

handwork

How to ride a shaving horse

BY CURTIS BUCHANAN

Over the past 34 years, I calculate that I've spent over 21,000 hours at work on my shaving horse. Why do I still look forward each week to my time on it? I'm sure simple-mindedness plays a role, but I like to think it goes beyond that. Partly it's that it does its job so beautifully, and partly that it just feels great to use it.

It doesn't hurt that mine's on the porch of my shop for most of the year, so I can work outdoors. And it's always appealing that I get to sit when I use it. I typically make one chair at a time and it takes me a week or two. During this time I'm splitting logs, turning, boring holes, assembling, and finishing—all



READY THE RIDE

The seat should slide. A friction fit between the seat fin and the rails lets you shift to an optimal position without getting up, simply by pushing with your feet. The riser block tilts the seat forward, straightening your posture as you work and relieving pressure on your back.



Minimize the clearance, maximize the bite. The horse's swing arm adjusts easily for workpieces of different thicknesses. A steel pin locks in the setting. For maximal gripping power you want minimal clearance between the head and the workpiece.



Power with little pressure. When the head is adjusted properly close to the workpiece, this horse provides great grip with just light pressure on the treadle. Buchanan keeps his heel on the floor as if pressing a car's accelerator.



SHAVING SPINDLES

Rapid removal. When roughing out a spindle with the drawknife, Buchanan takes fast strokes largely with arm power. The goal here is to create a square spindle. For finishing cuts, as shown below, he keeps his elbows fairly stiff and pulls the shaving by leaning back with his upper body, exercising fine control with his wrists.



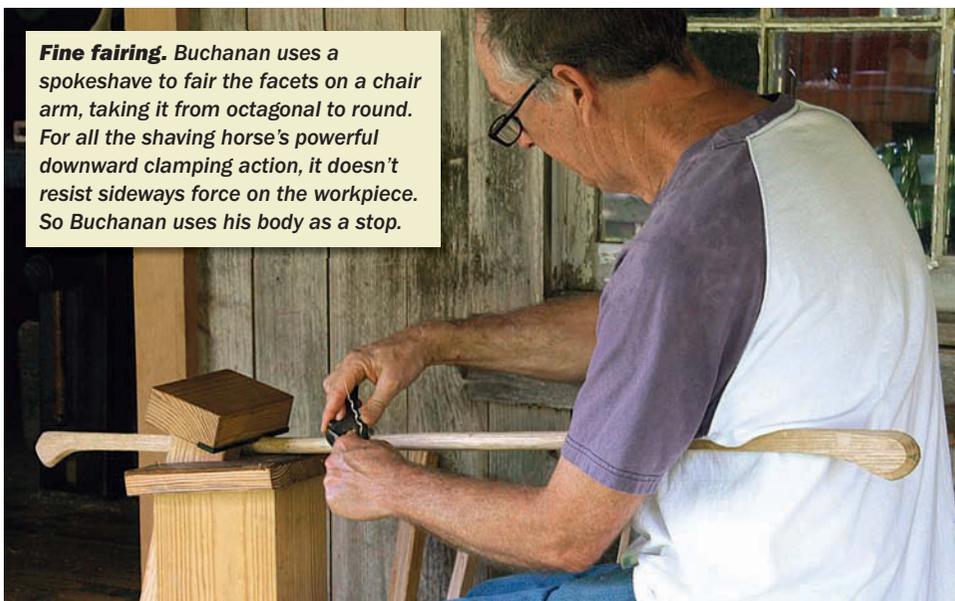
From rectangle to octagon. After shaving the spindle square, Buchanan clamps it on its points to chamfer the corners and make it into an octagon. The cushioning glued to the platform and head let him grip the angled piece firmly without denting it.



processes performed standing up. So it is a pleasure to turn to the shaving horse and work sitting down. But even though there's a meditative feeling to shaving spindles on the horse, it's not a form of rest—using the shaving horse is totally engaging.

The shaving horse is basically a giant vise, and it works seamlessly. The harder you pull on a drawknife, the harder you automatically push on the treadle with your foot. This tightens the grip on the stock and prevents it from slipping out of the jaws. To maximize gripping power,

Fine fairing. Buchanan uses a spokeshave to fair the facets on a chair arm, taking it from octagonal to round. For all the shaving horse's powerful downward clamping action, it doesn't resist sideways force on the workpiece. So Buchanan uses his body as a stop.



Most versatile vise. In some situations it's best to work on the front side of the clamping head. The small size of the platform on this horse makes the operation more convenient.

always adjust the head when you switch to a thicker or thinner workpiece. There should be just a little clearance between the head and the workpiece. The smaller the distance the head has to travel to contact the workpiece, the tighter its grip will be. When you need to rotate the stock, simply let your foot off the treadle; a properly balanced head will swing back. Rotate the stock and you're back in business, with the stock clamped securely and ready for the next cut. This motion becomes automatic and you'll develop a distinctive rhythm.

There are about as many species of shaving horses as there are users, many



CLAMPING CURVES

Curved wood won't spook this horse. The head and pedestal can easily pinion curved parts in their one-point grip. Here Buchanan uses his shoulder to help stabilize the workpiece.



Delicate and doubly curved. With a little ingenuity, you can get the horse to grip just about any workpiece. The shaving horse makes it a simple matter to clamp compound curved parts for shaping, keeping them locked tight yet safe from damage. Here Buchanan makes finishing cuts on a crest rail.



of them customized to fit an individual's size and work style. But the broad range of horses can be divided into two basic styles. The Swiss, or dumbhead, style horse has a single arm that penetrates the work platform. A thick block of wood—the dumbhead—at the top of the arm serves as the upper jaw of the clamp. The English-style horse has a pair of arms that straddle the work platform, and the upper jaw is a crossbar between the arms. I use the Swiss type, which I think is more versatile. The one I'm using now was designed and made by Tim Manney, and it's the best I've ever used (to learn how to build your own, see his article, pp. 43–51). □

Curtis Buchanan builds Windsor chairs in Jonesborough, Tenn.



Firm grip, fast reset. While Buchanan beads this chair arm with a scratch stock, the horse's lightning-fast release-and-reclamp action enables him to work close to the clamping head for maximum stability without sacrificing efficiency.