

## Battle Chic

*Craft a wardrobe of medieval armor with DIY chainmail.* BY ANNALEE NEWITZ

**H**enrik Olsgaard, aka Henrik of Havn, has been proclaimed King of the West six times. Obviously the guy is deft with a sword — you don't get to be King in the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) without winning several bouts in the annual Crown Tournament. But his triumph is also testimony to his skill at making chainmail. Henrik has been fashioning chainmail of every description for the past four decades — from beautiful, sterling silver belts to a 50-pound battle hauberk (a knee-length shirt).

And now, I'm going to teach you what he taught me: how to make your own chainmail. With just a few basic patterns, you'll have all the knowledge you need to fashion a helmet, shirt, belt, coin purse, and even a full hauberk.





## Materials

» **Needlenose pliers**

» **1/8" diameter dowel**, which you can hold in place with a rack or some other device

Make rings yourself using: **3/8" diameter rod, coat hangers** (15; or several feet of stripped aluminum wire or junk wire that you want to recycle), **hammer, rod clamp** that fits the 3/8" rod, **small wire snipper**. Or you can buy pre-made steel rings from [chainmail.com](http://chainmail.com).

### 1. Buy or make your own rings.

For this project, we'll create square and triangular swatches of chainmail, which are the basic building blocks for anything larger. There are two ways to go about this: you can make your own rings from stripped aluminum electrical wire, store-bought wire, or coat hangers, or you can buy the rings ready-made from sources like [chainmail.com](http://chainmail.com).

If you'd like to create your own rings, begin with the wire of your choice. For lighter pieces, you might try aluminum wire. Most mail makers prefer steel. To create the rings, wind your wire around a rod, then flatten the end with a hammer and hold it in place with a small rod clamp (Figure A).

**CAUTION:** As you wind, you're creating a high-tension spring — if you slip, the wire can snap back at you quickly.

Next, you'll want to slip the coil off your rod and use a wire snipper to cut the rings (Figure B).

Be sure, as you're cutting, that you are creating full rings and not leaving gaps.

**Shortcut:** Some armor makers cut their rings out of door springs.

### 2. Knit your rings into chainmail swatches.

Once you have a few hundred rings, you're ready to start knitting (for reference, a full hauberk takes about 10,200 rings). To do this, you'll start by creating a small length of chain using 2 needlenose pliers

to open and close each ring (Figure D) — this is the knitting part. When you pull the rings open, be sure to open them sideways (Figure C).

Your first string should be twice as long as the first row in the swatch you'll be making. For this exercise, we chose to make the string 20 rings long, for a 10-ring row. Once you have your string, you'll want to thread it onto a thin rod so that it hangs properly as you add length (Figure E). Henrik's knitting rig is typical — he's got two uprights with holes in them to place the rod into (Figure G). But you can use literally anything that will hold your rod in place as you work, including simply taping it to 2 boxes.

To create the first 2 rows, you should thread every other ring, thus creating the kind of design shown on page 115.

This is the beginning of the "four in one" pattern you'll use for the rest of your swatch. When you make your next row, you'll want each ring to link to 2 others. Each ring on the second row should have 4 rings in it.

If you want to make a square, every other row should begin with a ring that only holds one ring from the row above, as described thus far. But for a triangle, you want to shrink each row by 2. So you'll start each row with a ring that connects 2 from the row above. Keep knitting until you have a square or triangle of the size you wish.

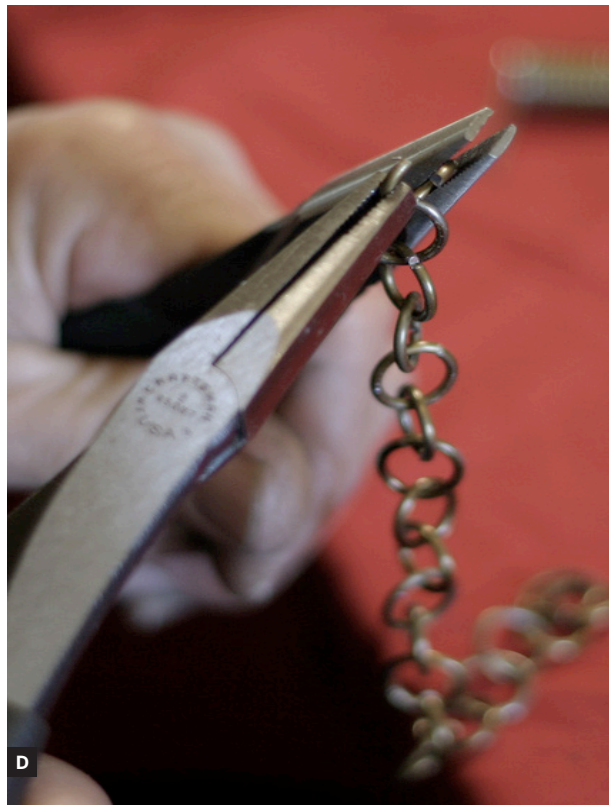
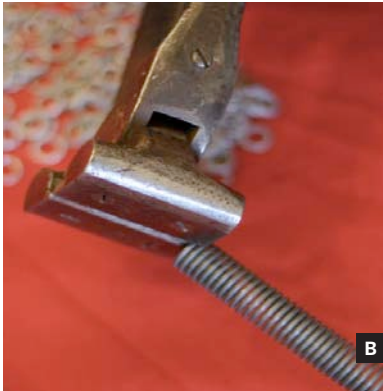
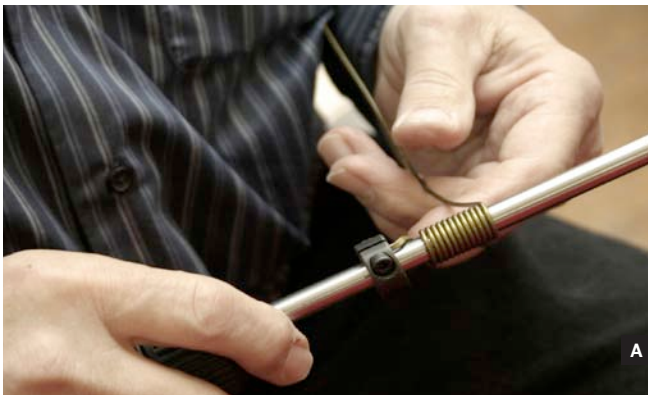
### 3. Connect swatches to make armor (or anything metallic!)

Now that you're practiced, you're ready to pick a pattern and start making something other than a square or triangular swatch (see Figure H). Figure F shows how triangles and squares can fit together to create other shapes. There are several sites that offer patterns you can choose from, including [theringlord.com](http://theringlord.com), which sells armor supplies and pattern books and hosts a community forum, as does [artofchainmail.com](http://artofchainmail.com).

Henrik says the best part of chainmail making is getting a chance to wear and use it with friends. "I don't like getting in front of paying audiences to do this," he explains. "I like to share what I've done at SCA tournaments and places where everybody participates in the event." And that's where I find him, in full armor, a few weeks after our lesson.

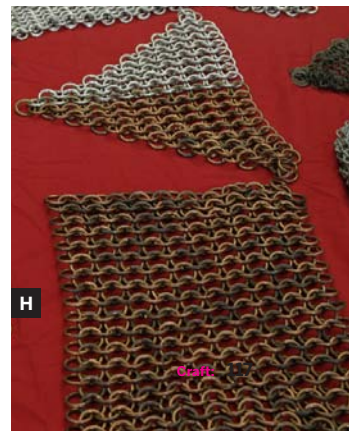
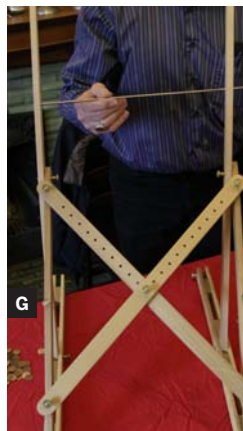
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Annalee Newitz ([techsploitation.com](http://techsploitation.com)) writes about geek culture in San Francisco. Her favorite dragon is black, and her favorite accessory is a bag of holding.



To make chainmail, you can buy pre-made rings or make them with stripped aluminum wire or coat hangers, which you must coil and cut. Once you have rings, you start your project by knitting square and triangular

swatches. Then attach your swatches together to make metal garments and accessories such as helmets, belts, collars, coin purses, and traditional knee-length shirts called haubkerks.



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