

# Article for American Survival Guide Magazine

By John Bailey

Introduction: Because of my experience in knife throwing, I have had hundreds of people corner me into giving impromptu knife throwing lessons. From these lessons I found that it was best to show the right way to start and the way to practice along with the practical application, before they reach the, "if I can't do what was on the tube, what's the use", state. This way students will find a satisfaction of the sport similar to that felt by first time Karate students or other like disciplines. They will have the confidence to work for their personal best and look for new ways to apply what they have learned. In this article, I intend to break down movie misconceptions pertaining to knife throwing that have sprung up as of late. I will explain, with pictures, showing proper stance, methods of correction and distance judging. Also, types of knives for particular applications and answers to the five most asked questions in hunting and knife throwing in a survival situation. This will also include where the throwing stars and darts fit in, along with their lethal capacity. What knives should be thrown by the blade or by the handle, what knives not to get for throwing and emphasis on never throwing you only knife. The above mentioned impromptu lessons pretty much started 25 years ago and have never stopped. When at all possible I give a helping hand to anyone who asks. Formal classes first started while I was in Ranger Training, in the Army. As a member of the American Knife Throwers Alliance since 1972, I have contributed to their newsletter, I've given a number of demonstrations to boy Scouts and Centennial Frontier Events with both tomahawks and knives. Besides the normal classes on knife throwing, I taught classes on knife utilization at the 1985 Florida State Rendezvous and National American Pistol and Rifle Association Rendezvous held in Tenn. I am an officer with the Central Florida A.P.R.A. Unit and knife craft instructor. As a subscriber to your magazine for the past five years, I'm sure my fellow readers and you will find this article is very informative and interesting. Thank you for your time and consideration; hope to hear from you soon.

## KNIFE THROWING, FACT OR FICTION

By John L. Bailey

Interest in knife throwing can start at an early age while watching a myriad of Hollywood characters perform the seemingly impossible. Fascinated you can watch Robin Hood casually pluck a dagger from his belt and unerringly pin a rich Normans' money purse to a convenient tree. Jim Bowie was no slouch either, portrayed by Alan Ladd, it was nothing for him to drop a bad guy running through the woods; lit only by a full moon. And who could ever forget the dazzling and sneaky under hand throw James Colburn delivered to the poor unfortunate in the movie, "The Magnificent Seven".

Moviemakers for years have worked hard at reinforcing these myths pertaining to the capabilities of knives. They delight at leading patrons to believe that this sort of trickery could be common place, with anyone who took a notion to take knife in hand and heave it, in the manner the script writer fantasized at the typewriter, a la Rambo, Jim Bowie, Ninja, Commando, Kung-Fu, etc.

### DIFFERENT STYLES IN MOVIES:

Let's look at a few examples in which the thrown knife was bigger than life. The most over used

movie favorite and by far the most useless throw to master, is the open palm style. This has been shown as a fast and deadly throw, at distances of up to what appears to be 20 feet or so. The truth is you must be only a few feet from the target; too close for any mistake and no chance for a second throw. Most often, the knife is seen in a bot, sleeve (opposite hand) or behind the neck rig. The knife is carried this way so it can be drawn and thrown and leaves the hand with no spin. Avoid knives with heavy handles, they will want to flip as soon as they leave the hand. Nevertheless, because of the grip you still won't generate enough power to get much accuracy. Hold the knife in your open palm, with the thumb on the handle. Throw with the back of the hand going forward. The knife has to be fairly light, because extra weight would mean a tighter grip, causing more of a chance of missing target alignment. Using this style, it is crucial to have the knife slip out as soon as the arm is in line with the target. Now it's not to say you can't learn this style or that you can't throw it at a further distance, but there are better styles to use in close. You would be better off if you held on to the knife and spend the time learning a knife fighting technique.

#### KNIVES NOT TO GET:

With all the knives being made nowadays it is easier to point out what you don't want in a throwing knife, then to try and tell you what knife to buy. Good throwing knives with a throwing life of 20 years or so are hard to find. Most are passed off to look the part but are flawed either in design or steel temper. Almost all have poor handles. Knives with hollow handles are on the top of the list, second only to stag in the self-destruction department. Next are models with hilts . . . this is the cross guard between the blade and the handle. Knives that have the blades affixed only by a small part of the handle or continues only partially into it, with the handle material making up the rest of the knives length, are also not good for throwing. Knives made of very high carbon steel (files), thin spring steel blades (kitchen knives) or any combination of same, will not hold up under the continuous impact throwing knives are subject to. Folding knives are the worst things you can pick for throwing. I say this because I've never seen one stay together more than a few dozen throws. The hinge pins will loosen or break all together. What I am saying here, is you can definitely throw a Ka-Bar, Fairbairn, Puma White Hunter, or for that matter even your favorite buck folder, just don't fool yourself into thinking it will hold up for any length of time. If you still want to impress your friends with a well placed throw, with your Ka-Bar, I suggest you buy up a batch of surplus stock at a gun show to practice with, before you throw the one you care about.

#### WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A THROWING KNIFE:

Look for a knife made of spring steel, from 5/32" to 5/16" thick, tempered to somewhere between 43 to 48 on the Rockwell C scale. I have had good luck with 440C stainless. . . so far 2 years. I am writing to see if they will hold up like two of my seventeen-year-old Tru-Bal bowie-Axes. Try to figure 1 to 1.5 oz.'s per inch of overall length; not to exceed 14" nor less than 10". I like 13.5" at 15 oz. Some might like the smaller, heavy blade boot knife style. Make sure the handles are of a fibrous stock and held on with heavy rivets. Most handles that have a pommel, or come even with the end, are subject to slicing rivets off at the interface. There are a few handleless stainless steel knives good for blade throwing for fun, but they are not much good for anything else.

#### TO THROW BY THE HANDLE OR THE BLADE:

There are two basic ways to throw a knife; by the blade or by the handle. No doubt you have seen someone (I am sure you can include yourself) pick up a knife and balance it on their finger and spout, "Umm good balance." Most people hope you won't ask, "what does good balance mean?" Good balance is relative only to the use in which it is to be applied. Let's say we find a knife that is NOT in the category of KNIVES NOT TO GET. How do we find out how it should be thrown? Most acceptable knives will be good for one style of throw and bad or not so good for the other style, few are good at both. Here is one of the secrets to throwing a knife. **THROW THE HEAVY END FIRST.**

#### **THROWING BY THE HANDLE:**

A knife that is perfect for the handle throw, has a good balance if it has 1 oz. To the inch and the blade is the heavy end. This is, if balanced on the finger, in the above mentioned manner, the balance point is in the center or no more than an inch back towards the handle. . . a light handle, hence a heavy blade. Hold the knife in the same manner as you would a hatchet, but instead of wrapping the thumb around the handle; lay it along side the handle, usually on top of the first rivet.

#### **THROWING BY THE BLADE:**

If a knife with a heavy blade is thrown by the handle, it would seem that a heavy handle would be best for the blade throw. For the most part that is true, whereas the configuration of the blade is normally not a large concern on a knife thrown by the handle, it must be considered in choosing which one three methods you will use when throwing by the blade.

**FIRST:** Daggers, Ice Picks or Stiletos are held in the same manner as a throwing star, with the point just touching the ring finger, if a light weight (floater); or just even with the little finger, if a heavier (Fairbairn or boot style). Except for the ice pick; their blades are or should be sharp on both sides and to throw it any other way is asking for trouble.

**SECOND:** If the knife is of the hunting style (Ka-Bar, Buck, and most bayonets), the majority have a false edge. Use what I call a sandwich grip. Marines taught this style for throwing the Ka-Bar and I taught it in the Army for bayonets. With sharp edge out, lay the thumb along the center of the flat side of the blade and push the finger tips tight to the center of the other side. This will put the false edge slightly off the meat in the inside of the hand, so when the knife is released the point the point won't drag across your palm. Never throw a **SAW BACK** knife by the blade, (it will do to your hand the same as it does to a piece of wood).

**THIRD:** This method is for the most part used by professionals for stage shows. These knives don't have sharp edges, but do have sharp points. The grip used is almost the same as a handle thrower, except the thumb is most often put on the to edge.

This concludes the styles used when throwing a knife by the blade. Personally I do not recommend that you spend too much time trying to learn them: (except perhaps style three if you intend to go professional). I say this because, I have never seen anyone carry a knife in a sheath handle down; nor have I seen anyone successfully grab for a **SHARP** knife and throw it in a manner that could be in anyway construed as, a better, or faster way; than a knife thrown by a person of equal skill using the handle. The only reason I teach these styles, in my class, is to

show the student the how and why some knives seem to throw better than others.

**UNDER HAND STYLES BY THE HANDLES:** Next are two different under hand throws. In the first method the blade is pointed down or forward, and is most often drawn from a sheath or from a sleeve of the opposite arm. Like the open palm style, there is not much power in the throw. The knife is held in a similar manner, except the fingers are lightly wrapped around the handle. Most people will find that arm and shoulder muscles won't allow you to develop much leverage on the back swing, and because of the limit put on the apex of the throwing curve, it is very important to keep the spin as slow as possible. One complete turn is about max with a light knife, two with a heavy knife of 13 oz. Or more. This can be remedied and an increase in power obtained with another method.

The second method is more often seen used with a High-Rise upside down belt sheath on the throwing arm side, or a sleeve drop rig, on the forearm of the throwing arm. The knife is pulled out of the belt sheath by the end of the handle and held mostly by the thumb and inside ring finger, with the blade next to the back of the arm. If the sleeve rig is used, use a light knife, and make sure the blade is clear of the sleeve after it drops. The throw itself is the same as the first, except that as the hand is brought back down from the back swing, the knife is allowed to pivot between the ring finger and thumb (light knife) or with more of a full grip with a heavier knife. At the instant the knife starts to drop the elbow must be pointing down and the forearm brought up sharply with the hand, allowing the knife to develop a spin, by bending the wrist to 90 degrees pointing up and opening the fingers, in progression, starting with the little finger and the forefinger and thumb being last. In this way the knife leave the hand already spinning, and generating speed and power. When executed properly with either light or heavy knife you can hardly see it coming, a la, Commando.

**THE OVER HAND THROW:** So much for show boating. Her is the style that for all intense and purpose is the one to learn for hunting or a more true to life survival scenario. You have the best of all styles when you throw by the handle, it is effective in that it will get you the most impact, game and control. The knife handle is the first thing in your hand when you reach for it, by mere virtue of design, that is where it is suppose to be held. Unlike the under hand and the open palm style, the most powerful muscles in the arm and shoulder are used in this style. Whereas the target in the under hand and palm styles have to be a soft tissue points, such as throat, diaphragm or kidneys because the impact needed to get between ribs and vertebra is not developed. The overhand throw can make even a knife of boarder line weight get maximum penetration. I know of a man in Florida who put a Tru-Bal Bowie-Axe (13.5" long x 2.0" wide, 3/16" thick with a weight of 15 oz.) into a 275 lb. Boar's right shoulder at a recorded distance of 75 feet. A second knife was thrown at about 50 feet, to kill the animal, and hit just under the neck and cut through into the chest cavity. This example along with many other show that a throwing knife weighing close to one pound can indeed put food on the table. The skill level a throw like that involves means six or more full spins and more luck than I would suggest you can count on; however, you're the one who has to make the decision. A lost knife could be results of failure. More on when to throw.

**THE STANCE:** There are two basic stances for the over hand throw. Start with the shoulders square to the target, if you are right handed put your left foot forward (reverse if left handed),

start the windup as the knife comes past the head, unweight the left foot, slide or take a small step forward as the knife is brought forward, settling your weight back down exactly at the same time as the knife leaves the hand.

In other stance, the left foot is back. When the knife is drawn back as described, start your step forward. Continue the stride as the knife come forward. The step must be completed with your foot settling back down exactly as the knife leaves the hand. This will give you more power, but can lead to a tendency to lose sight alignment. If you can keep a god eye on the target and control the bobbing, this is a good stance to use when walking or running towards a target. Just remember to start the windup on the right foot and throw on the left.

**THE WINDUP:** The windup starts at the stance ready position; hold both arms in front, foot forward or foot back ready for the step through. Draw the knife arm back as is if you were pulling back a bow string or back for a fast ball pitch. Leave the opposite arm out for balance and aid in aiming. Continue back until the elbow is pointing back and the forearm is up at a 90 degree angle. Take care to have the blade come from the point-up position (at the start of the windup), to pointing straight back or back and slightly to the opposite shoulder position. From here the wrist and arm are brought forward as if you were dragging the point with it. When the hand is about even with the head, let the opposite arm come down; and here is where the knife starts its return rotation cycle. The point now comes from the trailing, to the up, and then finally pointing at the target. Here it is released as if it had suddenly become a red hot coal; **DO NOT SNAP YOUR WRIST.**

**FOLLOW THROUGH:** This is where almost all problems start. Try this; Use a baseball for practice. You don't snap your wrist when you throw it do you? Well then, don't do it when you throw your knife, otherwise you will never be consistent. Oh maybe you will get OK after awhile, but you will always take forever learning another knife or take longer to change distances. Bring the cutting edge down as if you were cutting a limb. If you release the knife any time after it has crossed the body it will spin in an oscillating manner; so even if it comes in point first, the side spin will more than likely twist it out of the target. This error is multiplied more so with longer throws. Remember release the knife as it starts to come in line, and let loose as if it were red hot; **DO NOT SNAP YOUR WRIST.**

**MAKING CORRECTIONS AFTER THE THROW:** If all has gone well, your knife is now stuck firmly in the target; but most of the time this is not the case. If the knife stuck at all, check the position of the handle. When the handle is pointing up, the knife developed too much of a spin, and would not have stuck at all had you been only a few inches back or had your hand just been a fraction lower on the handle. So move up 6" or so and throw the knife **EXACTLY** the same as before. You can't make changes in both distance and your normal throw (grip, speed, follow-through) and expect to get a feeling or automatic sense of distance. Make every throw at the same speed. You will have time later to learn about hard and fast throwing. When the handle is pointing down, the reverse is the case. The knife just barely completed its spin and there it is, already at the target. This happened because you were too close to the target or your hand was too far up on the handle. Slide your right foot back a few inches and throw again; and at the risk of repeating myself, make sure you throw it at the same speed. As I mentioned previously, in both cases you can make corrections by moving your hand up or down on the handle. Now assuming

you threw your first knife, with your thumb on the first rivet, and the knife stuck in the target, with the handle up, you could slow down the spin by either moving ahead or you could slide your thumb and hand up, lets say 1/2". The results will be: the knife will leave your hand with a slower spin and the handle will come down. Same thing applies with the under thrown knives, handle down. Slide your hand down the handle and you will speed up the spin; therefore bringing the handle up. This is the method you would use when hunting, as you will read later, **YOU SHOULD NEVER THROW YOUR ONLY KNIFE. SO**, if you make any stopping blow with the first knife and the second is needed, to take the game, your correction can be made without approaching it. This also applies for knives that hit the target and don't stick, keep your eyes at the impact point. If the blade is absolutely vertical with the handle up or down, instead of 6" back up or move ahead 1'. If it comes in backwards, move 2'.

**NEVERS TO THROWING YOUR KNIFE:** Now that you think you have got it down pat here is the rule of the combat knife thrower:

1. No fight has ever been stopped to retrieve a thrown knife that's missed its target. When it's gone it's gone!
2. Never throw your only knife: Except if someone is turning their gun on you to shoot you.
3. Never use a thrown knife as the key to an action: Patrol, rescue, i.e. Trying to takeout a sentry.

#### **WHEN TO THROW YOUR KNIFE**

1. To save a life: When yours or someone else's life depends on it.
2. For taking game: When others are also looking for food, or for you.
3. As a diversion: they never heard anything but, "something strange is going on here?"
4. Running away: Keep the chasers guessing, i.e. Rounding corners.
5. As a signal: Thrown at a mob or gang leader will show you mean business and back them off. Where your gun fire could alert more or draw attention.
6. As back off warning: Thrown at a mob or gang leader will show you mean business and back them off. Where your gun fire could alert more or draw attention.

**THROWING STARS AND OTHER THINGS TO THROW:** No class is complete until I hear someone ask, "What about throwing stars, spikes, or the Spring propelled knives (the copy of the Russian shooting knife)." Stars and spikes along with cheaply made knives have one use as far as I am concerned, besides to play with; that is, when thrown from a safe distance at someone i.e. flight of stairs, a window, they can be annoying obstacles to anyone who is chasing you. Just imagine a person tossing one at you ever time you rounded a corner. However, you should be aware the lethal capacity of the star is highly overrated. This goes for the other goodies such as the: Ninja throwing spikes, spiked lead shot, darts, etc. I suggest the longer the spikes, the better, also keep in mind that if you don't hit our target at least once they will be picking the stuff up and throwing it back at you or keep it for a fight later. So practice using the same style as you would with a dagger or ice pick, and use the cheapest stars, spikes and knives as possible. The spring propelled shooting knife has the hitting power of a full thrust what???? At a reasonable distance, 10' or so; with a threatening distance up to maybe 20'. But keep in mind it is a three part system, the spring handle, the blade cover, and the knife itself. After the knife is shot the other the other two parts are dead weight and without them the knife ain't much. When cocked it is like a loaded gun, with the safety pin pulled, a loaded gun with a hair trigger. Generally, the knife has only one

good purpose, that is to aim it and push the button, then watch your \$80.00 plus knife go and hope you have another to reload, and five minutes or longer to do it.

Some of the tips listed may be questioned, by some people because I did not describe the way they were taught by their Dad or some other teacher. I am not saying theirs is wrong or mine is right, as far as I know there is nothing etched in stone that says, "This is the way, period". In the years I've instructed throwing, I have thrown just about everything that can be thrown, and a few things that can not or should not. From this I found the best way to stop people from using or doing the things that don't work. My intent is to make your time learning as easy as possible and to clear up disillusionment you may feel the first time you realize that you won't be able to throw your knife as far and as fast and as deadly as the journalist or movie producers would like you to believe. But you will find the more realistic uses will be as much or more rewarding, and you find that you have just been hooked on an old tradition that's making a strong come back.

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