

KICK IT

What's the basis for a solid bow hand? Well, according to John Dudley, it's your feet – and here's why...

Lots of people have been asking me about stability in the bow hand recently – and, commonly, the question is: “How do I make myself more consistently steady?” My reply usually comes as quite a surprise, as it's not that hand, or even bowarm, you need to look at. In fact, it's the feet.

People usually relate steadiness in the bow to the stabilizers or handle shape, and there's no question that these things do have an effect on stability – but when it comes to consistency, and making sure you've got a solid shot, time after time, then it's your stance that matters most.

A consistent bow hand requires consistent feet position; the two are inherently connected – and having strict focus on a repeatable stance will bring you both consistency in your hold and at the target.

Choose your stance

The three types of archery stances are the open stance, closed

stance and the neutral stance. Each of them is slightly different and each is effective if repeated consistently, all the time. However, each stance has its positives and negatives depending on your shooting style – and some are more forgiving than others.

All three are determined by the position of the front foot in the relation to the back:

The **open** stance has the front foot behind the rear; this opens the torso and pelvis towards the target – to a lesser or greater degree

depending

on how

far back

the

front

foot's

positioned.

I have seen

open stances

where the

front foot

literally points towards the target – though usually archers aren't as extreme as that.

The **closed** stance is when the front foot is further forward than the rear. This, of course, closes off the torso to the target. Hitting your arm with the bowstring is more common to closed-stance archers since the front arm and front shoulder are closer to the string. Many times you can eliminate the need for an arm guard simply by making sure you aren't closed off in your stance – and if you hit your arm only sometimes, it's often an indication you aren't consistent in your foot placement.

The **neutral** stance is bang in the middle – the toes in line with one another and perpendicular to the target. This stance has many advantages and can be slightly tweaked to even better suit your style of shooting. In a neutral stance you will have good string clearance as well as good positioning for movement in the back muscle contraction.



Fine tuning

Many years ago I learned a technique from Larry Wise that helped me find the perfect foot position for my body and flexibility level. Take a neutral stance, shooting at 18 metres, and draw back and take aim. Then close your eyes for about 10 seconds. When you open your eyes again your pin may not be sitting on the gold anymore.

You'll find your body has naturally drifted your aim, without you forcing it into the middle. In most cases, your pin will be below the spot – but that's simply due to gravity, so don't worry about that. It's the left and right you're focusing on.

Assuming you shoot right handed – just flip these around if you're a leftie – if your pin's to the right of the target, then you need to open up your stance, and you need to close it if it's to the left.

It's best to do the test several times, to find the perfect, natural stance position – that'll naturally hold your bow's pin near the centre of the target, so you don't have to fight your body to keep it there. When you've found the place your body wants to sit naturally, mark your feet position – and be sure to keep your feet on those little marks.

Cause and effect

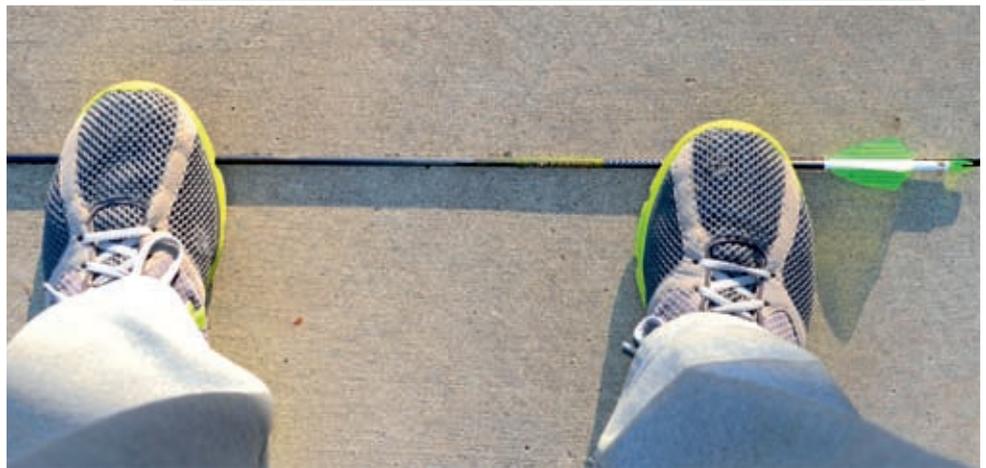
What many shooters don't realise is that each of these stances has an immediate effect on your upper body including the front shoulder position. This is vitally important because a variance in your feet will quickly bring a variance in your front shoulder position. Shoulder position is vital to quality shots using back tension.

For any of you who shoot a clicker on a recurve bow you will know that back tension and scapula rotation are sometimes frustrating. Having a consistent front shoulder will make using a clicker much easier, I can promise that. I teach a simple shot routine: Stance, grip, shoulder, anchor and peep (or reference, for recurves) – as these lay the framework for a perfect shot. If any of these steps are missed or inconsistent then an arrow will most likely go astray – so make sure the first one's right!

If the front shoulder is inconsistent then the steadiness of the bow hand and the ease of pull in the rear rhomboid are affected. Take a quick look at the illustration to see how the stance affects the front shoulder. When we look at the open stance you will notice that when the torso is opened up the front shoulder has a prominent angle in relation to the front hand and rear elbow. This angle will make aiming a little more solid but will make pulling more difficult. An open stance is a difficult stance for pulling with back tension because with the angles there is just not as



Above: An open stance has the front foot sitting behind the rear, which opens your torso up to the target. This does allow for the front shoulder to sit low and forward in the shoulder and makes for a relatively sturdy front unit. However, an open stance will limit the amount of back tension that's achievable



Above: A closed stance has the front foot (the one to the left – as John is a right-handed archer) slightly in front of the back. (The arrow is at right angles to the shooting line.) This might cause your bowstring to hit your arm, and doesn't allow your front shoulder to sit rearward into your back



Above: A neutral stance has the toes running along a line at right angles to the target, and offers the best compromise at all levels. It's fairly sturdy, gives reasonable back tension and front shoulder capabilities – but it should be tweaked to best suit your style of shooting. With all feet positionings, remember to keep your base a shoulder width apart



Left: When shooting with a closed stance, across your body, you lose some front shoulder stability – which can cause it to raise

much muscular leverage and the front scapula is pushed back hard against the spine.

Back tension pull will always be easily completed when you have less of an angle like in the neutral stance. When looking at the neutral stance, notice that the angle is much less and the line between the front arm and rear elbow are much straighter. This is the best position if you are a dynamic puller – so a recurve shooter with a clicker, or a compounder with a back tension release.

In the neutral stance the front shoulder can go down and forward – and can be held there with the front lat muscle. Since the front shoulder is forward the rear scapula will have plenty of unrestricted range of pull. Back tension movement will be easier and more consistent.

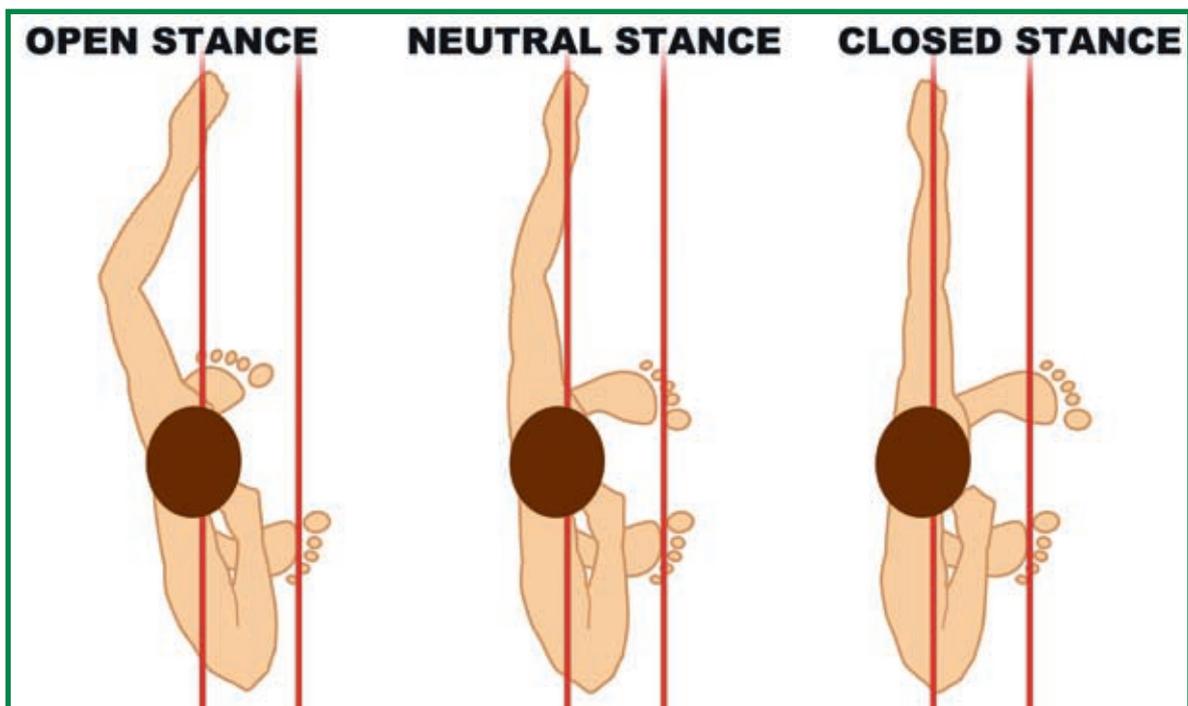
When reviewing the closed stance you notice the front shoulder will be forward of the rear shoulder. This will cause you to shoot across your body – which, as I mentioned earlier – results in hitting your front arm with the string. Also, when you are shooting across your body like this you lose most of your strength in keeping the front shoulder down. You will no longer have the complete range of motion of the front muscles and the front shoulder will commonly collapse up against the neck. (A mistake I've made in the past!) The front shoulder collapse is a very common problem for both compound and recurve shooters. Many archers wonder why some shots feel so much different from one arrow to the next, and many times it is because they go from one stance style to the next without

even noticing – as a little movement at the feet can have a great effect through the rest of the body.

Right width

As a rule of thumb, your stance should be at least a shoulder width apart. Think of it like a building structure or even a bottle to water. They are at least as wide on the bottom as they are on the top. This keeps them solid and prevents them from tipping over when placed on a surface. I mean, flip a water bottle over and see how stable it is! Why are you any different? Especially in windy conditions! Keep your feet under your shoulders for the best stability. Any wider, and you're putting undue stress on your legs, which will also damage your stability.

Right: The way you position your feet has an impact on how much back tension you can achieve, and how your front shoulder sits





The toe ball positioning of the feet is a stable base from which to start, for most archers – it's a slightly-opened neutral stance

Toe ball position

I've done countless stance tests – and I always start them in a position I call the 'toe ball'. In this stance, the front foot's toes are lined up with the ball of the rear foot. It's basically a very-slightly-opened neutral stance.

It's a stance in which most people can usually keep the pin close to the middle during the blind aiming test – and it also allows good front shoulder movement. A good starting point.

Draw a line perpendicular to the target, on the line, when you're testing these out for yourself – as not only will it help you get it right, but it'll get you in the habit of carefully checking your feet positions when you get on the line.

Kicks

The type of footwear you shoot in is surprisingly important, and pretty much everyone overlooks it. Remember: Your feet send a huge number of signals to your brain, and if your entire foot feels stable on the ground, those signals will be positive – and you'll find your stance more comfortable.

I prefer shoes that have a wide base, with a flat bottom – as they keep my entire foot solid to the ground... and you get none of that rocking motion you get with canoe-type footwear. Curves at the front and back, or sides, or are narrow anyway just don't have the base for a successful aiming period: You'll just wobble!

Many European-style designer shoes are rubbish for archery; they might look cool on a Friday night – but they will make you shoot poorly at an archery event. I remember seeing a guy shooting in weird motorcycle boots once; about an hour into the tournament I overheard him saying "today just isn't my day, my bow's dancing all over the place". Nothing to do with the oversized canoes he was wearing? No, of course not... I felt like screaming: "Get some proper kicks!"

Most people overlook the smallest of things that make a difference each and every shot. Your feet are no exception. Although we subconsciously walk and stand on them most of our lives, that doesn't mean we are consciously thinking about being consistent.

When it comes to shooting sports your foundation determines your stability. Make sure your stance position and the width of your stance are consistent each and every shot. You will eliminate issues like unsteadiness, slapping your arm and having your front shoulder collapse. Every good shot starts with your feet – and when you place them in the right spot you are laying the foundation for perfect execution. Best of luck to you!

John Dudley

www.dudleyarchery.info