



First Lessons on the Saxophone

By Frederick L. Hemke and David Demsey

The most enduring problems with young saxophonists can be traced to their initial contact with the mouthpiece and reed. If good habits are established during the first lessons, these problems never arise.

Mouthpiece Setup

Most student saxophones are satisfactory instruments, but the mouthpieces that come with them should not be used. A good mouthpiece has an average lay and tip opening and costs approximately \$60. Among the good mouthpieces for beginners are the Selmer Soloist C Star, the Vandoren A15 and A25, the Selmer S90-190, and the Russo 5R. These mouthpieces are relatively inexpensive investments and make a remarkable difference in a beginner's sound. An old, hand-me-down

instrument often works well with a good mouthpiece, but even a professional instrument will not respond well with a poor-quality mouthpiece. Regardless of mouthpiece or instrument quality, an instrument that is not adjusted properly will not play well.

The reed should match the mouthpiece. Generally speaking, an average lay mouthpiece with an average tip opening will take a #2½ or 3 reed. This setup causes the least discomfort for students because it matches the skill and musculature of the lip and produces the best tone. Lower number reeds (softer) need a more wide-open mouthpiece and a different embouchure because there is less resistance.

The reed and mouthpiece should be assembled with the tip of the reed

even with the tip of the mouthpiece and the sides of the reed even with the sides of the mouthpiece. If the reed is too high, too low, or not centered at the tip, the instrument will be unresponsive and feel much the same as if the pads leaked air. The reed should be moistened in a glass of water or with saliva before being placed on the mouthpiece. Although this seems too basic to mention, a surprising number of students take a reed out of the box, put it directly on the mouthpiece, and wonder why they produce so many squeaks.

The saxophone ligature has the sole function of holding the reed on the mouthpiece. Students will break a lot of reeds if they are not taught to put the ligature on the mouthpiece first, then slide the reed butt end first under the ligature. Most mouthpieces have an embossed line to show where the ligature should be when tightened.

Reeds left on a mouthpiece create mold growth worthy of a science project, so it is far better to remove reeds after each use. Several companies make inexpensive plastic carriers for two or four reeds, but an alternative is a piece of Plexiglas with a big rubber band that holds the reeds flat. Reeds are just pieces of cane that can wear out, so each student should have at least five usable reeds available and rotate these for a much longer playing life. Having played and rotated the five reeds, if one breaks ten minutes before a concert there is no problem. Both lipstick and ChapStick clog a reed and prevent it from vibrating, so saxophone players should wipe everything off their lips before taking the instrument out of the case.

Students are rarely taught how to assemble the mouthpiece on the instrument and often end up placing it too far, or not far enough, on the cork. The placement depends on where the mouthpiece plays in tune for most notes. Directors should check each instrument and mark this spot on the cork as a future reference for the student. Obviously, tuning changes and the mouthpiece will not always be posi-

tioned in the same place, but the line gives students a good starting point, especially before they learn to tune the instrument.

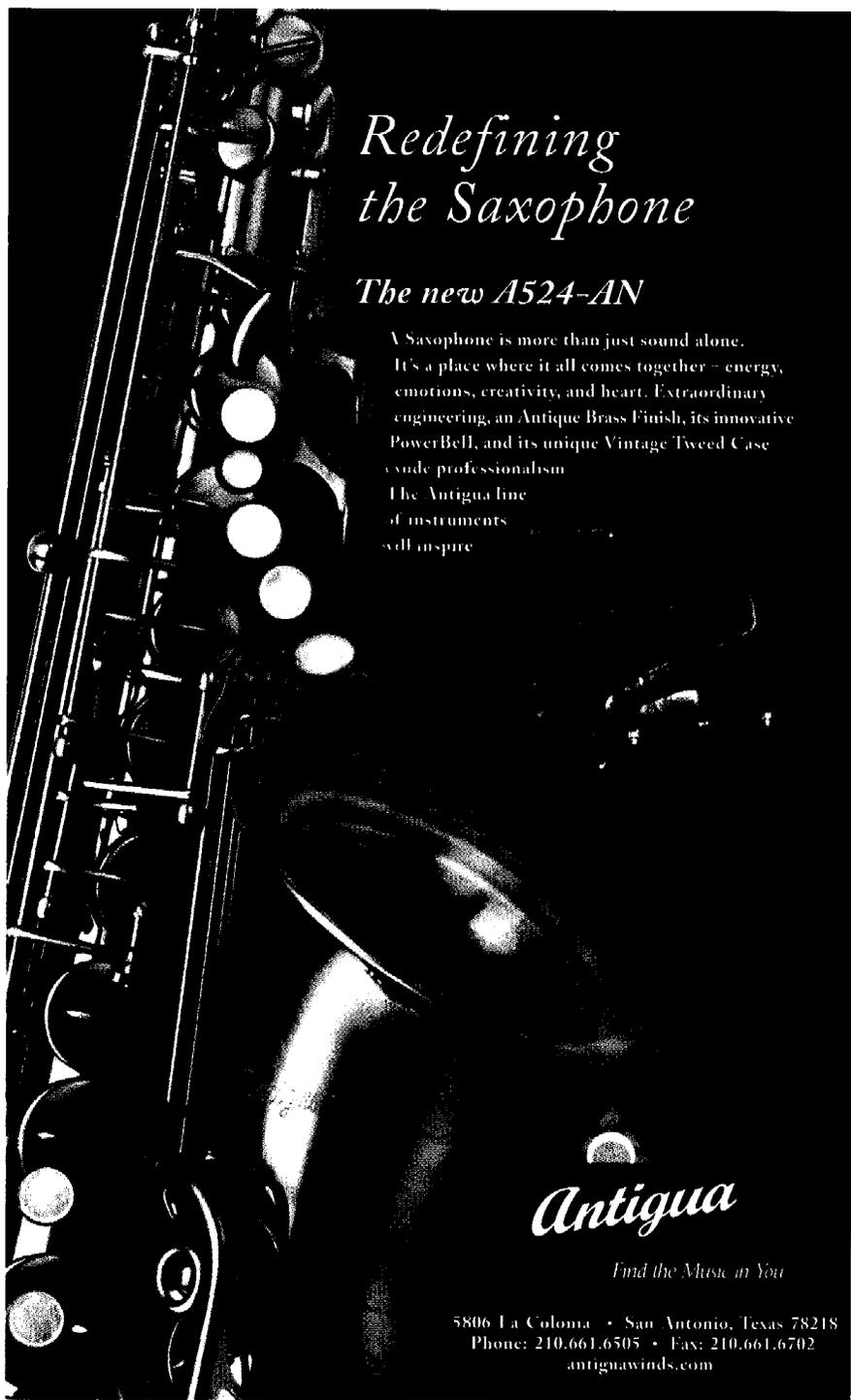
Embouchure

In a good saxophone embouchure the top teeth contact the top of the mouthpiece but the lower teeth do not touch the reed because the lower lip acts as a cushion. How much lower lip goes over the bottom teeth depends on the thickness of the lip. It will quickly become obvious that too much lip over the bottom teeth causes pain when the lip is pinched against the teeth. Most players find that the fleshy part of the lip, not the thin edge, is the best cushion for the reed. If the lower teeth touch the reed, a squeaking sound invariably results.

Beginning sax students are usually not told how much mouthpiece to put into their mouths and end up with too much or too little. With too little mouthpiece in the mouth it is hard to make a sound; with too much, a honking sound ensues. The object is to find the point where the reed breaks away from the mouthpiece. Slip a thin piece of paper between the reed and the mouthpiece and mark how far in it slides with a pencil line on the reed. This point should be about halfway down the

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opening in the mouthpiece. If the paper stops far back, the mouthpiece is too open; if it stops near the tip, the mouthpiece is too closed. Both of these extremes result from improper placement or adjustment of the ligature. The pencil line will show a student the point where the lower lip should contact the reed so it will vibrate most freely.

Just as flutists start by playing only the headjoint and brass players begin by using only the mouthpiece, a beginning saxophonist should play on the mouthpiece and neck at first. Famous saxophone teacher Joseph Allard often told students to "feel the reed with your teeth" because the teeth should apply only enough pressure on the reed through the lower lip to feel the contact, but no more. Too much biting produces a higher pitch, and too little pressure gives a lower pitch. With the correct jaw pressure the mouthpiece/neck combination will sound a concert A^b (F5 on the alto saxophone).

Students should understand that huge embouchure changes are not necessary to move from the low to middle and high registers. With the limited saxophone range it is

unnecessary to relax for the low register or to tighten for the upper register, so beginning saxophonists can play in the upper and lower registers sooner than students on other instruments.

Playing Position

From the first saxophone lesson students should sit with a straight back and feet on the floor or stand up straight so they can breathe correctly. Proper air flow eliminates a host of intonation and tone problems. In particular, the upper saxophone register is impossible to produce without the essential air pressure. Lacking in air support, many students develop the habit of biting on the reed to produce the high notes.

The purpose of the neck strap is to hold the instrument directly in front of the mouth so it can be played with little pressure on the bottom lip. Although students think it looks stylish if a long neck strap allows the instrument to hang in a low position, this will soon cause pain when they play. If the neck strap is adjusted properly the mouthpiece swings into the mouth, not the eye or Adam's apple. The correct motion is to bring the instrument to the mouth

instead of extending the neck and head forward to reach the mouthpiece. The saxophone should be held vertical to the ground, with the neck angling up. This position and angle should be maintained when the mouthpiece goes into the mouth. The right hand and arm should be held so that the instrument is positioned toward the front of the performer, not at the side or behind. The neck is constructed at the correct angle for a good playing position when the instrument is vertical or within 5° of vertical. If the mouthpiece is angled more than this, the sound will be thin.

Hand size is not often a problem for young saxophonists because almost all members of the saxophone family, even the baritone, are manufactured to have a similar feel. However, arm position is often a problem. The instruments are manufactured to be played with the arms at a 90° angle to the instrument so the middle finger, which is longer than the other fingers, reaches the keys that are placed accordingly. Players who approach the keys from other than a 90° angle will have to kink their hands to reach some keys. A 90° arm angle places

the hands in the correct position. Some beginners hold their elbows too high so the arms angle down to reach the keys.

Poor finger dexterity is often caused by poor hand position or too much tension in the fingers, arms, and shoulders, particularly when playing palm or pinkie keys. The hands should be curved and relaxed, as when they hang from the shoulders in a relaxed way. Stiff or pointed fingers are incorrect. The finger pads should touch the six front pearls at all times and never lift off the pearls when a key is released. It helps some students to think of squeezing keys shut and relaxing the hand to release the keys. The left thumb should never be lifted off the octave key. Instead, use a rocking motion to squeeze the key. Both pinkie fingers should remain relaxed and curved and should not curl back tightly when other fingers are in motion.

Beyond the First Three Lessons

Good tonguing habits are difficult to instill and perhaps the most difficult to diagnose because the tongue cannot be observed. The reed will touch the tongue about 1/8" back from the tip of the tongue, so the tongue tip does not touch the reed. To become aware of tongue position students should practice attacking and releasing pitches while being very aware that the tip of the tongue does not touch any part of the reed. The sharpness of the attack can be modified by practicing with different articulations, such as *tu*, *ta*, and *du*.

When initiating an attack, placement of the tip of the tongue on the reed results in an undesirable slap tongue and can slow the speed of successive attacks as well. Students can correct this by not having the tip of the tongue touch the reed.

When attention is given to the physical factors that affect sound production, good habits can be instilled from the first lesson and lead to the development of solid saxophone technique. □

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