



JOURNEY OF A MASTERSMITH

J. NEILSON TALKS ABOUT HIS ROAD TO RECOVERY, IMPRESSIVE ACCOLADES AND RETURN TO "FORGED IN FIRE"

STORY BY JOSHUA SWANAGON
PHOTOS PROVIDED BY J. NEILSON AND HISTORY

The master has entered the forge. Although J. Neilson likes his solitude and the peace and quiet of his "shop in the woods," he has made more than just a splash on the international stage. Being one of the select few to bear the title of Mastersmith with the ABS (American Bladesmith Society), J. has been turning heads with his refined style of knives—of which every detail of the knife-making process is done in-house—for some time. Add to that his keen eye judging the knife-making process of "Forged in Fire" on the History Channel, along with including some coaching during the process on this year's season, and it is not difficult to see why he is a sought after Mastersmith.

I got to speak with J. about his Mastersmith journey, his time on "Forged in Fire" and his recent injury that has kept him away from the show for a bit.

Craft Mastery

KI: It must be quite the honor to be one of only 115 people in the world to hold the Mastersmith title with the ABS. Was this a goal you set out to achieve from the beginning, or did it happen organically?
JN: I actually didn't start making knives with any goals in mind, but once I realized there was a possibility of making a living with the craft, it definitely became a priority to become Mastersmith for both personal and financial reasons.

KI: What part of the all-around process did you feel was the most challenging while working towards that title?
JN: One of the hardest things for me was not getting overly focused on certain things. I'd start working on my test knives, especially as Journeyman, and totally stress myself out over every little detail. Now I know that you actually do better work when you relax and enjoy yourself than you do when you are freaking out.

KI: Was there any point that you thought you might not achieve your goal or thought of throwing in the towel?
JN: Not really, I just kept trying until I got there. I just feel very fortunate that I was able to pass both my tests the first time around.

KI: If someone were interested in pursuing that title, what advice would you have for them?
JN: I'd suggest talking to as many other Mastersmiths as possible about the process and get as much information and advice from them as you can.

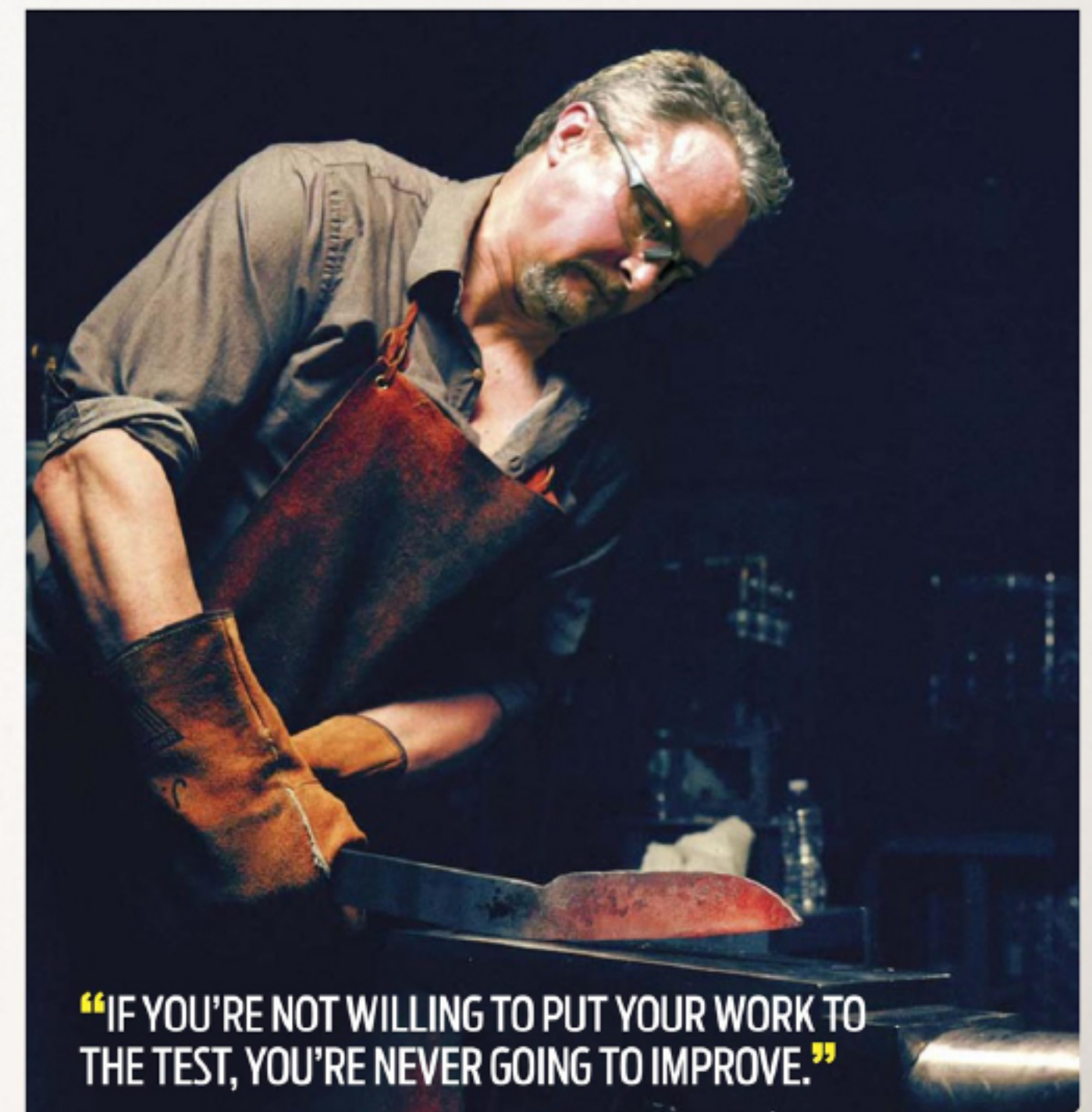
KI: Although you are acknowledged as being one of the best all-around bladesmiths in the world, is there a specific element or feature in your work that you feel tipped the scales in your favor?
JN: I would have to say it's my willingness to test and abuse my

knives the same way I do on the show. The various strength and sharpness tests are things I've been doing in my shop for years. This has helped me improve my designs, heat treat and grinds. If you're not willing to put your work to the test, you're never going to improve.

KI: Is there any specific element of the blade-making process you still feel you would like to perfect a little more?
JN: There's always room for improvement in many areas of blade making. That's one of the things I love about our craft, there's always room to improve and always new things to try. Specifically, though, there are a few Damascus patterns that I've done that I'd like to improve on a bit more.

"Forged in Fire"
KI: How did you get involved with "Forged in Fire"?
JN: I actually just got a phone call out of the blue one day from

Photo credit: HISTORY
OPPOSITE: Photo credit: HISTORY



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“I’VE TAUGHT PEOPLE THAT NEVER PICKED UP A HAMMER BEFORE, AS WELL AS THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN FORGING FOR SEVERAL YEARS.”

someone at the History Channel telling me about the show and asking if I was interested in being a judge. My initial reaction was “Ha ha, very funny. Now who is this really?” It probably took a good 10 minutes to convince me that it was a legitimate phone call. [laughs]

KI: Is it hard putting aside strict attention to detail and remembering that the knives are made in only three hours, when judging on the show?
JN: Yes, it is sometimes. There are certain little things or details that you want the smiths to get to, but they just don’t have the time, and it becomes easier to let go of that as the clock counts down to zero.

KI: What are key elements that you look for when judging a blade on the show?

Photo credit: HISTORY

JN: There are a lot of different things, but the first thing I look for is structural integrity of both the blade and the handle. I keep an eye out for any kind of cracks, gaps, misalignments and things like that. Plus, you have to remember, if this knife is going to fail, it’s probably going to happen in my hands and in a spectacular way.

KI: Have there been any blades that you absolutely thought should make it through, but were outvoted?
JN: Not that I can remember. Myself and the other judges don’t always agree 100%, but if there is a difference of opinion, we always sit down and go through everything thoroughly, point by point, to make sure we come to the right decision.

KI: It seems that each judge

looks at something different when judging a blade, what do you look at/for specifically?

JN: Basically the same things I would look for if somebody was going to give me one of their knives to critique, if they were pursuing a Journeyman or Mastersmith title: possible structural integrity issues, warps or twists, gapping, alignment, overall design, etc.

KI: What has been your greatest challenge being a part of “Forged in Fire”?

JN: The greatest challenge is not being in my own shop making knives. The first couple of seasons were quite a balancing act; trying to do the show, filling my orders and keeping my customers happy, as well as spending time with my family to keep them happy. It can be pretty tough

sometimes, but the people who run the show have been very flexible, and my customers have been very understanding and supportive.

KI: What is your best story/memory working on “Forged in Fire”?

JN: My actual best memory of working on the show was the very first pilot we shot in Seattle. I had never met any of the people I was going to be working with and wasn’t exactly sure how this whole thing was going to work out without somebody getting hurt. I was also wondering what the heck I was supposed to talk about with these other two guys for three hours solid. Funny thing was, as soon as the clock started, we not only never stopped talking for the whole three hours, we weren’t even sitting in our chairs, we were so into it and so excited.

KI: How has working on “Forged in Fire” affected your personal business?

JN: The exposure of being on an international television show has definitely increased people’s interest in my work, which also seems to be the case for most of the contestants we’ve had on the show; whether they leave us at the end of the first round or win the show. It is another perk for anybody who’s thinking about coming on.

KI: Do you have any advice for “Forged in Fire” contestants scheduled to compete on the show?

JN: Information is the key! If you’re going to compete on the show, watch every episode, watch my instructional DVDs, read and study up on the things that my fellow judges and I look for and talk about, and if possible, talk to some past contestants as well.

Leave of Absence

KI: Do you mind if I ask how you injured your hand?

JN: Most folks assume it was forging related, but actually it just came from catching myself the wrong way during a silly slip and fall back in 2008, when I slipped on some

wet grass on a hill and fractured the small bones in my hand, which never healed properly. The bone started to die in my hand—I didn’t realize it until I started getting toothache-like pain for the last few years. So, I went and got the surgery to fix it.

KI: How is the healing process coming along?

JN: My surgeon did a fantastic job, two summers ago, and my hand is stronger than ever.

KI: We missed you in season three, although you were well covered, and saw little of you in season

four. When can we expect to see you back on the show regularly?
JN: I will continue to shoot more episodes, but my preference is to split them with another maker. When we first started, we would shoot eight or 10 episodes in a season, and now they’re up to shooting 40 at a time. That’s just too many for me to do and continue making knives and filling orders.

KI: Were you able to use your time off to catch up on any cool projects?

JN: No, not really, just healing. I had to teach myself how to fill out orders left-handed, and I tried

J. Nelson Meteorite San Mai Bowie. Photo credit: Caleb Royer Studio.





“[GETTING THE CALL FROM HISTORY CHANNEL TO DO ‘FORGED IN FIRE’] IT PROBABLY TOOK A GOOD 10 MINUTES TO CONVINCE ME THAT IT WAS A LEGITIMATE PHONE CALL. [LAUGHS]”

to do a little left-handed forging, but that got kind of scary.

Wrapping Up

KI: I noticed that you teach small, personal classes. Do you do any kind of apprenticeship programs as well? Or just the classes?

JN: Just the classes. I like to teach blade-smithing, but I would not be able to have somebody in the shop with me every day.

KI: If someone wants to take one of your classes, what experience level should they have before attending?

JN: It doesn't really matter, I've taught people that never picked up a hammer before, as well as those who have been forging for several years.

KI: Are there any little-known facts about you that might surprise your fans?

JN: Well, I was getting a few comments from folks who would

Photo credit: HISTORY

go back and find some of my old YouTube videos, from when I had long hair. Most folks who just know me from the show, or only for the last few years, are kind of surprised by that.

KI: Is there anything else you would like to say to your fans?

JN: I would just like to thank them for embracing and supporting the show. I'm constantly getting letters and emails from folks of all ages who have been inspired to start

J. Neilson DVD Library

In an effort to help further the craft that he loves and advance interest in it, J. has worked with Chris Crawford Knives to put out an instructional DVD library to assist knife makers in their journey to perfecting their trade. There are five DVDs available currently that can be purchased on ChrisCrawfordKnives.com.

- Advanced Hunters with J. Neilson
- Bowie Knives with J. Neilson (new)
- Basic Hunters with J. Neilson
- Canister Damascus with J. Neilson (new)
- Tips and Tricks with J. Neilson

For anybody who is interested in being a contestant on "Forged in Fire," these DVDs would be a great way to gain an understanding of what J. looks for in a blade. Even if you are not planning a run on the show, but want to advance your forging knowledge, these DVDs are a great resource.

forging and making knives. To see and be a part of something that has brought such incredible interest to the craft that I love is thrilling, and it wouldn't be that way if it wasn't for the fans who watch the show.

Knives Illustrated would like to thank J. for taking the time to speak with us and show us a glimpse inside the world of an ABS Mastersmith and judge on one of the hottest shows on television. **KI**

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