

Competition Chopping Techniques

By Jim Hunt

Introduction

The first part of the following information is formulated initially for the raw novice "would be axeman". The balance is follow on advice that may also be useful for improving the technique of many established competitors.

The correct place to learn to use an axe, followed by learning to chop a log, is at home under the guidance of a capable axeman as coach. It is pointless and dangerous to attempt to "chop a log" much less enter into competition, until you are reasonably competent in a basic skill of using an axe. Newcomers should not be encouraged to "have a go" until they are capable of chopping a log safely and properly.

Learning to use an axe

I believe the best and safest method of learning to use an axe is chopping into a log that is laying on the ground while standing alongside on the ground. First ensure that there are no obstructions overhead and that limbs and ground foliage are cleared away. Make sure your feet are on clean even ground.

If you are left-handed (hold the axe with your left hand nearest to the axe head) stand with your left foot slightly ahead of the right, and with your feet about twelve inches apart. Chop into the log on the left side only, working your way up the log, taking slices of chip about every four inches. The angle of the scarf slope on the log should be at least 45 degrees. If right handed stand the opposite way and chop into the right side only. Avoid rough knotty wood that may damage your axe. Stand far enough back from the log to obtain maximum length of swing. As you swing the axe face directly along the line of the scarf slope. This is most important to learn to hit true and "get your eye in ". Learn to place your blows in the right place. Keep your body relaxed and utilize strength without becoming tense. Endeavor to obtain maximum body co-ordination.

Retain a firm hold with your grip hand on the end of the handle and also with your free hand when your hands come together as you hit the log. Otherwise avoid gripping the handle to tight causing the muscles to become taunt.

A pendulum on a length of string is the basis of the swing and hit. Use a full swing with your body relaxed to learn to hit true and to develop the blow of the axe. Slide your free hand about three quarters the length of the axe handle towards the axe head while lifting the axe back and then to your grip hand when hitting the log. Legs and arms should be reasonably straight with the body partly bent on impact. Allow the axe to fully complete the blow, drawing it into the log before swinging back for the next blow. This is known as " follow through ", and once achieved successfully, allows maximum power of blow with speed of hit when chopping a log. Avoid tapping at the log and attempting to withdraw the axe before the hit is completed. The heel of the axe is the most effective part of the blade. Endeavor to slice the axe down into the log and avoid hitting whereby the toe of the axe goes into the wood first.

Your axe should be reasonably good and of similar weight to that used in competition. Avoid using too heavy an axe. The handle inclusive of the head should be about thirty inches long, not too thick and heavy as this causes you to lose the feel of the axe. Make sure the handle is fitted straight on the head and feels comfortable. Crooked handles tend to make the scoop.

General Information

Styles of chopping vary considerably and certain aspects are personal choice. Not every axeman chops the same. Various factors are involved such as a persons build and where individual strength is greatest. It is necessary to individually select that type of style that most naturally suits you.

There are certain basics that apply regardless of methods. Once you learn basics and can apply them you are well on the way to becoming an axeman. I will endeavor to explain the correct basics in the Underhand and Standing sections.

In competition it is necessary to be mentally as well as physically prepared. You need to be able to think ahead and discipline yourself to place your blows properly, keep weight on each hit, and have just sufficient speed to do everything correctly. Avoid trying to go too fast and sacrifice basic aspects. Correct any mistakes immediately after it is made, if you consider it may prevent you from finishing your log properly.

Many novice axemen endeavor to use axes that are too heavy for them. Choose a weight that you can swing comfortable and is not too heavy, in that the axe tends to swing you. Try an axe that has a head weight of about four and half pounds. You need to be sufficiently relaxed in your swing and let the axe do most of the work.

The handle is equally as important as the head. It should be neither too thick nor too thin, with an end grip that suits you and feels comfortable to hold. My favorite handle is approx. 7/8 inch thick and 1 5/8 inches deep with the usual flare at the end. The handle should be fitted perfectly straight on the head, in line with the blade as well as parallel with the head. If possible have it fitted by an expert.

Stands

Stands for both Underhand and Standing Chopping events should be of a good design and securely fixed to the ground or platform. Make sure the log is firmly secured to the stand by whatever method is used. Any movement while chopping reduces efficiency of the hit and increases the chance of an accident occurring.

Chopping The Underhand Block

To be attempted only after you are confident in using an axe.

Position of the Log on the Cradle

Rig your log to take advantage of the best wood. Avoid knots and rough wood as much as possible. Preferably chop the narrow way through the log. If the wood texture is the same throughout the log and the circumference varies chop through the smallest part. Place the best wood to the top and in the front scarf. If egg shaped place the narrow point to the top where possible and chop into the flat surface on each side.

Footholds

Cut footholds level and deep enough to stand comfortable with your heel at least partly on the log, just wide enough apart to be able to chop the log without cutting into them. The closer you feet are the better balance you have and the more control you have of the axe. Angle the sides of the footholds slightly so that the feet face a little towards the side of the scarf where the axe lifts the chip (left side if left-handed).

Marking the Scarf

Mark the scarf to chop just beyond half way in the front, marking it About one inch wider than the diameter of the log. Keep a good slope on the chip lifting side of the scarf (left side if left-handed). Less slope on the side that cleans away the chip. Mark the back about two inches further over than the front (to the left if left-handed). Also you can close the width in slightly.

Pattern of Hits

There are various styles but the easiest to learn is to rotate the hits in a circle, clockwise for right handed axeman and counter clockwise for left handers, except for the driving hits in the back where hits should be from top to bottom of the block. Any ineffective misplaced hit should be recut.

Remember the heel of the axe is most effective. Endeavor to slice the axe into the log and avoid hitting whereby the toe of the axe goes into the wood first.

Opening blows may be one or two on each side of the log depending on the block size and shape, wood type and to a degree the style of the chopping used. After that use two on each side except for bigger logs where at times it may be necessary to use three.

Cut the top of the log out as soon as possible and then work down to the bottom finishing with the driving hits vertical into the log. Leave sufficient width of scarf for the driving hits to be fully effective.

In blocks of twelve inches and over my advice is to have three driving hits on each side of the log, primarily using the heel of the axe to achieve maximum penetration. Avoid hitting the top blow in the front too hard, causing the axe to stick just before your turn.

Body Position

Retain comfortable and solid footing with minimum foot movement. Keep your body relaxed, utilizing maximum strength as the axe hits the wood. Use body co-ordination and avoid becoming tense. Endeavor to flow your body action avoiding stop, start movements. Pivot your body at the hips so as to keep a direct line of vision with the angle of the scarf with minimum head movement. When lifting the axe up for the blow bend your knees and partly straighten your body. Legs and arms to be fairly straight and body bent at the impact of the blow. Without any deliberate pause allow the axe to draw into the wood, for maximum follow through of the blow, before swinging back for the next hit.

There are variations in body action depending on the style of chopping. These variations are probably best determined by watching video tapes of various styles of chopping.

Chopping Styles

There are three basic styles of holding the axe for Underhand Chopping, with variations within each style that depend to a certain extent on the length of the handle used.

1. Sliding the free hand up the handle while lifting the axe up and then sliding back bringing the hands together, at the end of the handle, when coming down for the hit. This is no doubt the most ideal method, especially for bigger logs and harder wood.
2. Gripping the handle a few inches from the end with both hands and retaining that grip throughout.
3. Gripping the handle at the end with both hands and retaining that grip throughout.

Chopping The Standing (Vertical) Block

Again should be attempted only after obtaining confidence, as glancing blows particularly downwards are dangerous.

The ground should be level and clear. Use footwear with a good grip, such as golf spikes or rubber baseball type grips, if on dry boards or plywood use rubber grips.

Position of the Log on the Stand

Rig your log to take advantage of the best wood. Avoid knots and rough wood as much as possible. Preferably chop the narrow way through the log. If the wood texture is the same throughout the log and the circumference varies chop through the smallest part. Place the best wood in the front at the correct height. Avoid chopping too high. A few inches below waist height is considered correct for the bottom hit in the front, but there is some variation amongst axemen.

Marking the scarf

Mark the scarf to chop just beyond half way in the front, about one inch wider than the log diameter. Keep a good slope on the bottom of the scarf. Mark the back about two or three inches higher than the front. Keep a good slope on the top of the scarf.

Pattern of Hits

There are various styles but the easiest to learn is to rotate the hits in a circle, clockwise for right handed axeman and counter clockwise for left handers. Place driving hits far to near side of the block at the bottom of the front scarf and near to the far side at the top in the back.

Opening blows may be one or two bottom and top, again depending on the block size, wood type, etc. After that use two bottom and top except for bigger logs where three hits may be necessary. Drive three hits in logs twelve inches and over at the bottom in the front before turning and at the top in the back to finish. Leave sufficient width of scarf for the driving hits to be fully effective.

Body Position

Learn to swing the axe sliding the free hand up the handle. Again keep your body relaxed to utilize maximum strength as the axe hits the block. Use body co-ordination and avoid becoming tense.

Place your front foot parallel with the centerline of the block, with the toe of your boot eighteen inches to two feet out. Placing of your back foot depends on the maximum power or speed of hit required. For maximum power the back foot would be almost in line with the front foot and center line. For maximum speed it would be out from the front of the scarf. Choose somewhere about half way between, wherever you feel most comfortable. Remember however the power of the hit is first priority, speed will come later. Spread your feet to get a good long swing of the axe.

The swing for both bottom and top hits should be of an even arc. The height of the arc, down and up for the bottom hit and over and over and down for the top hit, governs the slope of the scarf required and uniformity should be maintained, especially the driving side of the scarf. Drop the shoulder down to get full body power behind the up blow, and to maintain a horizontal scarf. Come up onto the side of your back foot at the point of hitting the log with your up blow. Consequently your knee will be bent forward. Swing right over for the top hit holding a more

moderate leg and body stance. Avoid standing too straight and flat footed as you hit the block.

The axe should be held as if it was an extension of arms. Your grip on the handle end should be maintained the same at all points of the swing. Use maximum power of your blows as the axe hits the wood. Ensure adequate "follow through".

Summary

Some axeman may disagree with parts of these contents. There are considerable variations in theories, resulting in different styles, with each method being successful. I have endeavored to set it out as I see it, especially when taking into account that the information is targeted for novice axemen.

I want to acknowledge with thanks the assistance given by Les Gilsenan with some of the Standing Block Chopping advice.

To the novice axeman, don't try to absorb everything at once. Take each part step by step. If you don't understand some chopping terms seek advice from accomplished axemen. Don't be disheartened if you take a while to achieve success. It can take up to ten years of practice and competition for a top axeman to reach full potential. The most important thing is to learn properly and to continue to put that knowledge into practice. Once entering into competition ignore your supporters with comments to go faster, etc. Just take heed of sensible advice, such as "cut the top out " or " make sure of the driving hits

I hope this information can be of some assistance and wish you luck.

Jim Hunt