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Mike Slinkard of

Winner's Choice Custom Bowstrings

Innovative Solutions

MIKE SLINKARD

OF

WINNER'S CHOICE

CUSTOM BOWSTRINGS



INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

One of the surest ways to find success in the archery industry is to solve longstanding equipment problems.

For as long as compound bows have been around, observers have noted that the weakest link in the compound system is the bows' bowstring and cable arrangement.

Conventional bowstrings and cables stretched, servings separated, peeps over-rotated and durability always seemed an issue. In short, bowstrings and cables were an ongoing problem.

"That's pretty much how an associate and I assessed the situation when we founded Winner's Choice Custom Bowstrings Inc. in 2000," says Mike Slinkard.

"We'd both been involved in archery a long time, and we'd watched as the designs for risers, limbs and eccentrics had all gotten dramatically better, while bowstring making had remained much the same. It's as though bowstrings had fallen behind.

"What we also discovered - while researching better construction processes for bowstrings - was that by making improved bowstrings and cables for ourselves, we were able to shoot better. With better strings and cables, we were much more accurate day to day, our peep sights came back consistently and we replaced strings or cables much less often because the overall durability was much improved."

BY BILL AND SHERRY KRENZ WITH INTERVIEWS BY TRAVIS REGINEK



The Winner's Choice Custom Bowstrings in-house management staff includes (l to r) Production Manager Tracy Moss, Office and Customer Service Manager Max Maupin, President/CEO Mike Slinkard, R&D Manager Mark Brown, and Accounting and Human Resources Manager Sharrie Slinkard.



That revelation, however, didn't happen overnight. It took nearly a decade to take shape. In 1990, Mike Slinkard opened an archery shop in John Day.

"My father introduced me to shooting and hunting when I was just a toddler," says Mike. "I can hardly remember a time when I didn't shoot and hunt. By age 12, I was shooting competitively with both air rifles and bows. That year I won the state title with an air rifle and placed fourth in the air rifle nationals. But it was the bow that eventually became my real love.

"Like a lot of other rural Oregon kids in the 1980s, I went straight to work in the local sawmill right out of high school. The timber industry was going great back then and was providing lots of training and plenty of job opportunities. I worked days at the mill and hunted, fished and shot my bows in the evening and on the weekends.

"I also discovered that I enjoyed helping others with their archery problems. In fact, it eventually seemed that I was working on the bows of my friends a whole lot more than I was working on my own gear or shooting.

"So in 1990, I finally opened my own archery shop. I cleaned out my garage, remodeled it for retail and launched the business.

"In no time, I had quite the small business going. I kept my job at the saw mill and ran the shop part time. Archers came from all over, and I soon developed a strong reputation for expertise and friendly, personal assistance."

Mike is also quick to point out that what he learned as an archery dealer for nearly a decade helped him immensely later on when he and an associate started Winner's Choice.

"Owning and operating MS Archery proved to be a great experience," Mike says. "I learned how to deal

with people and how to make money. I discovered that customer service was job one. If you took care of the customers, sales and profits followed. In the process, I also learned how to listen to people in order to help them with their problems. And I discovered that I really enjoyed trying to find innovative solutions to those problems. By thinking outside the box, I could often find solutions no one had ever thought of before."

While doing all that, Mike discovered that a good number of his archery customers were willing to pay quite well for products or services that really helped them shoot better.

One of the problems that kept popping up over and over again was faulty bowstrings and cables. In Mike's mind, a solution to that problem seemed long overdue.

"One of the most common complaints was peep sights that came back inconsistently when the bow was drawn. That was a real annoyance to many archers, but we knew it as merely a symptom of a bigger problem with strings and cables.

"The real problem was string creep. String creep took place in two intervals. First was the initial elongation that took place when a new bow or a new string or cable was first shot. That initial creep often took hundreds of shots to stabilize. The second interval of creep was even more troublesome, as it was the more subtle elongation that continued for nearly the entire life of many strings and cables. String creep, in both scenarios, caused archers no end in tuning and accuracy problems.

"Fortunately, we knew one of the finest minds in archery and a pioneer in building better bowstrings and cables (as well as countless other archery innovations), and he resided right in our home state.

"Spot-Hogg's Steve Johnson had been building improved bowstrings for his own use for some time, and he proved happy to help us. Steve's the kind of guy who always seems eager to help other archers.



“He showed us a variety of techniques for making vastly improved bowstrings and cables, including how to twist and apply pressures to string materials. In fairly short order, the strings and cables we were building - as the result of Steve’s help - were a lot better than anything we could buy or get on a bow.

“The more we researched and experimented with different techniques and processes, the better our bowstrings got,” Mike says. “And it began to dawn on us that we had a very innovative solution to a longstanding archery problem.”

In 2000, Mike Slinkard and his associate drew up a partnership agreement and founded Winner’s Choice Custom Bowstrings.

About that same time, the mill where Mike had worked for 16 years did some restructuring based on a weakening timber industry, and he I lost his job.

“The good news was that I had a 401K, a pension plan and a profit-sharing plan at the mill,” Mike says. “I was able to fall back on those resources to cover my living expenses as we got Winner’s



“Every Winner’s Choice employee is key to our operation,” say Mike Slinkard, Front row (L to R) are Jennifer Cook, Tina Stearly, Sherri Dowdy, Marilyn Raymond and Debbie Bennett. Middle row: Karen Sullivan, Ginger Gentis, Janet Kimesday, Perle Langenfeld, Loretta Jewell, Susan Goetsch, Mike Slinkard, Sharrie Slinkard, Eileen Roberts, Tracy Moss, Alesa Molyneux, Devin Burril, Les Gutfu and Lisa Pereira. Back row: Mark Brown, Max Maupin and Colby Farrell. Not shown are Bruce Brown and Mark Henderson.



ABOVE: Mike Slinkard has been shooting and hunting with a bow almost all of his life. Mike took this 6x6 bull elk during an Oregon archery elk season.



LEFT: Mike called in this 6x6 bull elk for his dad and mentor Bob Slinkard (R) just the year before. Accompanying Mike and Bob on that elk hunt was hunting buddy and Winner's Choice Production Foreman Tracy Moss (L).

Choice up and running.

“The first thing we did was approach our local banker. We worked with the Old West Federal Credit Union in John Day, and you can imagine the look on their face when we explained that we were forming a company to build bowstrings. Fortunately, they proved a forward-thinking organization and loaned us \$9,500 to use as start-up capital for our enterprise.”

With that money, the two partners built their innovative bowstring-making machines and installed them in Mike's garage.

“As luck would have it, I had purchased a new house just before the mill restructured, which is often how those things go,” says Mike. “That house, however, did have a two-car garage, and it proved just barely large enough for all of our new machinery.”

Along with getting the production equipment ready, Mike took business and marketing courses at Eastern Oregon University through an online program, and also began to research the intricacies of synthetic fiber, specifically the high modulus polyethylene extruded fiber used in bowstring materials. Synthetic fiber research continues to be a passion of Mike's.

“Those were some of the longest work days of my life,” says Mike. “But they were worth every minute.”

At the same time, based on the advice of a trusted archery dealer friend, the partners were gearing up to exhibit at the annual ATA Trade Show in Indianapolis, Ind.

To save money, Mike and his partner drove all the way from Oregon to Indianapolis, loaded down with



a makeshift booth, product and their literature.

“The very next weekend, a national indoor tournament was being held in nearby Louisville, and we had planned to stay over and man a booth at that event as well,” Mike says.

“At that tournament a very fortunate thing happened to us. The leader in the open division after the first day had a problem with his buss cable and he came to us for a fix. His feeling was that his tournament was over because he’d never be able to get his bow shooting properly with a brand new cable. We installed a new Winner’s Choice cable and bowstring on his bow and he surprised everyone, including himself, by going on to win the tournament. Quite suddenly, we had scores of top archers standing in front of our booth asking who we were and how they could get our strings and cables. The whole affair was a huge break for us.”

A couple of weeks later, they attended a buying show in Reno for the National Archery Buyers Association, an archery buying group Mike had belonged to when he had been a dealer. The reception was warm and a modest number of orders were written.

“But the biggest thing that happened to us at that show was the meeting we had with Dee Wilde. Dee was an Idaho dealer and also one of the top competitive archers in the world. Someone had given Dee one of our bowstrings to try and he sought us out.”

“Do you have a pro staff?” Dee wanted to know. “I’d like to shoot your strings.”

“We were a bit stunned and thoroughly delighted,” says Mike. “Here was one of the most accomplished and successful archers in the world asking about our strings and our pro staff. Of course we didn’t have much of a pro staff - just a few accomplished friends who were testing strings and cables for us. But we formed an official Winner’s Choice Pro Staff right

there on the spot.

“We formulated a company philosophy that said that we would never approach shooters to shoot for us. Instead, shooters had to come to us because they sincerely wanted to shoot our products. To this day, we have never approached a shooter. Top archers like Dee Wilde, Dave Cousins and Randy Ulmer have all approached us.”

To get through that first, slow startup year, the partners at Winner’s Choice had to get very creative.

“Demand for our strings and cables was steadily increasing,” says Mike. “But there wasn’t a lot of money coming in. I didn’t take a wage from the company at all that first year, living instead off my 401K and slight pension from the saw mill.

“Even so, we soon found that the two of us could barely build our strings and cables fast enough. We needed a few good employees, but weren’t sure how we could pay them. That’s when I began working with the Grant County Training and Employment Consortium, a local economic development group who had also helped me when I first wrote our business plan. Together, we came up with an innovative solution to the problem of employees.

“With the decline in the timber industry, much of our area was economically depressed. Our economic development group helped us apply for funding for displaced timber workers. In addition, our first two employees were deaf, and that further qualified us for wage compensation funds. In total, we were able to qualify for almost 100 percent wage reimbursement during our first year.”

With new employees, Winner’s Choice moved out of Mike’s garage and into a 2,500 square-foot building on Main Street. But by late summer of that year, Winner’s Choice faced yet another problem. Even with additional employees, demand was again out-



stripping the company's production capabilities.

"The problem," Mike remembers, "was that our unique stringmaking machinery was proving too slow. We were capable of building the best bowstrings and cables available at the time. We just couldn't build them fast enough.

"Fortunately, I knew a manufacturing engineer who could help us. John Keseley had been my very first boss at the saw mill. He was an exceptional equipment designer and had improved many of the processes at the mill while I had worked there.

"When I approached him about our dilemma, he proved eager to help. John is one of those talented guys who can look at a process and come back with specific design improvements in a fairly short period of time. He came in, learned how we did things and why and then completely re-engineered our operation for us. He designed and built three new machines for us. It was like flipping a switch in our operation. Those new machines enabled us to breeze through our unique pre-stretching process, greatly improve our products and dramatically increase our volume."

With those manufacturing improvements, Winner's Choice Custom Bowstrings leaped onto the archery scene. Suddenly, discriminating archers everywhere

were clamoring for Winner's Choice bowstrings and cables, and even bow manufacturers were placing orders.

Since that time, Winner's Choice has continued to grow. This year marks the company's second anniversary in a 7,500 squarefoot building it constructed at the industrial park. Winner's Choice purchased the first plot of land in the park. The company is expanding to a third lot for more parking and to lease a building to Motion Targets

The Winner's Choice facility houses 22 employees and includes offices and state-of-the-art manufacturing, along with a 45-yard indoor testing range, a 100-yard outdoor shooting range and a specialized practice range for the ESPN Great Outdoor Games, a made-for-television archery competition that Mike has participated in for the past four seasons.

"Every Winner's Choice employee is key to our operation," says Mike. "It takes a lot of hands, eyes and minds to make our products."

Winner's Choice custom bowstrings and cables are available almost everywhere. Consumers crave them, distributors carry them, and savvy dealers stock them and special order them as needed.





Late in 2005, Mike bought out his long-time partner. It was not an easy process.

“As Winner’s Choice grew, the functional nature of our partnership eroded, which became a very trying situation. Last October, we finally reached a mediated buyout agreement and I became the sole owner.”

“For 2006, we’ll introduce a number of revolutionary new bowstring products,” Mike says. “We’ve been working very hard on a new development we call the Proprietary Interlocking Molecular Manufacturing Process, or PIMMP. While we pioneered the concept of pre-stretching bowstring materials before assembly, almost every bowstring manufacturer now claims to have some sort of pre-stretching process for their bowstrings. PIMMP is centered on a revolutionary new technique for pre-stretching materials at the strand level by attaining improved molecular alignment in the fiber.

“We’ve also got a new cable slide called the Weather Tamer that is designed to offer exceptional performance in any weather condition while being easy on strings and cables. In addition, we have refined our patented Torque Reduction Cable System.

Winner’s Choice Custom Bowstrings have been working long and hard to strengthen the weakest link in the compound bow system. Their efforts have enabled discerning archers to shoot better.

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Winner’s Choice Custom Bowstrings and Cables enjoy an enviable reputation for exceptional quality, consistency and durability. Quality control stations double check every Winner’s Choice product against a rigid set of manufactures standards. Inconsistent peep sight rotation is symptomatic of lesser-quality bowstrings. Winner’s Choice guarantees proper and consistent peep alignment with its high quality strings.



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