

Embouchure Health: Consistency Maintenance

by Andrew J. Pelletier

Introduction: The embouchure is a remarkably complex area of the horn player's physique. Thousands of tiny muscles are manipulated to create the needed resistance against the air stream to create the "buzz". Despite the immense strength that one can attain, there is also the risk of great injury. This article will not speak directly to the issue of damage (on this subject, I highly recommend Bengt Belfrage's article, "Damage due to Overstrain" in the *Horn Call* XXIII, #2). Instead, it will focus on the ways one can avoid the risk of damage; and actually make the embouchure feel consistent from day to day.

In the summer of 1994, while making a solo recording, I began to feel a sharp twinge in my face, running down the left side of my nose, and ending at the corner of my mouth. Numbness and dull pain followed this. I thought nothing of it, and continued to play, not realizing until later that I was "pulling", or overworking that muscle. During nine months of difficult recuperation, I discovered what happened was completely unnecessary and avoidable. Instead of being negative, I saw it as a blessing, and set out to create some techniques for keeping the embouchure consistent and injury-free: Embouchure Health. In no way am I trying to present myself as a medical expert; these techniques are just suggestions that may or may not work for you. As with all suggestions of a medical nature, however, please be sure consult a doctor or appropriate specialist. The important thing is to think about the present and future health of the embouchure-this thought leading to positive action.

Basics of Embouchure Health

1) "Listen" to your embouchure. It is truly incredible how one can get used to ignoring the body. The concept of "listening" begins with the warm-up. "Listening" consists of being constantly aware of the feel of the embouchure muscles; rather than playing in an inattentive manner. One should use this "listening" at the beginning and throughout the warm-up. If the embouchure feels tight, warm-up in a manner that loosens it up. If there is a lack of center, do some stabilizing exercises; like long tones or air attacks. Be willing to experiment and do what the embouchure needs. If a "burn" (a tight, warm sting in the muscles, which marks the beginning of muscle cramping) begins in the corners of the embouchure, ease up for a second and allow the muscles to relax. This relaxing will prevent the build up of lactic acid, which makes the muscle less flexible, and eventually leads to cramping and damage.

Take this concept of "listening" into the practice session itself, and experiment by practicing in spurts with rest; for instance 30 minutes of work with 10-15 minutes rest. Practicing in this manner is beneficial for the embouchure and your brain as well. Times of brief rest can yield great insight into a problem needing work.

2) Get ample rest. A full schedule of performing, teaching, and traveling is sometimes achieved at the expense of one's physical health. Proper rest begins with the night's sleep. It is important to get enough sleep to allow the body time to rest and repair. For most people, this is between five and nine hours per night. Obviously, there will be times when this is impossible, but the moment your schedule allows, allow your body as much time to rest as necessary.

Eat meals sitting down! (And no, this does not include in the car.). It is the small things that can make a big difference. Eating while sitting promotes better digestion and has a greater calming effect. The more relaxed the whole body is, the more relaxed the embouchure can be, thus providing more strength. Finally, when possible, set aside about 20 minutes a day to mentally rest (i.e. - read a book for pleasure, meditate, play with your pet, etc.). We are all busy people, and the effect this can have on one's playing could be profound.

3) Water! There is no simpler path to better health as drinking at least eight glasses (eight oz.) of water a day. Not only does it aid digestion and absorption of vitamins and minerals, it disposes of lactic acid, which helps the player to fight cramping and stiffness. I could not believe the difference this water consumption made in my own playing. I now drink between two and four liters of water a day.

Extras: In addition to these basic techniques, here are some additional strategies that can make a difference.

Massage: After some very hard playing, massage can loosen the embouchure up to a “normal” feeling. Experiment with manual massage while taking a hot shower, or try a small, hand-held electronic massager on the embouchure. This can truly help the embouchure feel consistent, despite very hard playing demands. For some specific massage techniques, consult the Belfrage article mentioned earlier, as well as Paul Pritchard’s section of “The Business”.

Diet Alteration: Some food products can affect the performance of the embouchure. Consider slowly phasing these foods out of the diet, especially during times of heavy playing. Foods like citrus, tomato, spicy food, or heavily salted food can make the lips swell, or cause canker sores. Excessive caffeine can affect muscle response and control. Careful consideration of your diet and how your embouchure responds can lead to some great discoveries.

Pain Prevention: If, after valiant efforts at maintaining embouchure health, there is stiffness and mild discomfort (like after a week of a Mahler symphony), here are some techniques that I have found very helpful. First, definitely do some light massage of the embouchure, and place a warm, moist towel over the entire area. Follow this with some kind of anti-inflammatory drug, like ibuprofen. I have found excellent results using the homeopathic remedy Arnica. It is very safe and it seems to work better with the face’s smaller muscles. It can be found in many natural foods stores and some pharmacies. Continue this pattern daily, regardless of the playing demands of that day, until the stiffness and discomfort subside.

Further Reading: Here are some sources to review that can compliment your embouchure health techniques. Although not all music based, all contain great lessons.

Brussat, Frederic and Mary Ann. *Spiritual Literacy*, New York: Scribner Books, 1996.

Bruser, Madeline. *The Art of Practicing*, New York: Bell Tower, 1997.

Green, James. *Male Herbal*, Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1991.

Pritchard, Paul, ed. *The Business*, 1992. (No printer specified, ISBN #09520626 07)

Conclusion: Horn players hurt themselves yearly, and the most disturbing thing is it is preventable. If one takes time to get to know how their embouchure works and responds, such pain could be prevented, and one could learn how to make the embouchure feel consistent from day to day. The techniques suggested here are just a start. Once you have achieved a greater knowledge of your embouchure feel free to experiment with other methods to improve and maintain your embouchure’s health My hope is that this article helps you to maintain a healthy embouchure, and enjoy consistent, pain-free performing for as long as possible.

A soloist/chamber musician of growing popularity and importance, Andrew Pelletier is a musician dedicated to the horn as a solo voice. He has been the first prize winner of numerous competitions, including the Jon Hawkins Memorial Scholarship of the International Horn Society, the University Division of the American Horn Competition, and has been awarded two significant awards in the Léni Fé Bland Foundation Scholarship Award Competition. Pelletier has presented several recitals throughout the Los Angeles area, northern New England, and Shropshire, England. He has performed as soloist with famed composer/conductor Michael Kamen (at the composer’s request), the Long Beach Camerata, the Los Angeles Debut Orchestra, University of Southern California Symphony, and the Crossroads Chamber Orchestra. A strong advocate of contemporary music, he has premiered works by several composers, including Howard Yermish and Christina Laberge. He holds a Bachelor’s Degree, Summa Cum Laude from the University of Southern Maine, a Master’s Degree with Highest Honors from the University of Southern California, and is completing the Doctor of Musical Arts Degree at the University of Southern California. He is an alumnus of the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival where he attended in 1992 and 1993 on full scholarship. He has performed in master classes with Douglas Hill, Jean Rife, Michael Thompson, Frøydis Ree Wekre and Gail Williams. Pelletier maintains several scholarly projects on the horn, its musical history and its players. His articles have been published in The Horn Call (the Journal of the International Horn Society), and Horn Klubb (the Journal of the Norwegian Horn Society.) He is an avid cook and calligrapher and currently lives in North Hollywood with his wife, Christina Laberge, and their cat, Thistle