

Sticking Pads *by Stephen Howard*

Sticking pads can be the bane of the woodwind player's life. Having said that, it's something that affects players in varying degrees. Some hardly notice the occasionally sticky pad, others find it compromises the playability of their instrument to such an extent that it's almost impossible to rely on the instrument in any real capacity.

So what's the answer? Well, you'd have thought the solution would be to replace the pad - and where the pad is old and evidently worn this is often the best recourse - but more often than not the pad that sticks is in good shape...new and even.

There are two main factors that cause pads to stick. The first, and most obvious, is that they get wet in use. Granted, most of the moisture found in the bore of an instrument is condensation - but it carries with it fats and sugars that have been dissolved in the airstream. There's also a certain amount of saliva that finds its way into the bore too. The other factor than can cause a pad to stick is the natural oil present in the pad skin - a problem mainly confined to new pads.

This is such a common problem that there are quite a few products on the market that claim to be able to cure or prevent pads from sticking. The most common and widely available are the powders. Essentially these are little more talc, the theory being that absorb the gunk that collects on the pad and provide a means of dry lubrication. The truth of the matter is they make a mess and eventually exacerbate the problem - and once you start using the stuff you find you have to keep using it to cure the stickiness that the talc contributes towards!

Another popular solution is called pad dope. Typically these are oils -such as neats foot. The claim here is that these products are supposed to waterproof the pad, the theory being that if you can stop the water from being absorbed by the pad then it won't stick. The problem is the oil itself can contribute to the stickiness, and the goo present in the condensation can still deposit itself on the pad whether it's waterproof or not.

The outlook then is bleak. But there are one or two tricks that can help.

Cleaning and degreasing the pad is an effective solution. There are no magic ingredients and potions involved - just plain old ordinary lighter fluid - and common or garden cotton buds.

The method itself is simple to, wet the cotton bud with lighter fluid and gently rub it over the pad, concentrating your efforts on and around the impression made by the tone hole.

While you're there it's worth giving the tone hole itself a bit of a wipe over, particular the bore of the hole as this often harbours dried goo which dissolves when wet and finds its way onto the pad again.

If you find a cotton bud a bit of a tight fit, use a pipe cleaner, though bend it in half first so as not to risk the wire core puncturing the pad. You may have to make a couple of applications if the pad is particularly gummed up - and if it's that bad then maybe it really is time to have it replaced!

For flutes and clarinets you can use a piece of cotton cloth, a corner of which you moisten with lighter fluid. Place this corner under the pad and very gently close the key onto the cloth. Slowly and gently drag the cloth out. It's worth pointing out that this method can shorten the life of a skin pad - so you might well find it enough to merely press the key down onto the moistened cloth and leave it at that.

Factors that contribute towards sticky pads are eating, drinking, smoking and breathing. Pick three out of that list and try not to do them before playing. A non-existent bore-swabbing routine doesn't help matters - though ironically enough there are times when it can actually worsen the problem!

I feel duty bound to point out that lighter fluid is highly flammable - so please bear that in mind if you decide it would be a neat idea to ungunk your pads before a blazing log fire. Lighter fluid is also a deeply dangerous and unpleasant drink.

Mr. Howard operates a woodwind instrument repair shop in the United Kingdom and can be reached through his website shwoodwind@gmx.co.uk