

How to Make an SCA Unpadded Pole Arm

Here is how I make a pole arm. More specifically, this is how Master Tiernan Mac Alpin and Sir Brien MacShane taught me to make a pole arm. The majority of the photos are of pole arms they made.

Pole arm is a general term for a rattan SCA weapon meant to represent some sort of cutting blade mounted on a long haft. Depending on your preference and persona this could be a hewing spear, a glaive, a naginata, or some other sort of weapon.

You can pad your pole arm, and can add pieces meant to replicate the shape and silhouette of actual weapons, such as halberds. Several vendors sell semi-rigid foam for this purpose, or you can use split rattan. These directions are specifically about making an unpadded pole arm with a thrusting tip and a butt spike as allowed in the East Kingdom, however. Apart from thrusting tips the entire weapon is just a piece of rattan and some tape.

Be sure to read the *East Kingdom Marshals Handbook* section on two-handed weapons for additional rules for any two-handed weapon, which includes pole arms. Also recognize that rules for pole arms vary from kingdom to kingdom and these directions are specifically for an unpadded pole arm as allowed in the East Kingdom.

Step 1 – Select some Rattan: Your piece of rattan must be at least 1 ¼' in diameter and no longer than 7 ½" long. You need to account for the extra length any thrusting tips you use will add to the overall length. You can add tape to increase the diameter, but multiple layers of tape begin to act like padding and can detract from the power of your blows. Diameter and length is largely a matter of personal preference. Some fighters prefer thinner sticks as they are more "whippy" while others prefer thicker "war sticks." Depending on your size and fighting style you may prefer a longer or shorter pole arm. Most pole arms are between 6' and 7 ½' long.

Look at the cut ends at each end of the rattan. The more porous end is softer, meaning it will "broom" faster. "Brooming" is the term for when the fibers in a stick of rattan separate, resembling the brush head of a broom. All things considered the denser end is better as the striking surface.

Step 2 – Shape the Rattan: It is important to know the orientation of your rattan relative to your striking surface(s) so you will not hit with the flat side of the blade. As shown later, the striking edge(s) are marked with contrasting tape. The best way to do this is to shave your rattan along the sides so you can feel the orientation in your hands. You will be shaving along the sides of the shaft that line up with the flat of your striking surface. A drawknife works best,

but you can also use a wood file if a draw knife is not available. Take off a little at a time, equally on both sides, and check often to ensure you do not thin the handle to less than 1 ¼". Understand that no part of the pole arm can be less than 1 ¼" even though you'll typically be hitting with only the blade or the butt spike. Some fighters use the shaft of the weapon to push others away and if you managed to wedge it inside the grill of someone's helmet and twist it would be catastrophic to their neck.

Sir Brien further modifies the shaft of his pole arm so it is a bit narrower at the butt spike because he finds this gives him a better grip. Master Tiernan sometimes shapes the cutting head of his pole arm to look more like a blade. In each case they make sure to not violate the 1 ¼" rule.

Shaving and shaping the shaft of the weapon allows you to feel its orientation in your hand, as explained above. It provides a natural stopping point for your hands as you slide them up and down the shaft to perform your cuts and thrusts, as the unshaven parts are thicker and more round. This prevents you from mistakenly grasping the weapon by the blade. It also prevents you from sliding your gauntleted hand down over the butt spike which could result in you accidentally hammer fisting someone with your gauntlet rather than hitting them with your butt spike.



Shaved Shaft



Shaved Narrower at Bottom

Step 3 – Make the Blade: You are making an unpadded pole arm, meaning the striking surface is just rattan covered in tape. You can reinforce the striking surfaces (the sides representing the blades) with strapping tape or with a piece of nylon trapping if you want. Either works to preserve the rattan longer and reduce brooming. A strip of strapping tape holds itself in place. If you elect to use a strip of nylon webbing, have it run the length of the blade along one side, up over the top (head) of the pole, and down the other side. Use a minimal amount of tape to hold it in place. Excessive tape adds weight and can start to act as padding. Next, run a strip of duct tape up either side of the blade, along the flat sides (the non-cutting sides). You will have strips along each cutting edge after, uncovered by duct tape. Now run a tape of a contrasting color

along the cutting edges of the blade. Your blade is now entirely covered by a combination of your primary color duct tape (silver is a good choice) and your contrasting color to mark the blade (black is a good color).

The *East Kingdom Marshals Handbook* does not specify how long the blade can be, because the rules for two-handed weapons (other than spears) is meant to cover a wide array of weapons including pole arms, Dane axes, and great swords. Technically the difference between an SCA pole arm and an SCA great sword is the blade-to-handle ratio and the addition of a cross guard. For a pole arm the blade should be somewhere around 20" long more or less, and should constitute a minority of the overall length of the weapon.

If you want a thrusting tip you can use a piece of semi-rigid foam or pre-made rubber tips made specifically as thrusting tips. If you use a foam tip, cover the top of it with one piece of your primary color duct tape. Next, wrap strapping tape around the sides of it and the top of your pole arm blade to hold the foam in place. Finally, mark the thrusting tip with a third color of contrasting tape (red is a good choice), forming a cross or X shape on the tip with two pieces of this tape. If you use a pre-made rubber thrusting tip check the directions. Some (including the style I prefer to use) require you to add some small foam discs to the inside before mounting the tip. I do so and then mount the thrusting tip by taping it in place with strapping tape the same way I would for a foam tip with one exception, do not tape over the thrusting surface itself. Marshals require rubber tips be uncovered by tape. Check the *East Kingdom Marshals Handbook* for more information on thrusting tips.



Un-shaped Blade



Shaped Blade

Step 4 – Make the Butt Spike: Many historical pole arms had butt spikes, which are literally spikes mounted to the bottom of the shaft. They helped hold the weapon in place if you braced it against the ground and also protected the wooden shaft from dirt and moisture. Accordingly, they were usually made of a non-ferrous metal to avoid rust. They also provided a convenient spike to stab people with. Follow the same methods as explained above for making the thrusting tip to make a butt spike. Note that you cannot make a slashing butt spike, just one to

stab (thrust) with. SCA rules do not allow for double-bladed pole arms. Check the *East Kingdom Marshals Handbook* for more information on thrusting tips.



Foam Tip



Rubber Tip

Step 5 – Tape the Handle (Optional): Sir Brien prefers to not tape any portion of the shaft because he finds the added friction makes some of his rapid hand changes too slow when quickly adjusting how he holds the weapon. Master Tiernan prefers to have the bottom portion of the haft taped for a better grip. He uses grip tape (example: hockey tape) and sometimes even wraps a piece of 550 cord around the shaft first, before adding the grip tape, for more texture. Both are members of the Order of Chivalry and both are quite good with a pole arm. I recommend you consider how you prefer to fight with a pole arm and experiment a bit to see which technique suits you best.



Un-taped Shaft



Taped Shaft



Taped with Cord Underneath

Step 6 – Finishing Touches (Optional): I sometimes add small strips of gold colored duct tape to replicate non-ferrous metal at the base of the blade and by the butt spike. It is entirely cosmetic. Some people find the center balance point of the shaft and mark it with one wrap of tape so they can quickly find it if they find themselves fighting one-handed. These extra touches are entirely up to you. Just remember not to add too much as it only increases weight.

I hope you find these directions helpful. As I was not making a pole arm while writing this document I did not have any “in-progress” photos available to include. Please refer to my directions for making a sword for details on taping the blade, shaping the handle, and other concepts not fully illustrated here. The concepts are identical for each weapon.

Have fun!

- Vindiorix “Black Finn” Ordovix (MKA Justin Davis)