light from the edge.

Congratulations! You now have a blade that is trued and tapered. It will be much easier to maintain that edge. Part two: Maintaining the edge.

If I use a variety of stones I keep them flooded with liquid to float the metal particles away. Oil is the recommended fluid but I have found that liquid dish soap works great. It is so easy to clean up. Just run water over it and it will even clean up old clogged stones. Make sure it is dry before storing.

There is nothing better than the feel of an edge on a good Arkansas stone.

I think you will be amazed at how that old knife will cut no. After spending this much time on it I am sure you will be more careful about keeping that edge sharp. Don't cut on glass, use a cutting board and find a knife block for storage instead of letting it kicked around in that kitchen drawer.

I use a quick simple way to touch up these fine edges and it works on the convex edges used on a lot of custom knives these days.

Lay a wash cloth or a mouse pad, anything that will give a little cushion on the edge of a counter or table. Use 400 grit sandpaper or finer if you choose over the edge and repeat the last step of the sharpening process, drawing the knife length wise down off of the table edge. Strop it on that piece of leather over your leg and you are good to go again. This will work for a long time with a thin tapered edge.

Let's take a look at the multitude of sharpeners out there and some of their pros and cons. The basic old stand-by kitchen steels are still hard to beat. They have been around for centuries and still work, as long as you have that thin tapered edge.

The varieties of cross sticks I find are too blunt of an angle. They are simple and quick for a touch up but use them too much and you lose that long taper you just worked so hard to get. The steel cross sticks may also start a "chatter" on the blades if used too much.

There are various grits of ceramic hones which work well. Most are round so you have very little blade contact. They also break very easily. These can plug up with metal filings after long use but these too can be cleaned with soap, water and a scratch pad.

See the photo of the handy little piece of carbide welded to a steel handle. It is indestructible, light weight and tiny. The problem is; these will cause rough chatter marks on your blade with very little use.

With harder blades the diamond hones are practical and popular. They come in all shapes and sizes including one the size of a credit card. I am afraid that they would bend if stored in your wallet. The large flat ones replace the old stones and work great in the kitchen. They are a bit bulky to pack in the field.

One of the earliest collapsible ones screwed into a brass handle making it great for packing and nearly indestructible. The small diameter gives very little blade contact and the brass is heavy!

If you really want compact and light weight you can get a fish hook sharpener. They are smaller diameter than a pencil and only about 3 inches long. It will get you by in a pinch but very little blade contact and I find them too course.

After using so many I prefer the oval diamond. They have more surface area which makes more blade contact than a round stick and are light weight. I looked on the Internet and made a few phone calls until I found Richard at the Ultimate Edge. He started out with a mobile sharpening business in 1983.

He did a lot of research and designed his first models for professional chefs. Using a light weight steel oval electroplated with nickel; he uses a magnetic chamber and bonds the industrial diamond chips to the steel tube using the electroplated nickel. No glues to come loose as an some import knock-offs.

The magnetic chamber causes the points of the diamond chips to all radiate away from the steel to. This makes even the 600 grit tool very aggressive.

These are then attached to a variety of handles. There are a lot of varieties to choose from. He offers a molded handle on 10 inch long stick for home kitchen or professional chefs, aluminum collapsible handles on a 4 inch stick for hikers and hunters.

The design of the blades tapers to a small enough edge that I have even used one to sharpen a #14 trout hook! A 6 inch blade with a molded handle is really handy to throw in the camper or chuck box and they come in various grits from 300-600-1200-1800. Now he has developed a three sided model in both a 10 inch and a 6 inch collapsible packer model. Richard is developing new designs all the time so look up The Ultimate Edge.com online, watch for his products at your local store or give me; Montana Americana a call. I am so impressed I became a distributor for his products.

Keep those knives sharp!