Technical Overview of AISI A2 Tool Steel Hardness Characteristics

Introduction

AISI A2 tool steel is classified as a 5% chromium, air-hardening, cold-work tool steel. Its composition, particularly approximately 1.00% carbon and 5.25% chromium, provides a balanced combination of wear resistance and toughness, making it a widely utilized grade for various tooling applications. A key characteristic is its ability to achieve full hardness through air quenching, which minimizes distortion and enhances dimensional stability during heat treatment compared to liquid-quenching grades. This document outlines the typical hardness properties and related characteristics of A2 tool steel based on standard heat treatment practices.

Heat Treatment and Hardness

The standard heat treatment protocol for A2 tool steel involves austenitizing, typically within the range of 950°C to 968°C (1740°F to 1775°F), followed by cooling in still air (air quenching).

- **As-Quenched Hardness:** Immediately following the air quench from the austenitizing temperature, A2 steel can attain a hardness level of approximately 65 HRC.
- **Tempering and Working Hardness:** The as-quenched structure is typically too brittle for service and requires tempering to achieve the desired balance of hardness, strength, and toughness. The final working hardness is dictated by the tempering temperature employed.
    - A common working hardness range for A2 is **58–60 HRC**.
    - Variations exist depending on the specific application requirements; for instance, ranges of 56-58 HRC are also cited, while bending and blanking dies might utilize 58-64 HRC, and aluminum extrusion dies may operate at 56-62 HRC.
    - Tempering response examples (for a 1" diameter specimen quenched from 968°C/1775°F):
        - Tempering at 149°C (300°F) yields approximately 61 HRC.
        - Tempering at 204°C (400°F) yields approximately 60 HRC.
    - Higher tempering temperatures generally reduce hardness but increase toughness. A slight secondary hardening effect may be observed when tempering around 510°C to 538°C (950°F to 1000°F), where hardness can slightly increase or stabilize before decreasing at higher tempering

temperatures.
- **Microhardness:** Properly hardened and tempered A2 tool steel typically exhibits a microhardness in the range of 630-700 HV.

Hardenability

A2 tool steel possesses excellent hardenability, meaning it can achieve high hardness relatively uniformly throughout its cross-section, even in larger sizes.

- It is capable of fully hardening through sections up to approximately 114.3 mm (4.5 inches) in round or square dimensions when air quenched.
- A hardness of 60 HRC can typically be developed at the center of a 125 mm (5-inch) square section. This deep hardening capability makes A2 suitable for substantial tooling components requiring consistent properties.

Wear Resistance and Toughness

Hardness is intrinsically linked to wear resistance. A2's wear resistance stems from its carbon and chromium content, which facilitates the formation of hard chromium carbides within the tempered martensitic matrix.

- **Comparative Performance:**
  - A2 offers superior abrasion resistance compared to shock-resistant tool steels like the S-series (e.g., S7).
  - Conversely, it provides better toughness and ductility than the high-carbon, high-chromium D-series tool steels (e.g., D2), although D2 exhibits significantly higher wear resistance (estimated 30-40% greater than A2).
- **Balance:** A2 represents a compromise, offering good wear resistance combined with commendable toughness, suitable for applications where chipping or fracture resistance is as important as wear resistance.

Surface Modification for Enhanced Hardness

For applications demanding exceptional surface hardness to combat severe abrasion or wear, various surface treatments can be applied to A2 tool steel:

- **Ion Nitriding:** Can produce a very hard surface layer (750–1200 HV) to a typical depth of around 8 µm, while maintaining a core hardness of 54–60 HRC.
- **Boriding:** Can achieve surface microhardness values around 1900 HV.

Machinability

In the annealed condition (typically supplied at a maximum hardness of 235 HB), A2 tool steel exhibits relatively good machinability for a tool steel grade. Its machinability

rating is often cited as 60-65% compared to a 1% carbon steel (rated at 100%).

Conclusion

AISI A2 tool steel provides a versatile combination of properties, characterized by good wear resistance, adequate toughness, and excellent dimensional stability during heat treatment due to its air-hardening nature. Its deep hardenability makes it suitable for larger sections. A typical working hardness of 58-60 HRC is achieved through appropriate tempering, balancing wear performance with resistance to fracture. It remains a preferred choice for a wide range of cold-work tooling applications where this balance is critical.

Aobo Steel
Website: aobosteel.com
Email: sales@aobosteel.com