

# Traditional Shooting

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## The Question of Bow Weight

By G. Fred Asbell

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I've been asked "What's the right bow weight?" at least a quarter of a million times over the years, and I don't know that I've done a very good job of answering the question. That's partially because what's being asked isn't very clear cut. The right bow weight for what? For just shooting? For accuracy? For penetration? For comfort?

My first bow had a draw weight of around thirty-four pounds. I'll add "I think," because the bow had a pretty rough life before I owned it and had been originally sold as a second. You could still see a "3," but it wasn't clear what the other number was. I always said it was thirty-four pounds just to get past the topic. The upper limb was twisted pretty badly, and it was beginning to throw the string by the time I bought a forty-six-pound Bear Kodiak. I had just joined the

local archery club, and everyone there seemed appalled that I'd bought such a heavy bow. I remember the club president saying, "What are you going to shoot with that thing...an elephant?"

Everyone was shooting forty or forty-two pounds in those days, even though most bow manufacturers continually talked of shooting bows of lighter weight which could be drawn and shot with comfort. Then bow weights began creeping upward as the popularity of bowhunting increased. The influence of Fred Bear and Howard Hill led the way to

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***No matter your strength or experience, dropping down in bow weight will make trying something new, be it a bow, or a technique, much easier to learn, and to learn correctly.***

the use of heavier bows. Both were very successful bowhunters, both were known to shoot heavy bows, and both had a corner on the “hero” market between the early 1950s and the late 1970s. Bear was known for preferring a sixty-five-pound recurve, and Hill shot seventy-five-pound bows or heavier on a regular basis. I would guess that the two of them influenced bow weight choices more than all other factors combined. The weight of the average hunting bows followed their lead, moving ever upward.

About that time the compound appeared, which allowed the average archer to shoot heavier bows based on the compound’s let-off design. Then the archery industry fixated on kinetic energy, brought forth from the firearm side, and somehow decided it should be used as the true indicator of the proper bow for bowhunting. I was never clear about the “whys and wherefores” of that campaign, but it put way too many super heavy bows—compound and traditional—in bowhunters’ hands. Not many of us realized it at the time, but the heavy bow/kinetic energy medicine show was particularly destructive to traditional archery.

Having said all of that about bow weight concepts and how they’ve come to be; in my mind, it’s time to take another look from a different angle. I’ll ignore the compound and deal strictly with traditional equipment.

Hunters ask about bow weight because there are a lot of unknowns involving bow weight, shooting ability, and dead deer. Bow weight as it relates to arrow penetration is probably the biggest concern and adding kinetic energy to the mix muddied that up far too much. You’ll hear stories of animals taken with what sounds like ultralight bows, and stories that might never have ended successfully with anything less than sixty-five pounds of draw weight. Penetration is the real question behind all of this concern. Is my forty-five-pound bow going to work on deer? On bears? How about elk?

A broadhead arrow must penetrate “X” amount, depending on the hit location, to put an animal on the ground. The broadside lung shot has always been recommended and I’m going to stick with that as the right choice. You’ll hear all sorts of arguments about bow weights, higher and lower. There are a lot of variables to be considered when looking at penetration, but in the end, we see that there’s no exact pass or fail bow weight. An arrow from a 100-pound bow in the wrong place won’t work, and an arrow from a thirty-five-pound bow in the right place can be deadly, which brings me to the point I want to make. *Accuracy is the key issue, and the bow weight that allows you to shoot accurately is the best whether it’s sixty-pounds or thirty.*

If you can’t shoot a given bow accurately, you shouldn’t

hunt with it. Of course, a lot of factors come into play—cold weather, out-of-position shots, mental and physical distractions that throw shoulders, arms, and wrists out of position are all considerations. Cold weather and heavy bows make a bad combination that has stolen animals from me more times than I want to recall. Standing on a tree limb for hours in cold weather can be a real problem for most of us with a bow that’s a bit too heavy.

The correct bow weight is simply what you can draw and shoot accurately, and it’s really no more complicated than that. If you really want to drop down in bow weight, I’d suggest something under a maximum of fifty pounds to begin with and giving consideration to something closer to fifty. You should be able to come to full draw and hold it there for several seconds. If that seems difficult, drop down a couple of pounds.

Talk to a few bowyers and get an idea what they’re building and selling, and what they were building over the last few years. The answers may surprise you. My conversations with a couple of the major traditional manufacturers indicate a drop in average bow weight of twenty to thirty pounds recently.

After over fifty years of shooting traditional equipment—which includes some competition, lots of bowhunting, and several books both written and read—and having taught instinctive shooting for over forty years, I have concluded that a reduction in bow weight will do more to improve just about everyone’s shooting than will all other possibilities combined, including making a major shooting or aiming style change. There isn’t an exact formula for bow weight reduction. Just about any shooter can drop a few pounds of bow weight and have their shooting improve. Maybe you should try it.

Ken Beck, of Black Widow Bows, and I began teaching instinctive shooting classes almost twenty years ago, when a



majority of the students were shooting bows sixty pounds and over. Some of our students never got past wrestling with bow weight, and I suspect they eventually went back to their compounds. That changed when we built a set of ultralight take-down limbs (seven pounds) to use specifically for a beginners' class for single parents and their young children, none of whom had ever shot a bow. Over the years, I'd run into the same problem continually. It was virtually impossible to teach anyone anything about shooting if they couldn't even pull the bow.

Don't ask me why it took so long to come to that conclusion, because what had been missing instantly became obvious the first time I put the ultralight bow into someone's hands. The lightweight limbs worked wonderfully for the children, and for anyone else struggling with getting to full draw or wondering what it should feel like. I could see the students' immediate understanding of the difference between a 26" and a 28" draw. It wasn't long before I began using the light limbs in all my classes, where they worked perfectly for all students whether they'd been shooting for twenty years or two days.

Getting a student to feel around on their face for a good, solid anchor had been very difficult when it was all they could do to get the bow close to full draw. It was hard to get a student to change his draw or anchor if he'd been doing it the same way for years. The lighter weight bow puts the shooter in charge, and in fairly short order he becomes able to draw, anchor, aim, and release as he chooses.

For years I had been trying unsuccessfully to convey the feeling of using the back muscles and pulling with the elbow, getting away from utilizing the arms totally as so many shooters do. With the seven-pound limbs, the shooter could

tinker with how it should feel, and I could move their hand, fingers, arms, and elbows when they were at full-draw to get them where I wanted them to be. It was as if a light bulb flashed on when they could get the feel and see the result of the change.

If I can put a bow in your hands that you can pull and handle easily, and if you will do as I tell you, I can have most shooters hitting a door knob sized target consistently within twenty or thirty minutes. It's not my teaching. It's the simplicity of the instinctive shooting process coupled with a bow that can be drawn and shot easily.

After a recent class, Ken Beck and I were commenting on how much better today's traditional bow shooters were than those we encountered in those first classes. The people in the class we had just finished were for the most part all shooting bows 50 pounds and under. Suddenly after all those years and classes, the big truth flashed right before our eyes. Way too many shooters had been fighting bow weight. Our early students were usually all shooting bows over sixty pounds, some much higher. Most of them were struggling. Some got better, but there was nothing like the improvements we saw in the class we'd just completed.

There could be some ego involved in dropping bow weight for some traditional shooters, but I now see traditional archers taking a second look at bow weight. Overall, traditional bow weight is coming down everywhere, in clubs, organizations, and as individuals. It's a good thing. Shooting a bow accurately is a delightful experience. It's lots more fun, and I see traditional organizations growing because of it. I ascribe a lot of that to the reduction of bow weight across the board. Give it some serious thought. I think you'll like the results.

*G. Fred Asbell serves as one of the magazine's Shooting Editors. He lives in Michigan with his wife, Teresa.*



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