

MAKING YOUR BAGPIPE FIT

Pipe Major Brett Tidswell

There is nothing that will hamper your playing as much as a bagpipe that does not fit. I see a large number of pipers who look uncomfortable playing. Many is the time when I have picked up someone else's bagpipe and played and found that I had a tense top hand. A couple of instruments I have played actually cramped my hand up to the point where I couldn't play well at all.

THE BAG

Something that must be accepted is that the ergonomics of the instrument have changed significantly due to the introduction of the synthetic bag. The bag is the single most important component in making your instrument fit. Synthetic bags do not tie onto a bagpipe the same as a hide bag. The hide bags pull and stretch when they are tied on and you end up with a bag that decreases significantly in depth beneath the drones. This is where your arm wraps around the bag. Synthetic bags do not do that, they are like a balloon and they generally hold their shape as the stocks are inserted into collars and the bag is not distorted to tie them in.



Look at the shape of the bag shown here in Glen's workshop. Compare it to a synthetic bag!

So, what does that mean? The synthetic bag is larger at the point where it meets your forearm and that is what puts pressure on your arm and hand when you play. To me the old rule of “play the largest bag you can” still applies, but we need to look at what that means.

I used to play a large bag. I am average height and build. With most synthetic bags the best I can now manage is an elongated small bag or a medium in some other brands. Anything else cramps my top hand. The advantage with a large bag is that it has a greater volume. This means less moisture going to your reeds and less variance due to blowing technique. So therefore playing the largest bag is best, but let’s qualify that by adding; the largest bag that you can comfortably play!

How do we decide on a bag? The best advice I can give is to try as many as possible. You must ensure that the main point of contact with your arm is the elbow. The bag should not be putting any significant pressure on your forearm.

TYING THE BAG ONTO THE PIPES

When tying the bag onto the instrument, I have never angled drones. They will find their own position, and the pressure they exert on the bag is minimal. I tie the drone stocks straight into the bag. Next I roughly tie in the chanter stock and blow stock. You have to play around with the angles of these stocks. I install the drones, chanter and blow stick into the stocks and then manoeuvre the blow stock until the mouthpiece sits on my lips. The stock will generally be tied in to point backwards and toward you.

You must ensure that you are standing straight with your head erect. Your left shoulder may lift a little but that is normal. When you take the blow stick out of your mouth you should be able to retrieve it with only a little head movement. You need to check the length of the blow stick. Look at yourself playing in the mirror. If your pipes look right, but when you stand normally and release the blow stick and it sits above your mouth it is too long. If it sits below it is too short. Change the mouthpiece or have your blow stick altered. The wrong length may cause your bag to rotate forcing your drones away from you or force your head to one side if too long. It also could cause the front end of the bag to lift up forcing your chanter way out in front, or cause you to slump forward if too short.

When you have the angle right, properly tie the blow stock in place and then look at the chanter stock. This might have to be angled back a little and you need to determine how far into the bag to insert it. You do not want to stretch to grasp the chanter. Neither do you want to huddle up into a foetal position. Your arms should form a comfortable arc. You should have no significant bends in the wrist. You should look and feel comfortable. Your bottom hand should sit somewhere around your mid-section. The chanter should hang in front of you. It should not be angled back into your groin, which will give you a muffled, flat bottom register. Neither should the chanter leap from your hands to jut out in front if you let go of it. That said it is nice to get a little pressure from the chanter pressing against your fingers.

All of these suggestions also apply to synthetic bags. You may not have as much variance to manipulate the angles of stocks, but there is always some room to manoeuvre. The bags are usually made with some of the variances already inbuilt. The blow stock and chanter stock usually have a lot of variances as to how they can be inserted and tied in. I have found with most synthetic bags that the blow stick sits up higher and has to be significantly shorter or inserted deeper than with most hide bags.



Look at Roddy MacLeod playing here. That is a bagpipe that fits him perfectly!

CORDS AND COVER

Check the spacing of your cords. They should not be too far apart or too close together. The bass drone should sit close to your head and not fall away from you or press against the side of your face. As a rule of thumb the spacing should equate to the span of a fist with your thumb sticking out.

Your bag cover should not fit too tightly, so as to strangle the expansion of the bag, but alternatively should not be so loose that the bag can slip inside the cover. A material such as Dycem or other non-slip material adhered to the outside of the bag to prevent slippage whilst playing is a good idea. There is no point having a perfectly fitting instrument if after 5 minutes of playing you have to keep hoisting it up.

BLOWING THE BAGPIPE

Just a short word on blowing as this can make a difference to how you look and feel. Your instrument should not be too hard for you. It is a musical instrument and should not be a huge physical effort to play.

When you squeeze the bag, apply pressure with your elbow, pulling it in horizontally toward your side. Do not lift your shoulder so that you use your shoulder muscles to do all the work, you may eventually hurt yourself. The larger muscles under your arm and across your back should be doing all the hard work.

INSTRUMENT SET UP

Your instrument should be comfortable for you to blow. Set up your drone reeds so that they are air efficient, but free blowing. I have seen many pipers set the drones up so that air has to be forced through them making the pipes harder to blow.

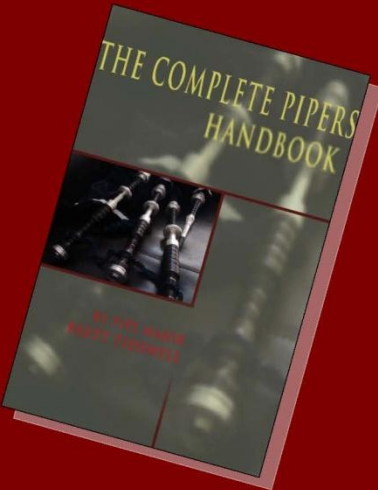
Play a chanter reed that is stable, bright and free blowing. A reed that is too hard or gives little value for effort makes your pipes seem hard to play. Always have a good choice of chanter reeds. There is no point buying one and thinking it will suit you.

To summarise, the important issues are:

- Select the correct size and type of bag. There should be little or no pressure on your forearm.
- When tying in the bag get your blow stick angle and depth right.
- When tying in the bag get your chanter depth and angle right.
- Set the cord spacing.
- Use a suitable bag cover so as not to strangle the bag or allow slippage.

- Always stand with good posture when playing.
- Do not play an instrument that is too hard for you.
- Pull across your back to squeeze the bag; do not lift your shoulder.

There is a lot more information on this topic and other issues in “The Complete Pipers Handbook” which is now available here: <http://www.schoolofpiping.com/handbook.html>

The image shows the cover of the book 'The Complete Pipers Handbook'. The cover is dark green with a central photograph of several bagpipes. The title 'THE COMPLETE PIPERS HANDBOOK' is written in yellow at the top. Below the photo, the author's name 'BY PIPER ANDREW BROWN' is visible in red. The book is shown at an angle, giving it a three-dimensional appearance.

The Complete Pipers Handbook is a must for every serious piper. Never before has a more comprehensive guide been published. Maintenance, set up, refinement, tuning, setting up bands, performance psychology and **much more!**

Available from:
www.schoolofpiping.com
and selected stockists.