

Puppy Dog Technique

One of the challenges pipers and drummers face is the need to keep our wrists, fingers and hands consistently relaxed while playing. Top players can achieve a relaxed yet strong grip, allowing for the most efficient movement providing strength and quickness when needed. This allows you to play fast, strong, clean and for longer durations without stress or strain. Today I'd like to share a set of free exercises for hand relaxation inspired by the piano teacher and author Margaret Elson.

In her book *Passionate Practice*, Elson describes what she calls "puppy dog hands".
"When your hands are heavy, or after you release a ball, or when you let your hands fall easily, palm up, in your lap, there's no extra tension in your hands. They look like a puppy dog's paws when she's on her back waiting to get a tummy rub. All easy and floppy."

Elson describes the technique for piano players, I've modified it for us, drummers please change chanter for drum sticks:

1. Sit in a chair with your practice chanter/drum sticks lying on the table.
 2. Rest your hands in your lap, palms facing up. Breathe slowly and let your hands feel heavy.
 3. Slowly raise your hands up and place them on your chanter. Keep your fingers and hands completely relaxed and free of tension as you place your fingers into position over the holes.
 4. Focus your awareness on the minimum amount of energy needed to keep your fingers in position on the chanter, covering the holes. Let the natural weight of your hands and fingers cover the holes, but don't add any extra squeezing force.
 5. Blow Low G.
 6. Stop and put down your chanter and go back to Step 1.
 7. Repeat several times until you can achieve perfect relaxed form holes covered, ready to play, aware of the minimum energy needed to get into position.
- Drummers please play a simple flam or similar.

The next and most challenging step is to maintain this state of relaxed fingering while playing more than Low G. Keep it simple at first and gradually build up the complexity.

Here are some things to play while you focus your awareness on your puppy dog hands. Again drummers please amend accordingly for drum embellishments starting simple and becoming more complex each time.

1. Low G
2. The scale
3. The scale alternating with Low G between the other notes
4. High G grace note scale
5. GDE grace note combinations
6. Doublings
7. Grips, Taorluaths. D Throws.

Remain focused and aware of the tension in your wrist, hands and fingers. If you find yourself tightening up at any time, pause, release the tension and try again. If you're like most pipers/drummers, some elements of your fingering will be overly tight or tense simply because you've practiced that way. It's a normal phase every piper goes through as we learn to control and master our technique. Good pipers & drummers understand the importance of relaxed

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technique which lets you play cleanly and consistently at a variety of tempos while conserving energy to let you enjoy playing for longer stretches of time.

So next time you practice try using the Puppy Dog Technique and see if that helps your playing improve!