

YOU GOTTA KNOW HOW TO HOLD 'EM

BY MARC SPAGNUOLO

Don't let the chips fall where they may; keep them organized with these classy, stackable trays.



Everybody's into poker these days. Those of you who haven't fallen victim to the craze yourselves probably at least have family members and friends who look forward to the occasional game.

Now, I don't know if you ever searched for poker chip trays before, but from what I can tell there are only very basic cases made of plastic, oak, or pine. Unfortunately, these mundane models lack the elegance to match the glorious array of custom poker chips they are intended to house. So let's fill that void by making a poker chip tray that any self-respecting poker player would be proud to show off at the next game.

My poker chip trays are designed to satisfy both form and function. Each tray houses 100 standard chips and features grooves on the underside that allow the trays to be stacked during play. The chip slots themselves are round, rather than square, giving the trays visual interest while keeping the chips secure. As an optional feature, small rare earth magnets are located on each side so that tray pairs can be sandwiched together for easy storage and transport.

Getting started

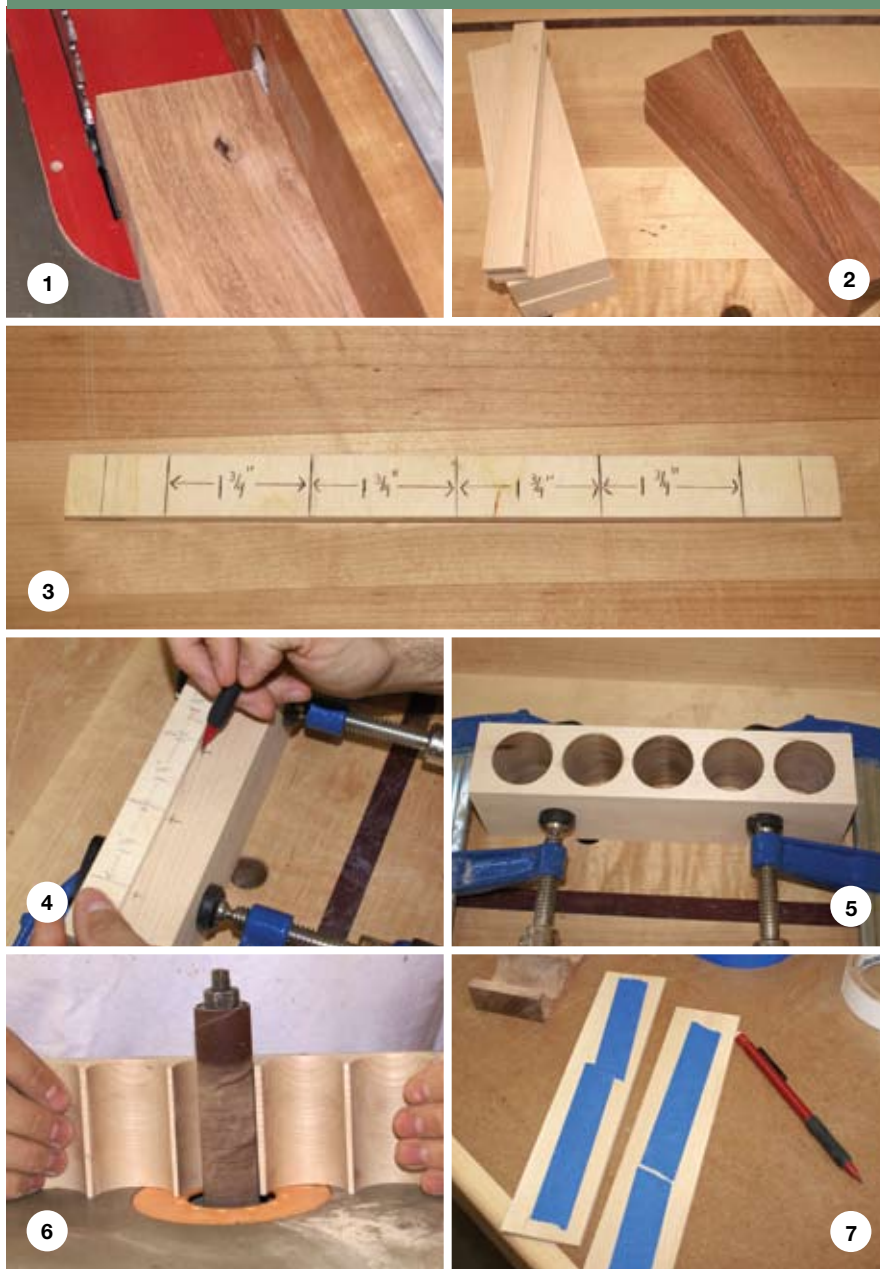
Head to the scrap pile and find at least two pieces that are a little over 1" thick, 10" long, and 3½" wide. If you

have mostly 4/4 stock, you might have to glue two pieces together. Mill each blank to 1" x 9½" x 3¼".

Using the bandsaw with the fence set at ¼", cut a single strip from one side of each blank.

Be careful to keep all pieces in order. Your extra effort here will be





rewarded with the beauty of perfect grain continuity in the finished product. Take the blanks over to the table saw and clean up the freshly sawn edges, removing as little additional material as possible (**Fig. 1**). Now take the blanks back to the bandsaw and cut another strip from the other side of each. Do another cleanup cut on the table saw, only this time, cut the blanks to a final width of $2\frac{5}{8}$ ". You can either plane or sand the small strips down to $\frac{3}{16}$ " thick. I build two sets at once (**Fig. 2**).

Drill the chip slots

In preparation for cutting the chip slots, construct a marking stick. By using this stick to mark the locations of the holes, we can ensure that each chip tray will come out exactly the same. I usually use a small strip of $\frac{1}{4}$ " ply cut to exactly $9\frac{1}{2}$ ". Start by striking a line at the exact center. Then carefully strike a line every $1\frac{3}{4}$ " to the left and the right of the center line (**Fig. 3**). Double-check your measurements. These lines mark the center point of each slot.

The secret to getting perfect, matching half-circle slots is to actually drill one hole, with two blanks clamped securely together. Use the marking stick to transfer the drilling locations to the blanks (**Fig. 4**). Using the drill press and a 40mm Forstner bit, drill out each slot. Take your time and be sure to back the bit out frequently in order to clear the chips and prevent overheating. It's a good idea to let the bit cool down between each cut. **Fig. 5** shows the finished holes.

Just a note about poker chips sizes: most poker chips are approximately 39mm in diameter. Consequently, I chose a 40mm bit for this operation. If you are not sure what size chips will be stored in the tray, you might want to consider a slightly larger bit just to be on the safe side. I have seen standard poker chips as large as 42mm.

After drilling, the slots will require some sanding to remove the marks left by the bit. I like to use an oscillating spindle sander for this task, but you can also use a dowel wrapped in sandpaper (**Fig. 6**).

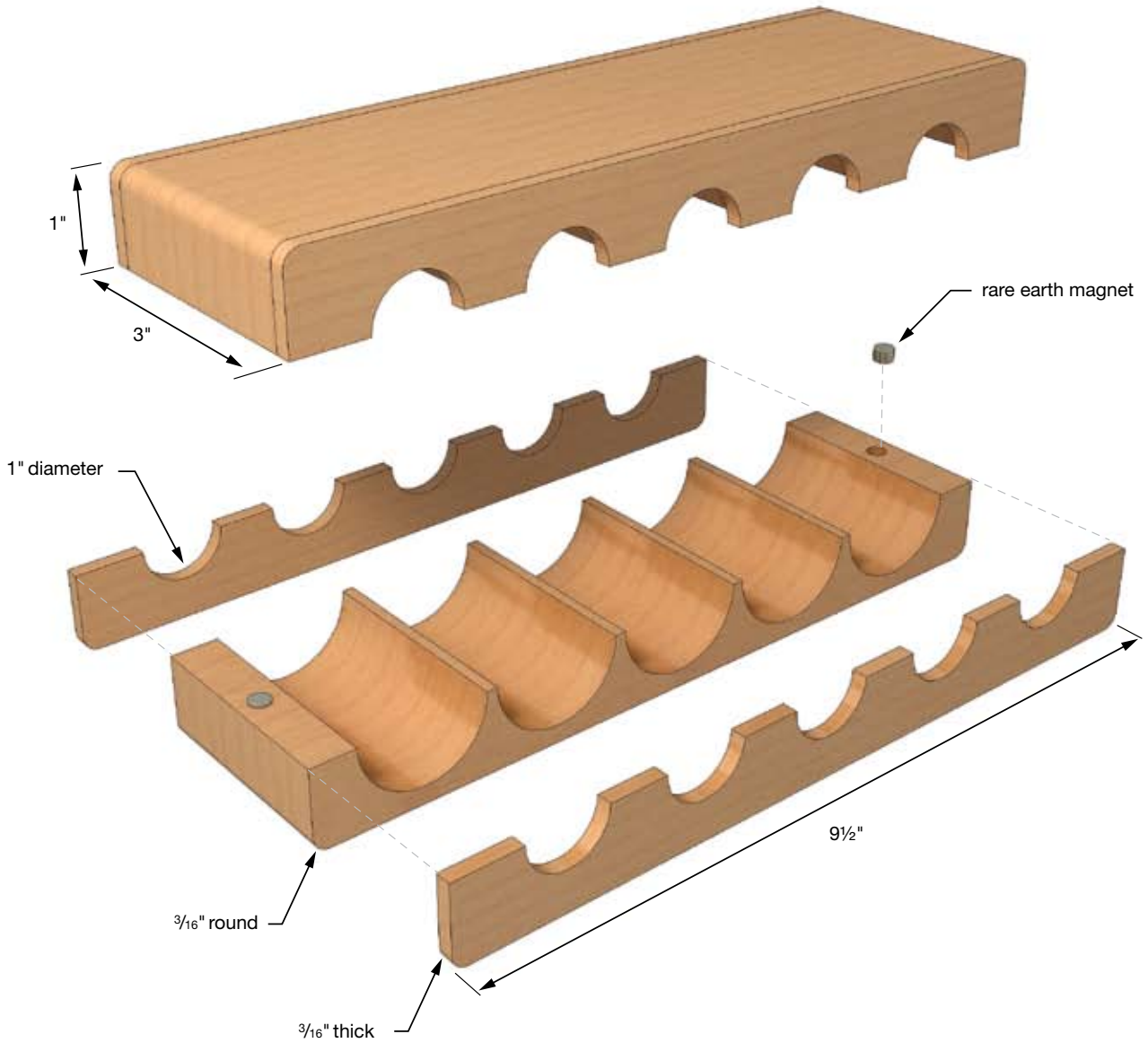
Now it's time to drill finger holes in the front and back strips. Start by taping the two strips together, edge to edge, keeping grain direction in mind (**Fig. 7**). Use the marking stick again to transfer the drilling locations to the strips, and drill each hole with a 1" Forstner bit. For added safety, tape the strips to the drill press table before drilling each hole (**Fig. 8**).

Mill the grooves

Glue each drilled strip onto the side of the tray from which it was originally cut (**Fig. 9**).

In order to mill the grooves on the bottom of the tray, I like to use a large-diameter core box bit in the router table. The diameter of the bit is not crucial since the object is to simply create a light recess that allows the trays to stack with a reasonable amount of stability.

Use the marking stick one last time to locate the center point of each groove. Set the router fence at the

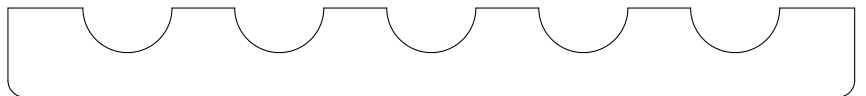
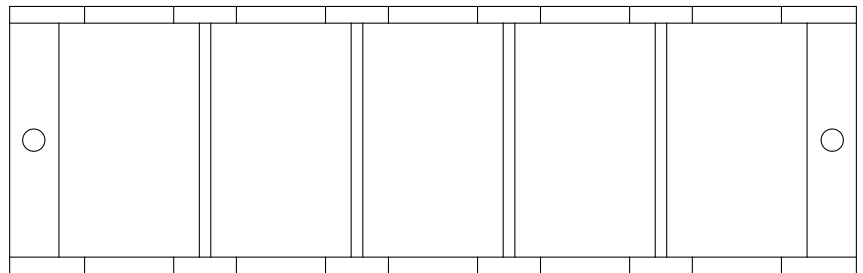


HARDWARE

6mm rare earth magnets (4)
 #128473, 6mm x 3mm, pack of 10, \$4.99
woodcraft.com

CUT LIST

Side (4)	1"	x	9 1/2"	x	1/4"
Body (2)	1"	x	9 1/2"	x	2 5/8"





appropriate distance for each groove. To speed up the process and increase accuracy, I recommend creating the groove on one side, then turning the tray 180° and milling the groove on the other side. Repeat this process until you reach the center groove.

Always use some sort of backing material when performing this operation. It not only helps reduce tearout, but it also helps prevent dangerous kickback. I simply use a scrap piece of plywood for this task (Fig. 10). As a finishing touch, I like to round over each edge of the tray bottom using a 1/2" roundover bit.

The final milling step is to drill the holes for the optional magnets. This can be done either before or after finishing. I like to drill the holes first so that I have an opportunity to address any tearout that might occur.

Drill a centered hole at each end of the tray (Fig. 11). The depth of the

hole should match the thickness of the magnet. The magnets I used were 6mm in diameter.

Finishing up

Give the pieces a thorough sanding and be sure to ease the edges of the finger holes. We don't want any unsuspecting poker players to get an

unpleasant surprise when they go to raise their bets.

Any standard finish would work just fine for this project. The one finish I would advise against is shellac. This is because many poker games are typically accompanied by adult beverages, and shellac dissolves in alcohol. Any lacquer, wipe-on poly, varnish, oil, or Danish oil will do the trick nicely. For my trays, I chose pre-catalyzed lacquer for its ease of application when finishing a large number of small items.

Using a little dab of five-minute epoxy, glue in the magnets (Fig. 12). Be sure to keep track of the magnets' polarities.

If there is one thing I have learned about these chip trays, it's that everybody wants them! If you make one or two, I guarantee you will be kicking yourself for not making a dozen. So think ahead and consider making a large batch. These trays make a fine gift for the most casual poker player, as well as the hardcore weekly gamer looking for a unique way to house his or her custom poker chips. 🌿



Marc Spagnuolo

Marc Spagnuolo is a former molecular biologist who became a full-time woodworker. He apprenticed with David Marks and now runs his own shop in Phoenix, Ariz., where he builds fine custom furniture and holds classes. His instructional video blog is thewoodwhisperer.com.

