

The

ATLATL

“Too long have I hunted mammoth alone!” Rich McWhorter

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Atlatl 3-D Hunter!

By Tom Mills

The hunter stood still, intuitively calculating the distance to his target. Eyes focused on a small point within the kill zone, atlatl and dart raised in still, silent readiness. With a forward rocking motion, the hunter began his cast. He transferred his weight forward to his left foot; his right arm and atlatl moving forward simultaneously, ending in a crisp snap of the wrist.

The 7' long cane dart leapt from his atlatl like a cat springing from a branch. The dart hurtled in silence towards the unsuspecting prey. Standing statue still in the morning light, the Mule Deer bowed its head as if feeding on the dew-laden grass. Twunk...the dart hit with authority, finding its mark in an area just behind the deer's



right front leg. The deer rocked back and forth from the force of the impact. Although the dart hit just outside of the “kill zone,” the hunter’s companions (archers all) mumbled with excitement, and appreciation.

This particular shot was 35 yards distant, and down hill. This distance was a bit far for realistic atlatl hunting situation, but hey...this is a simulated hunt - an archery 3-D tournament! The mule deer was standing “statue still” because it was a “statue” - a foam statue that is – one of many in an archery 3-D shoot!

Why Enter an Archery 3-D Tournament with an Atlatl?

Aside from being fun, entering archery 3-D shoots with an atlatl is a great way to spread the word about atlatls, and to entice new members to our sport (it's easy to win archers over to the atlatl - they are pre-disposed to it!). For those interested in hunting with an atlatl, it is also very good practice to throw at various unmarked distances, and in different situations (uphill/downhill, over, under and between obstacles, etc.). It's also a good way to open the eyes of those who might otherwise oppose atlatls for hunting (the archery community can be both a powerful ally in the quest to have the atlatl recognized as a legal hunting weapon). Spreading knowledge of the capabilities of the atlatl will usually work in our favor. For me, though, the number one reason is that it's a ton of fun, and quite a challenge.

First things First – Obtaining Permission

Clearly, you can't just walk up to the organizers of an archery tournament and expect to be welcomed with open arms. For one, the foam targets cost a lot of money, and the organizers don't want them to be needlessly damaged. The organizers will also have concerns about the other paying participants in the tournament. There are always those who for various reasons won't want you to participate. The biggest hurdle can be talking your way into the contest! I have some suggestions:

- 1) Make your equipment "archery friendly." I've made special 3-D darts. They have cane mainshafts, but the foreshaft/point is made from pieces of aluminum arrow shafts. If your darts won't do any more damage to a target than an arrow, you are on good footing! This is probably the single, most important thing you can do when seeking permission to participate in an archery contest (see photos of my equipment below).
- 2) It helps if you're a member of the archery club, or if you know someone who is a paying member. The more members you know the better!
- 3) Pique their interest first: You might have to employ a multi-part strategy. Show up at an archery contest with your atlatl equipment, and ask to give a demonstration at their practice bales. Throw darts and answer questions. Be friendly and make friends! When interest is strong, consider "popping the question." In the meanwhile, gather friends and allies. It helps if you're already an archer and can talk "archery" with the club members.
- 4) Enlist a group of archers who welcome you to throw with their group. I usually bring some or all group members with me when I ask the organizers. The group can back you up and assure the organizers that they don't mind shooting with you. This will alleviate the organizer's concerns about what the other participants might feel about the situation. They often say things like..."I don't mind, but the other participants might have a problem with it." If your shooting group is there to support you, you'll be in!
- 5) Always be polite to a fault! Even in the face of criticism and/or harsh words. Always proceed as if you're treading on thin ice (because you are). You can never say thank you enough!
- 6) Consider donating some atlatl equipment to the club for their raffle (they almost always have a raffle at these events), or some of your time to demonstrate the atlatl, and/or provide instruction to interested folks. It's amazing what a bit of goodwill can do for you and the entire sport of atlatls. It goes without saying that you can't expect to shoot for free, so cheerfully offer to pay the entrance fee to the contest.

Making Your Equipment Archery Friendly:

Again, this is the single most important problem to overcome! Darts with a maximum diameter of 19mm (3/4") points might be acceptable for an ISAC contest, but large points won't fly in the archery world. As mentioned above, archery 3-D targets are quite expensive. Even archery "hay" bales (not actually hay in most instances) are expensive too, and archery clubs won't warm to atlatlists who are poking large holes in their targets. To give you an appreciation of the sensitivity in this regard, consider that there is an ongoing (albeit low level) gripe between modern archers and traditional archers over the damage each perceive the other to cause to targets. Modern archers generally shoot higher powered bows with skinny little arrows, and traditional archers generally shoot larger diameter arrows out of lower poundage bows. Both groups have been known to accuse the other of damaging the targets (one side arguing that big arrows make big holes, and the other side arguing that the skinny arrows from powerful bows penetrate too deeply). So if your atlatl points are at all larger than the largest diameter arrow shafts, expect trouble!

I've found a simple solution. I use lengths of aluminum arrow shafts as foreshafts/points on my cane and bamboo darts. You can use wood (see photo below), but at acceptable diameters, you'll have a tough time finding wood that is tough enough to handle the abuse. The aluminum shafts come in different diameters and wall thicknesses, and it is pretty tough stuff. I've primarily been using 22/16 shafts, which are approximately 11/32nds of an inch in diameter. I make them quick and dirty so that they can easily be replaced when and if the aluminum shaft is destroyed. They are ugly, I know! I'm sure there are other methods than the one I employ, but I'm interested only in function and ease of repair – looks be damned! The aluminum shafts are also good because they are familiar to the modern archers, and that familiarity will help you when you ask for permission to use your atlatl. Every little bit helps!

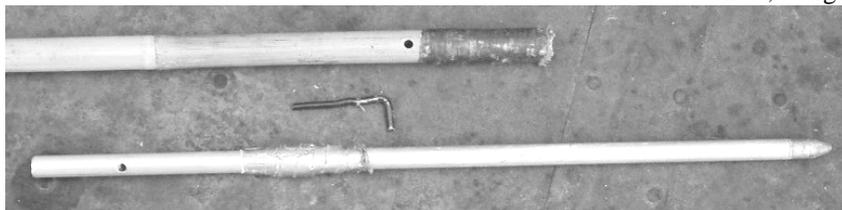
When preparing my cane and bamboo darts to accept aluminum foreshafts, I start by wrapping the end of my dart shaft with artificial sinew. I then ream out the dart shaft to a diameter sufficient for the aluminum shaft

(usually 11/32nd of an inch). I then use a sharp knife to create a cone shaped interior as I would with a foreshaft made of wood.

To make the aluminum foreshaft more like a tapered wood foreshaft, I use either electrical tape or duct tape to create a taper on the aluminum foreshaft roughly mirroring the cone shaped interior of my cane dart. I make sure that this cone of tape is just a bit larger in diameter than my cane shaft, so that it cannot be driven backward and forced inside. After fitting hand tight, I slam the point on cement to drive it back a bit and seat it firmly.



A typical “primitive” wood foreshaft – archery unfriendly:



An aluminum arrow foreshaft – archery friendly (note the slight cone-shaped blob of tape to simulate the shape of the wood foreshaft above):



Next, with the foreshaft in place, I drill a small hole completely through both the bamboo and the aluminum shaft inside. I place this hole carefully, directly behind the wrapping on the front of the dart. I then insert a small length of copper wire and bend it back on either side of the shaft, with the ends facing the fletching

This copper wire serves to hold the foreshaft in place when pulling darts from targets. I tape over this peg so the copper doesn’t snag on things (like my fingers). It is best to pull the dart from the target by the aluminum foreshaft rather than the cane. This set-up allows quick and easy replacement in the field. Using hot melt glue to hold the foreshaft is another method. It is a cleaner and a more attractive method perhaps, but it makes repair in the field more difficult as you must heat the shaft to melt the glue, etc. With the copper pin, you simply remove the tape. Pull out the copper, and remove and replace the foreshaft.

Again, this set-up is as ugly as can be. Neo-primitives like me cringe at the use of materials like aluminum and duct tape. Uggggly! But I like participating in archery 3-D shoots more than I care about what my equipment is made of and what my equipment looks like. Again, aluminum shafts are quite familiar to modern archers, and darts armed with these tips will more likely be accepted than not.

Success in the Contest:

The target distances in “traditional archery” (as opposed to open shoots, where compound bows are allowed) tournaments are usually quite reasonable. They generally strive to recreate true hunting situations, and that means most shots are within 20 yards or so. This fact makes an archery 3-D shoot well within the ability of the atlatl. In order to maximize your throwing pleasure, you might also consider

throwing from the children’s stakes (or “cub stakes” as many archery clubs call them). These are closer, easier shots, designed for young archers. No one will look down on you for throwing darts from the cub stakes; you will hit the targets more often, and have much more fun as a result. These shorter distances are certainly more realistic hunting distances for an atlatl too.

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Novelty Targets (moving targets, etc.):

Atlatls can have an advantage over bows when shooting at moving targets, or multiple/timed targets that require fast reloading and shooting. My first attempts throwing at a running pig were surprisingly successful! With a bow, I feel lucky to hit “running” or “flying” targets. Reflecting on it afterward, I realized that we grow up playing sports where we throw things to or at moving

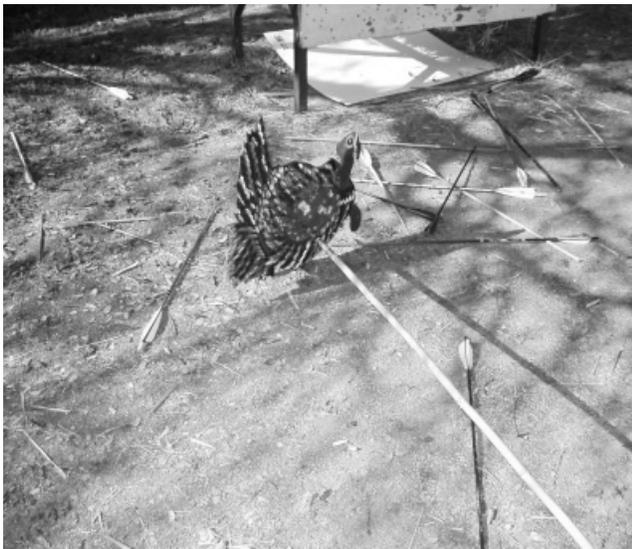
targets (football, baseball, lacrosse, etc.). It is rather natural feeling to throw at something moving. Conversely, we first learn to shoot bows and arrows at static, stationary



targets, and we find shooting at moving targets to be rather tricky.

The larger archery shoots often set up speed rounds, where you have a set amount of time to get off as many shots as possible. Some of these include moving targets as well. An archery 3-D tournament near Fresno California (The Gene Foster Shoot – held every November) has a really fun speed round employing 6 moving and pop-up targets. There is a running rabbit, a raccoon that pops up out of a trash can; a possum that pops up on a tree, a pop-up deer, a bear that swings out from behind a tree, and finally, a flying goose! To my surprise, I once managed to hit all 6 of the targets (the running rabbit and the flying goose were the most difficult.

People who run archery 3-D shoots must own stock in companies that make arrows, as they almost always have one or two steel targets. Yeah...that's right, I said steel! These targets have a soft foam center however. If you're brave and shoot for the steel target and hit the kill zone, you win extra points. If you miss and hit the steel plate, goodbye dart (or arrow, as the case may be)! I got lucky here, scored some needed extra points, and kept my dart out of the arrow graveyard (those are "dead" arrows from groups shooting a head of us). You can always play it safe and shoot for the regular 3-D animal placed somewhere near the steel target. Of course, with an easily replaceable foreshaft, you can hit the steel and have the dart back in service in just a minute or



two.

Participating in archery 3-D contests using an atlatl is an extremely fun and interesting experience. Here in Southern California, fellow atlatlists are few and far between. We used to have 2 weekend long atlatl events two times a year. These events were held at a private ranch in connection with a long-standing flintknapping and bow making event. The ranch owners decided that they didn't want to maintain their event insurance, and so we had to disband our growing atlatl group and give up our contests. While looking for a new venue, I learned to satisfy my atlatl dart tossing habit (it's addictive for sure) in creative ways. Throwing darts along

side my archery friends was a logical solution. After gaining entry into the first archery 3-D shoot, talking my way into others became easier to do so afterward. I knew the ropes, and was able to anticipate the concerns of the archers and make an effort to overcome them by being prepared ahead of time.

Aside from the tremendous fun of throwing darts at



life-sized foam animals in simulated hunting situations, participating in archery related events like this is a fantastic way to expose other folks to the atlatl, and give them a first hand view of this exciting sport of ours. So don't be bashful...get out there and have some fun with your atlatl and darts, and be an emissary for the world of atlatls!

