



CHECKERING

GETTING TO THE POINT BY PAUL COOK

There's nary a soul amongst firearm owners, no matter the prestige or utility of the firearm manufacturer, whose eye isn't instantly drawn to the embellishments on a gun. Checkering might be the very first of these embellishments we notice.

Checkering Basics

"Checkering" has become something of a generic term for embellishments in the grip and forearm areas of a firearm. Essentially there are three types: diamond (what we most often associate with the term checkering), fish scale, and basket weave. The latter two, as Doug Carpenter of Carpenter Custom

Gunstocks, LLC. pointed out, is arguably as much a form of carving, as it is checkering — although they do both have a regular pattern.

Diamond checkering has many variations, beginning with the number of lines per inch (LPI). There's flat-top checkering, where the diamonds are cut in a way that leaves a flat rather than a point on the top, and skip-line checkering, most commonly seen on guns of German origin.

The work is often completed with a combination of hand and power tools. The use of each of these tools varies with the craftsman. Where Wilson Smith, of Wenig Custom Gunstocks, LLC., prefers a hand tool, Carpenter prefers a power checkering tool.

Both men agreed that the nature of the trade, training and personal preferences developed over time are as unique as the craftsmen themselves.

The tools they work with vary less. Every now and then a special tool may be made by the craftsman

to achieve a particular goal, but for the most part, they're purchased off the shelf. Some cutting wheels for power tools can be re-sharpened but the hand tools generally have a lifespan, then are replaced. Doug noted that the introduction of carbide hand tools



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has greatly extended their life. Wilson said that when "doing fancy patterns, the chisels and tools matter."

There Must be a Reason

Usually we estimate that checkering on a firearm is meant to enhance grip. Thinking just a moment, throughout history there are quite a few contrary examples. For instance, military firearms, most old lever action Winchesters, or going back further, the utilitarian Kentucky rifle were not typically checkered.

Clearly, cost would have been a factor but maybe it was movement away from oil finishes, that can be grippy, to more slippery synthetic finishes spurred increased utilization of checkering. However it came about, checkering, whether laser, pressed or hand cut is pretty much an expectation on sporting firearms today.

If it Feels Right

All the above being said we're left with the purely human factor of

how something feels in the hand. If it feels right, secure and assured, then it's one less variable in the ultimate calculation our brains resolve instantly at the presentation of a clay target. Never mind that frankly, well-done checkering looks beautiful.

Doug said that generally speaking he's found that 20-22 LPI of diamond checkering is a good starting point when a customer is dialing in their personal feel for custom checkering. He noted that abrasiveness is a consideration and that some applications might be outside that range depending on intended use and personal tastes. Wilson explained that sometimes the size of the stock may impact the appearance of the checkering and that on a small stock, smaller checkering patterns may be desired to keep the proportions in balance.

Custom Work

Since both Doug and Wilson execute restorations, they can reproduce classic patterns, like the Remington Fleur de lis. Incorporating the appropriate factory embellishments on a



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restored and/or upgraded stock is a real jewel in the crown of a well-done restoration. Doug said "As much as I like doing a custom stock, I like a good refurbish and bringing an old gun back up to snuff." But the really interesting jobs are the custom jobs.

I asked Wilson what he thought his most interesting custom checkering job had been. He thought a moment and then told me about a job that incorporated a Ghost Rider motorcycle theme. It had dragons and flames and was initially laid out on an adhesive backed paper, then transferred to the wood. He used chisels to carve the figures and checkering to fill.

I asked Doug the same question and right away he described a maritime-themed job for a commercial diver that he'd done. It had compass points that were wrapped up in the tentacles of a kraken, surrounded with diamond checkering. Much of the job evolved inside Doug's head where he'd been granted latitude by the customer to make it distinctive.

Wilson said he'd once done a gun with an oak-leaf border on the checkering that took three days' work. Doug found it hard to estimate how long a job might take. He described a wide variety of variables like the wood the



LAYING A
PATTERN
OUT

customer had chosen, the detail of the pattern and even shape of the stock to be checkered. Interestingly, both craftsmen noted that they never recall actually telling a customer "no" to a desired pattern. Steering a customer for optimal results was common but only a suggestion. Wilson was succinct when he said "They're (the customer) the one that has to use it."

Custom Cradles

When I asked Doug and Wilson about the checkering cradles used to hold the workpiece, I wasn't surprised to learn that while their tools may be largely off-the-shelf, their cradles are not. Wilson said that he uses a self-made cradle and vise to be able to orient his work at his bench. It gives him 360 degrees of orientation on multiple axes. Doug described combining his cradle with a power-drafting table. This allows him added height and tilt adjustments to obtain the ideal angle to approach any cut.

In describing his cradle, Doug went on to talk about how he came to the trade and his struggle to find craftsmen willing to take the time to share information. Being largely self-taught, he described

the difficulty he had and how when he took his early jobs he explained to his customers and asked them to stick with him "until (they agreed) it was right." Wilson said that he had trained at Wenig and learned from his Uncle — and by doing lots of work. Wilson now works along

with Joyce Cardwell, both executing checkering services for Wenig.

Choices, Choices, Choices

If you're having the checkering on a sporting firearm restored or freshened-up, you're probably thinking of sticking with the original patterns and styles. If you're upgrading that same firearm or considering an altogether custom project, then you have quite a number of choices to make just surrounding the checkering.

Wilson said that he keeps examples of checkered stocks for customers to handle while considering the number of lines per inch. He noted that certain



types of highly figured woods require additional processes to stabilize and strengthen the wood in area(s) to be checkered. These processes take time and obviously add to the cost. He's also sketched details onto the wood to try

to give customers a feel for the appearance of what they're considering having put on a stock.

Doug said that "By the time a guy wants a custom stock, they already have something in mind."



DOUG CARPENTER'S CHECKERING CRADLE

He gets a good deal of latitude on some projects and while he too noted the same issues as Wilson with dramatically figured wood, he pointed out that laminates can be quite difficult to put certain patterns on as well. The variations between the adhesives and the different kinds of wood incorporated into the laminations have to be considered.

If you're having a custom gunstock made for your sporting firearm be prepared for some decision making. When you arrive at the checkering, be sure you pause to critically consider your options and consult an expert craftsman like Doug Carpenter or Wilson Smith. ■



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