
Finishing a *Gunstock*



Dominick Pisano

.....*Custom Stock Maker*

Complete the sanding of the stock through 220 grit abrasive paper. Be sure to use a large sanding backer with your paper so that you will not round over edges that should not be rounded over, e.g. the edge of the cheek piece.

I use artist's art gum erasers to get into the tight spots, and for the actual finish work. I have them in several sizes to be used in different applications. Keep the paper tightly wrapped against the backing in order to keep all surfaces flat and true.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE. It is not necessary to make the edges of the flutes, panels, cheekpiece, outside edge of forearm, etc. knife edge sharp. This will only improve the chances of denting and dinging those edges. A very slight rounding over is A-OK.

Do not bear down on the sanding block. Let the paper do the cutting. Bearing down will only clog the paper reducing its efficiency, and with the coarser grades deeply scratch the stock which will cause problems later on. Sand the stock with finer and finer grades of abrasive paper through 220 grit. Always sand with the grain.

There are certain areas where it is impossible to sand with the grain. Those are behind the cheek piece, behind the panels next to the receiver/frame, etc. Here you

have no choice but to sand across the grain in order to get the wood smooth. Do yourself a favor and do not bear down. Let the paper do the work. You will inevitably have scratches in those areas of cross grain sanding. If you did not bear down, these can be removed by carefully lining up the edge of the paper with a sanding block and sanding with the grain using short controlled strokes. Finish off the job by sanding the panels with the grain last. This will sharpen up the edges a bit if you rounded them over more than you like. This is a mark of good workmanship.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE. Keep the rifle assembled when sanding so that areas where the wood and metal should be flush such as the tangs, and behind the frame, become dead flush as you sand both together. Place some duct tape on the frame and tangs when using the coarse grades of paper so as not to mar the metal. This also holds true during your final shaping of the stock as the files and rasps can cause serious damage to the metal.

Disassemble the rifle. Now is the time to coat the interior of the stock with a 50-50 mixture of whatever finish material you are using. Let the finish soak in. Do a second or third coating if necessary. You want to be sure the interior is well sealed. Don't stop the finish on. That will make reassembly difficult later on. While the rifle is disassembled, lightly coat the metal with a good paste wax. This will prevent the finish from seriously sticking to the metal once you begin the finishing process.

Reassemble the rifle. Now we're ready to begin the process of applying a professional finish to the wood. There are a number of fine finish materials available on the market. Tru Oil, Permalyn and Classic Oil finish to name a few. I have used them all, and continue to experiment in an effort to find the elusive perfect finish that goes on without any significant work. While it is not my intention to promote one product over another, I want you to know what works for me and why.

Now the fun starts. You need two artist's

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art gum erasers (different sizes), a clean ash tray, a metal tablespoon measure, one can of mineral spirits (paint thinner), one bottle of finish material, two sheets 320 grit abrasive paper, one sheet 400 grit, and six sheets 600 silicon carbide wet/dry abrasive paper, one roll of paper towels, and some clean newspapers.

Currently, I am using Tru Oil. It is readily available, inexpensive, and it works now just as it did when it first came on the market. I make up a 50-50 mix of Tru-Oil and mineral spirits—one tablespoon of each measured into an ash tray or other small receptacle. I have found that this amount of the mixture is just the right amount for each "wet rub" session. This will give you a fairly watery solution that will readily soak into the wood. Remember you want the finish in the wood, not on it.

Cut one sheet of the 320 sandpaper into small sizes for use with your gum eraser sanding block, clean tablespoon and ash tray with paint thinner and dry, lay down on the newspaper, and mix 1 tablespoon Tru-Oil with 1 tablespoon paint thinner in the ash tray. Wet the sandpaper and sand the stock completely, one section at a time. Make no effort to paint finish on the stock. The idea is to "sand in" the finish. Keep plenty of mixture on the paper. Again, let the paper do the work. Replace the paper when it begins to wear out or gets gummed up. If the finish becomes gummy on the

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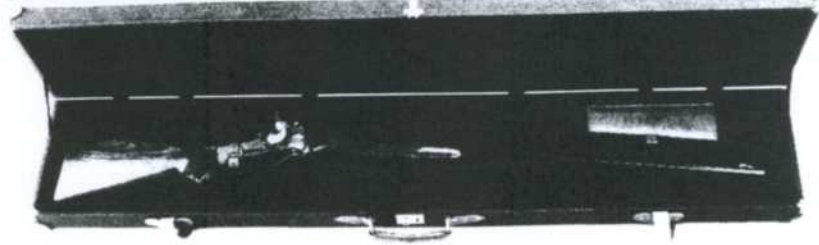
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stock, wet it down. Keep sanding until all the finish solution in the ashtray is used up. This process will further smooth the wood, and begin filling the pores by packing a combination of wood dust and finish mixture into the pores. The main purpose of 320 grit, which is a cutting paper, is to more finely smooth the wood and fill the pores.

Sand with the grain. Take your time. When the finish material is about used up wipe the stock down with your hand leaving a thin film of finish on the wood. This wood dust mixture will also aid in filling the pores (and now you can tell your friends that this is a "hand rubbed" finish). Don't get the mistaken idea that if you leave a thick goeey layer on the stock, the pores will fill faster. Not so. All you've done is slow down the process because it will take longer for the mixture to dry through and through. Also the dried mixture is just that much more work as you will have to sand through it during the next wet sanding session. Wipe the stock off with the paper towels to remove any excess finish and let dry for a day. Clean up the ash tray, tablespoon measure and erasers. Each of my sanding sessions takes about thirty minutes, not counting set up time.

After the first two sessions with the 320 sandpaper, the stock should begin to look like a quality stock as the color and grain variation become more evident. This is also

a good time to carefully search for scratches, made by the coarser grades of paper, that may have gone unnoticed during the sanding process. Carefully work them out using wet 320 paper backed by a sanding block. Do not limit your efforts to the immediate area as there is a likelihood of creating a depression in that area. Feather out the entire area. By the end of the third sanding session wipe the stock down with paper towels to determine whether it's time to move on to 400 grit paper. It's my experience that English walnut will now be ready for 400 grit. Claro walnut, a softer and more porous wood, may take as many as three more wet rubs using 320 grit to get all the pores filled.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE. You may now discover a small pin hole or two that somehow have not filled. Place a dab of clear super glue in the pin hole, let dry, then re-sand using wet paper. If that doesn't fill the pin hole, do it again.

Now move on to 400 grit abrasive paper. Repeat the above steps. 400 grit is really a polishing paper, and if you like, the metal may be removed from the stock and sent off to the metal finisher at this time. Again, if you let the paper do the work, use a sanding block and be careful not to rock the block as you sand the panels behind the receiver, and the cheek piece, you need not fear

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changing dimensions with the 400 grit, and finer papers. You can also now get to those places that you couldn't reach when the rifle was assembled, e.g., the tops of the forearm next to the barrel, the forearm tip, and along side the trigger guard loop/lever.

After the third session with 400 grit, again wipe down the stock with paper towels and examine your work. At this point your stock should have a soft luster and start looking terrific. If you have done your part, you should be feeling pretty good.

Perform the next three sanding sessions with 600 grit paper. At this point and for the next sanding sessions, keep sanding wet but with a lighter touch, because you are now effectively polishing the stock. Make certain to keep wiping the stock clean after each session. The number of succeeding sessions is up to you, and the amount of luster you desire. Attempt to use the same piece of abrasive paper as long as possible at this stage to get the desired stock luster. (You work slowly, carefully, and keep everything clean; it takes a long time and you will be satisfied with your results, so don't rush it.)

There's one more step. A day or two after you've completed the stock finish process, wipe it down with a soft cotton cloth. Use a bit of elbow grease. Then lightly coat the stock with a good grade of furniture polish. Use a paste wax. The liquid or spray polishes won't do. Let the wax film over, then rub the entire stock down with a soft cotton cloth. Old 100% cotton tee shirts work fine. Do this every once in a while to keep the finish looking fresh.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE. Take a shave if you do a lot of shooting. Your beard will act as an abrasive and wear the finish on the cheek piece. Not to worry. If that happens another polish with paste wax will restore it to its pristine glory.

Inevitably, some stock finish will get into the inletting. It is important to remove this material prior to reassembling the rifle. You would be surprised how little stock finish in the inletting can affect fit if you have done a good job of inletting. Simply use small chisels and scrapers to carefully remove any excess finish. 320 grit paper wrapped around a dowel will quickly remove excess finish from a round barrel channel. Small flat sticks will do the same for octagon barrels. Reassemble and head for the range. - [See Dominick's ad on Custom Stockmaking, page 6.]

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