Kurt's clinic

Kurt Hertzog gives some answers to readers' questions

How to become a demonstrator

Question: I've applied many times to be a demonstrator at national woodturning events. I keep getting rejected. I know I'm as good as or better than those demonstrating there each year. What does it take to get accepted?

Answer: From my experience, I chaired the Speaker Selection Committee for the AAW Annual Symposium for a number of years and for the past 20 or so years I've selected the demonstrators for the Totally Turning Symposium. I can share the criteria and mentality I've used, but be aware that this is only my perspective. It may be different from others. First and foremost, you need to have sufficient experience to provide a quality demonstration. Having earned your wings at smaller symposia, club demos, or other presentation forums, your selection assumes you'll do a good job. That includes starting and ending on time, dealing with the good and bad of what various audiences can present, and working around or through any unexpected equipment or material failures. The event needs your performance. You need to be able to deliver it. You are sharing your expertise, teaching, being personable and entertaining, and fielding questions. Having those skills under your belt, you now fall into one of two categories. You are either a drawing card, i.e. a name that alone will bring people to the event, or a lesser-known up and comer who people are still willing to watch based on your topic. Even totally unknown demonstrators can fit into category two with the proper topics. Regardless of the category, you now fall to the mercy of the mix of topics. Whatever your known speciality is, or the topics you've pitched on your demo application, you'll need to fill a hole in the demonstration topic matrix. Most events need to cater to a range of attendee interests but the universal meaty topics are bowl turning, spindle turning, pen/ornament/box turning, artistic decoration, basic skill sets, and often segmented work. Depending on who else has been selected, your pitched topics may immediately preclude or include you. If the event billing already includes Richard Raffan, Glen Lucas, or Mike Mahoney, or similar huge drawing cards, chances are pretty slim that the selection group will pick you as a bowl turning demonstrator. My suggestions to improve your chances of success are: be certain you've worked your way up the ladder from the smaller events to the larger; be a low-maintenance demonstrator with good reviews; present a quality application that makes them want to bring you in; and pitch something that sets you apart either by topic or technique. Finally, accept that it is humans doing the selection. It can be fraught with personal bias, opinions, and sometimes word of mouth. Being as good or better than the others is the entry threshold for potential selection. A key point to always remember is that being a talented turner or artist doesn't make you a good demonstrator. Without the skills to convey information in an enjoyable and educational manner and engage with the audience, you are only a talented turner and add little value as a presenter. Getting picked from the pool of equally talented applicants is often simply the luck of the draw. Don't ever take being rejected personally since it very rarely is. Continue to apply. Persistence works. Every year is a new year for each event and many times with a brand new selection team. Don't ever forget that there is a budget as well. Rotation fees, material costs, travel, lodging expenses and more all need to balance at any event. These will also enter the decision process.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KURT HERTZOG

Being a talented turner or artist is only part of a demonstrator skill needs. You need to be able to deliver, communicate, and educate others with those talents.

Fancy-metal turning tools

Question: Are there any good reasons to buy these high priced, fancy-metal turning tools? Their cost is out of sight. They seem to have a cult following surrounding them. What gives?

Answer: In my opinion, your tools should be a lifetime investment. As such, you should buy a quality level that will deliver service to you for many years and retain reasonable value should you sell them. That said, there are Yugos in the world as well as Mercedes. Each can get you across town. From high-speed steel through the powder metal alloys to the current more exotic steels, each different steel chemistry offers some benefit. The reason for the variation is to obtain an improved characteristic, but it is usually a trade-off for some other. Much of the drive for the high-performance steels is their ability to take and maintain an acceptable level working edge for longer service. For the pro, time at the grinder isn't saleable. The less frequently they need to sharpen, the more time they can make chips and therefore money. Unless you are in that mode of production turning that sharpening time is often a worthwhile respite from the lathe and refocus time. Sharpening and then the ongoing touching up of any tool, whether commodity high-speed steel or A-11 (or anything between or beyond), is a skill every woodturner should have. Once sharpening skills are developed, a trip to the grinder should only be a few moments at most. If you have the funds and want to purchase the more exotic tool steels, by all means do so. They command a premium price but that is your decision. You are right about there being a cult following around certain steels and brands. My collection of tools ranges from the original HS tools I bought when I started in the late 1990s and still use, to the latest exotics on the market. I suggest you accept the truth that there is no magic tool. The magic is and always will be in the hands of the user. Eric Clapton will always make far better music on a Walmart guitar than I ever will on the finest Gibson. If your time at the grinder is excessive and agonising, I suggest you spend time improving your sharpening skills before worrying about which alloy you should be shopping for.

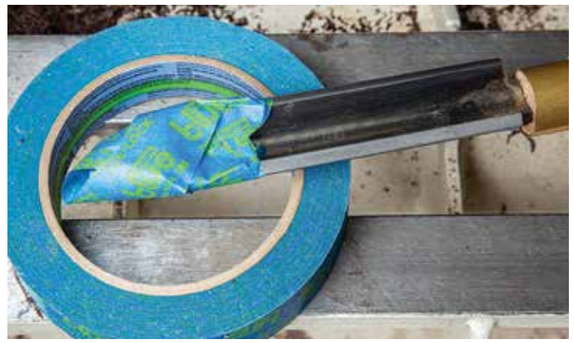
Be certain to focus on your sharpening skills before you agonise over the benefits of the various tool steel alloy options

Keeping your tools touched up is far faster and easier than sharpening dull tools

Get packing

Question: What is the best way to travel with tools? I travel on occasion and have not found a good way to pack them.

Answer: You don't say how you are traveling so I'll tackle a couple of modes. I find that the best way to travel with tools is not to. If I can borrow what is needed at the other end, whether for demos, classes, turning work, or whatever, I do so. A decent tool, regardless of brand, that can be sharpened and used need not be the one in your kit. Borrow what you need. Of course, there is a comfort level in using your own tools. When I do take my own, I don't screw with leather or plastic covers, cut-off glove fingers, or other odd protective items that are easily misplaced when not in use. What I've migrated to, and it has worked best for me for many years, is wrapping the edges with painter's tape. I'll tape the sharpened ends with a loose-wrapped bundle of tape surrounding the sharpened edges, and then lay the tools flat in a duffle bag of sufficient length. The tools all travel well and don't have any incentive to damage each other since they are all lying flat in the bottom of the bag. With them in the bottom, I'll pile anything else needed that there is room for on top of them. When travelling by air, if I must take my own tools I do the same taping job on the sharp ends. I'll then take the tools and lay them in a mix of handles out, shafts together and sharpened edges internally pointed, and use stretch wrap to make manageable bundles of them. Contained in the stretch wrapping is a large sheet of paper with a bold-coloured magic marker warning to TSA that they are sharp woodturning tools. I've haven't yet had TSA unwrap them although I'm pretty sure they sometimes were examined, explosive or drug test swabbed, or X-rayed. Because they are safely covered and the points are all internal to the wrapping, they can safely be packed in my checked luggage. Safely marked and packaged, they always get to the other end without incident. I always pack a roll of tape and a small spool of stretch wrap so I can prepare the tools in the same way for the flight home. When flying with tools using this method, I opt for my hard-shell luggage to contain the tools rather than any cloth or soft-shelled bags.



I use painter's tape to wrap the sharpened edge. It is wrapped in a loose bundle to be collapsible and compliant yet still protecting the edge from contact

The tools stretch-wrapped in bundles, points in, marked 'Sharp! Woodturning Tools', and packed in as many bundles as needed

Send your questions to Kurt's email: kurt@kurthertzog.com