

# Saxophone Wisdom from Eugene Rousseau

By Rich Breske

It has been nearly fifty years since Eugene Rousseau opened his saxophone studio at the Indiana University School of Music in 1964. The renowned wind faculty, which included Rousseau, William Bell, Keith Brown, Philip Farkas, Leonard Sharrow, and was led by Wilfred Bain, built a legacy of education that has flourished to this day. Rousseau joined the faculty of the University of Minnesota School of Music in fall 2000 and continues to instruct doctoral, masters, and undergraduate saxophonists, as well as ensembles including the award-winning University of Minnesota Saxophone Quartet.

Matt Muraski is the director of bands in the Cashton School District, located in west-central Wisconsin,

about 45 minutes east of La Crosse. With approximately 300 students enrolled at the high school level, 40% of whom are categorized as economically disadvantaged, Muraski teaches 32 in the high school band, along with 57 in the middle school band. He also coaches some smaller groups, including a saxophone quintet.

Rousseau and Muraski have a great deal in common. Muraski plays saxophone and studied at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls with David Milne, a student of Rousseau's. "I was always excited when he told stories of Rousseau's philosophies of the saxophone and playing. I have many techniques, fingerings, and interpretations handed down that I've passed on to my students.

"We sometimes forget that college and professional players have to get their start somewhere," said Matt. "When I started at Cashton, the band program was rough around the edges. Students weren't invested and most of them just played on whatever instrument they could find. Over the past couple of years I've cultivated some good players and wanted to provide them a step in the direction of a more characteristic sound."

**Rousseau:** "Developing a good saxophone section, whether in concert band or big band, requires a good tone, which is the most vital part of playing the saxophone. The tone is created by the air column, which is controlled and refined by the amount of air used and the formation of the embouchure

*Eugene Rousseau works with a saxophone quartet.*





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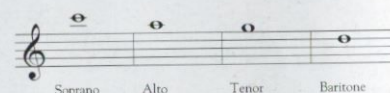
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during this use. The fact that wind instruments use air is obvious, but we sometimes forget that the air column of each instrument differs in size and shape, as well as in quantity. For saxophones, the amount of air differs throughout its range; and from one size of saxophone to another.

Players can improve their tone by inhaling quickly and deeply through the corners of their mouths. This will keep the basic embouchure position intact so that the player can resume a good tone immediately after inhaling.

There are five elements of a proper saxophone embouchure. The lower lip is curved over teeth, drawn toward center for cushion. The teeth must rest on top of the mouthpiece. The chin should be normal, not pointed. The corners of the mouth should be brought in, toward the center so that the embouchure feels round. The shape should feel solid, but not tense.

A simple test to determine the correct balance between air and embouchure is to play a note using only the mouthpiece. The goal is to achieve the following untransposed pitches:

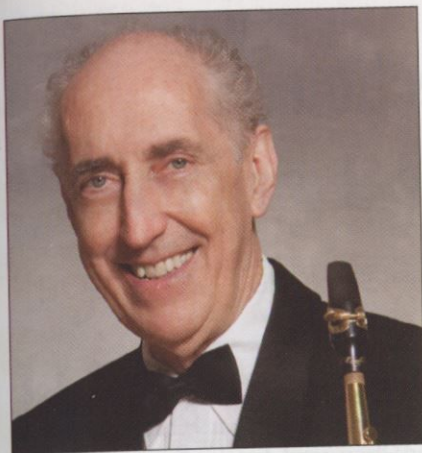


Take a quick, deep breath and sustain these notes at fortissimo. Keep the embouchure round. If the pitch is too high, think of a larger circle. If it is too low, think of a smaller circle. The air flow is controlled by the position of the tongue, so you may have to experiment by thinking of a different syllable from *ee* to *ah*.

**Muraski:** In my saxophone section, I have six alto players currently who all play Class A level solo/ensemble music, four of whom went to state last year. Most students play on second-hand instruments found in Cashton, rent from a store, or borrow from the school if they can't afford either. In most cases, having students purchase a new or upgraded instrument is extremely difficult, especially in the earlier grades.

**Rousseau:** In these types of situations, it is important to understand that not all saxophone makes and models respond the same way. At times, we might blame the player when, in reali-





Eugene Rousseau

ty, this complex instrument can fail mechanically in many small ways that affect performance. As well, some instruments may have flawed or obsolete designs which make blending more difficult. However, having a section that performs on similar makes and models of mouthpieces can have a great effect on the overall sound.

Of course, young players can have all sorts of difficulties as well, regardless of the equipment. If private lessons are unavailable, occasional clinics by a qualified saxophone instructor will help to at least avoid bad habits from spreading throughout the section.

**Muraski:** When I began student teaching I started thinking for the first time about the real scenarios that band directors face. I understand the importance of having high-quality equipment, but neither the school nor the students were able to afford making these investments. As a saxophonist, I thought that it would be best to play on something that students might have a snowball's chance of being able to afford. Also, regardless of price, the equipment must perform well. Rousseau's recommendations accomplished both.

**Rousseau:** The areas of the mouthpiece critical to influencing tone quality are the opening and length of the facing, balanced side rails, a chamber of appropriate size, and a well-designed baffle. There should be a good balance in these design features so that the tone quality is desirable but allows the player to have flexibility and control in all registers, and at all dynamic levels. My main concern has always been to find what I believe to be the best balance among tone quality, response, projection, and dynamic control.

**Muraski:** Over the past two years, two of my students bought upgraded mouthpieces. After this, I used some of my leftover repair budget (from doing most repairs myself) to purchase three

more. Having all players on the same mouthpiece design really helped to bring the section together. Before, tuning and intonation were just so-so. The scale of the instruments – and of the section – is now more in tune. The second greatest improvement was in the section's cohesiveness of sound. The models we use, along with a combination of specific instruction and practice, provide for a characteristic and much improved saxophone sound.

**Rousseau:** In testing a mouthpiece, I recommend four factors to consider. First, use several reeds of slightly different strengths; your favorite reed may be fine for your current mouthpiece but not for a different one. Be certain that the reed is placed correctly on the mouthpiece, that its tip is even with the tip of the mouthpiece, and that it is centered from side to side. Be certain that the reed is sealing. To test this, keep the end of the mouthpiece covered with one hand, draw the air out of the mouthpiece (keeping the end covered), then take the mouthpiece from your mouth. A popping sound ensures that the reed is sealing. Finally, before playing anything, use a tuning note so that the mouthpiece can be at the correct position on the bocal (neck). If not, distortion can occur.

If it is impossible to upgrade an instrument, upgrading the mouthpiece will still enhance performance. Upgrading an entire section's mouthpieces can also provide excellent results, especially if the mouthpieces are of similar make and design. □

*Rich Breske has spent his life in and around music and music education. Beginning as a saxophone player and one of the first college graduates with a degree in music-business, he has worked with symphonies, artists, instrument makers and a host of related businesses. He has also worked with a number of different organizations to support school music. With over thirty years experience in marketing and communications, he currently shares his talents with businesses and individuals who want to expand their reach and influence. He is an author of many articles and a new book on marching band directed to middle school students.*



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# Tuning the Saxophone Section

By Eugene Rousseau

Many student musicians take the time to tune to one note, which is fine for a start, but it is necessary to relate to different notes when working with a saxophone section. In tuning each saxophone individually and the saxophone section as a whole, it is best to start with two notes:

Alto sounds D4  
Tenor sounds A3  
Perfect fourth apart

Play B

Tenor sounds A3  
Baritone sounds D3  
Perfect fifth apart.

When tuning the saxophone section I recommend that all play B4, because this allows us to hear each instrument on a note that is in the same position acoustically. B may seem a trifle flat, but this is fine for the moment. However, if B is sharp the mouthpiece should be pulled out slightly. Then, play F# to confirm the mouthpiece position.

In tuning the saxophone section, after the alto has tuned, the tenor should also play B. This will produce an interval of a perfect fourth, an interval for which it is easy to hear if it is out of tune. After the tenor has tuned with the alto using this perfect fourth, the baritone should now play B with the tenor. This will produce a perfect fifth, another interval for which it is easy to determine tuning.

Then, when tuning the section further, note the five examples to the right. These chords are in concert keys, followed by the steps for tuning. In tuning chords it is important to begin with unisons and octaves, then fourths and fifths, as these comprise the foundation for good intonation, and they are the easiest to hear. Only five examples are provided here, but teachers could create many more.

For more information about Eugene Rousseau and a wide range of advice and discussions concerning saxophone performance and mouthpieces, visit [www.eugene-rousseau.com](http://www.eugene-rousseau.com).

1. Alto 1 and baritone tune double octave.
2. Baritone and tenor tune perfect fifth.
3. Tenor and alto 1 tune perfect fourth plus octave.
4. All play.

1. Alto 2 and baritone tune octaves.
2. Baritone and tenor tune perfect fifth (plus octave).
3. Tenor and alto 2 tune perfect fourth.
4. All play.

1. Alto 2 and baritone tune double octave.
2. Alto 2 and tenor tune perfect fourth.
3. All play.

1. Alto 1 and baritone tune double octave.
2. Alto 1 and alto 2 tune perfect fourth.
3. All play.

1. Alto 2 and baritone tune double octave.
2. Alto 1 and alto 2 tune perfect fifth.
3. All play.