



**Paul Berler**

## **Basic Saxophone Skills**

### **Reeds, Part I**

**I**t's concert time. Your suit has been cleaned and pressed, none of your music is lost or missing, and you've been practicing hard for the past several weeks to get ready for this performance. Your reputation as a musician is on the line, and yet you are calm and relaxed. You take your instrument out of its case and begin to warm up. As you are playing, however, you notice something odd about your sound as you're playing. It's not focused, there is no richness or body to it. None of your high tones are speaking well, and your low tones aren't coming out at all! What's going on? You think for a minute, it might be something mechanical; a leak perhaps? But you then remember that you just had your horn tuned-up last week! Finally, you look at the mouthpiece, and you see it. There's a crack in your reed the size of the Grand Canyon, and you don't have any spare reeds to use! Now the nervousness sets in, and the sweat starts rolling down your face, and then you wake up and realize it was all just a bad dream.

Does this scenario sound familiar? It does to me, because I was exactly like this in my high school days and I'm sure that a lot of people can identify with it because it's such a common problem. Taking care of your reeds is a vital part of being a saxophonist. If you choose not to care for your reeds, if you're the type of person who says, "I just slap a reed on my mouthpiece straight out of the box and play it until it dies," you're setting yourself up for

these kinds of problems. Unprepared reeds (i.e., reeds straight out of the box) have a greater risk for problems simply because most manufacturers of reeds sell them in what is known as a "rough state." That is to say that these reeds will not be able to hold up for very long against the kind of treatment we subject our reeds to. And let's face it, we put our reeds through hell!

In this column I'm going to assume that you have selected a brand and strength of reed that suits your sound concept and your style of playing. I'm not going to state that one brand of reed or one certain strength is the best for everyone; all I will say is that the more open your mouthpiece facing (i.e., jazz mouthpieces), the softer your reed strength should be. The more closed facing (classical mouthpieces), the harder the reed. Again, this is true most of the time, not all of the time. For example, when I play baritone saxophone in a jazz band section, I use a Berg Larsen mouthpiece with the most open facing, and a Hemke reed, strength #4! So, whatever works for you is what you should use, period! Also, always have an extra supply of reeds to work with, don't wait until you're on your last reed and it's all brown and moldy and chipped before you say, "Hmm, maybe I should buy a new reed." Don't buy reeds one at a time, buy them by the box. Reeds usually come in boxes ranging from five to twenty-five.

Let's assume you're starting a new cycle of reeds, in other words, all of

your previous reeds are getting to the point where they are unplayable and we have to break in some new ones. I suggest preparing reeds in groups of four, simply because most reed guards are designed to handle four reeds at a time. By the way, I'm also assuming you have a reed guard to store your reeds in. If you don't have one, go out and buy one before continuing with this article. The first thing we want to do is examine each of the reeds for any kinds of imperfections. Make sure the reed isn't cracked, chipped, or warped right out of the box, obviously those reeds cannot be used from the start, so get rid of them. Make sure the color of the reed is a nice golden yellow and is also somewhat shiny. If the reed is green in any way, that means it hasn't been cured enough. Don't throw it away, however! Simply store it in a dry place for about one year, and it should be okay. I know some people who never use reeds straight out of the box, they always store all the reeds they buy for at least a year before they even take them out of the box! Also, hold the reed up to a light source and make sure the reed has a heart. The heart is an area of thicker wood in the center of the reed. It need not have any particular shape, but in an unadjusted reed, this area should extend almost to the side edges of the reed.

Now that we have selected some reeds to use, we can move to the next phase. Some people call it curing, others call it conditioning, I simply call it preparing the reeds for

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use. The first thing you'll want to do is number your reeds with a pencil on the back side so you can keep track of which reed is which. It is also important that you condition the reeds in the order you number them, so you can tell which reed has had the most work done on it, which is second, and so on. In order to prepare your reeds, you're going to need a few pieces of equipment: a piece of glass (or some other hard and flat surface) upon which to work, a large round glass with flat sides, sandpaper (preferably 400-600 grit), and some kind of reed case or holder for storage.

The first phase of conditioning is soaking. This is done in order to get the reeds used to moisture content, and it begins to give the fibers of the reed more resiliency. Fill your glass about two-thirds full of water (preferably distilled water). Place the butt end of each reed in the water for a few seconds. Remove the reed and turn it over so that the tip is facing downward. Put the reed in the water tip-first, leaving about one-half inch above the water line, then carefully pull the reed against the side of the glass. If the back of the reed is pressed gently against the side of the glass, the water tension will hold the reed in a vertical position. Follow this same procedure for the rest of your reeds. I like to add a new reed every five minutes because that allows you some time in between to examine and test reeds before you have to remove another one from the water. The advantages of soaking reeds in this manner are: 1. the reeds can be monitored more easily and are kept in their proper order, 2. reeds are positioned in a way that will allow each to receive the same amount of moisture, and 3. the soaking time for each reed can be accurately timed.

After each reed has soaked for about fifteen minutes, remove it from the glass and wipe away the excess water by using the thumb and index finger to slowly move the water from the butt end of the reed to the tip, one finger on each side. Repeat this several times to remove

all excess water. Then place the reed in the mouth and coat it lightly with saliva in preparation for the initial playing period. Put the reed on the mouthpiece and assemble the saxophone for playing. Note that a new reed should be introduced to the stresses of playing vibrations gradually. If it is not, the vibrations can lead to damage of the reed fibers, thus reducing the reed's playing life. Since lower tones and softer dynamics need only a slow vibration, it is best to start the initial playing test with long, sustained tones in the lowest register at a medium-soft to medium-loud dynamic level, then gradually moving to the middle register still at the same dynamic level. High register tones and loud dynamic levels should be reserved for later playing tests. The first playing period should only last between five and ten minutes, and remember to play each new reed for an equal length of time. A reed that plays well at first will probably have a shorter playing life, while a reed that feels somewhat hard will have a longer life.

After playing each reed remove it from the mouthpiece and evaluate its performance. How did the reed respond in each register? At each dynamic level? Did the reed seem easy to play? Was it too hard? Too soft? Just right? These are the kinds of questions you need to ask for an overall evaluation of the reed. Then place the reed on your glass plate with the back side facing up to allow uniform exposure to the air. Let the reed air-dry until all of the surface moisture has evaporated. After each reed has been soaked, played, evaluated, and dried, place them in your reed case according to performance quality. I like to place the softer, more responsive reeds first, and the harder ones subsequently, but you can order them however you want. Let these reeds dry and rest for about twenty-four hours before playing them again. Now you should begin to see why you can't have just one reed at a time, why you need a cycle of reeds. While these reeds are being conditioned, you obviously need some reeds on

which to practice and perform. I always try to maintain a cycle of eight reeds, four which are being conditioned, and four which are in use.

The second session, which should occur one day after the first session, is very similar to the first session. Soak each reed in the glass for about ten minutes. Then in the playing session, play each reed for about fifteen to twenty minutes, extending into the upper ranges of pitch and dynamic level. Again, save the extremes, such as the altissimo register for subsequent sessions. Evaluate each reed's general performance in terms of pitch quality (did all notes speak clearly and easily?), intonation (using a tuner, did octaves and other intervals sound in tune?), and articulation (did legato and staccato notes begin clearly?). In general, softer reeds will sound thin and reedy and will not play in the upper register with ease. Harder reeds will not play in the lower register clearly and will not articulate with accuracy. Reorder the reeds in terms of performance quality, if necessary, and store them in your reed case. Remember to try and play each reed for an equal length of time and always be as objective as you can concerning a reed's performance. Don't be surprised if a reed was in position number one on the first day, but has moved to position three on the second day.

Again, the reeds should be stored four about twenty-four hours before moving to the third and fourth sessions. These sessions, which will be discussed in the next article, involve not only soaking and playing the reeds, but also physically adjusting the reeds to resolve any playing problems that might be caused by an imperfection in the reed's makeup. §