

The “S.T.A.R” Strike-In System

Strike-ins can be a major enigma in the pipe band world. From early E's, to double-toning drones, or over-blowing on the E, to coming in early, having trouble starting the tune at the proper tempo, attacks are tough!

With this said though, it is possible to tame the beast however we're going to need a plan, and then we are going to need to practice.

The Real Objective;

Before anything else, let's quickly touch on the true objective here. Attacks are too important to leave to chance, and therefore the objective is not to learn how to produce a good attack.

Instead, the true objective is to completely eliminate any chance of a bad attack. With the help of this guide, and some practice, you'll be able to guarantee a good attack, every time.

Let's resolve the attack issue once and for all, so we can move the focus to other (more difficult) aspects of piping!

Taming the Beast;

Let's identify the four items that can ruin an attack:

Double-toning drone reeds,

early chanter sounds,

out-of-tune blowing on entry notes closely followed by out-of-rhythm on entry notes.

These are the 4 issues that can throw us off, and each issue can be isolated and resolved quickly and easily if you follow what's written beyond this point. Our Setup will help us avoid the double-tone. There are three Techniques we can use to avoid early chanter sounds.

Knowing what Air-Pressure to blow will make sure we hit the 'E' in tune!

Doing your attack to a set Rhythm will ensure your 'E' and the ensuing tune happens perfectly on the beat.

The “S.T.A.R” Perfect for Pipe Band Strike Ins; (Setup, Technique, Air-Pressure, Rhythm).

Avoid Double-Toning

Avoid Early Chanter Sounds

Come In Perfectly In Tune

Come In Perfectly On Time

• Ask the 4 Questions of Bagpipe Maintenance

1. Bag Airtight?

2. Joints Airtight?

3. Reed-Seats Airtight?

4. Drone Reeds Well-

Calibrated?

• Then Ensure:

• Bass Drone Tuning Pin bottom joint is NO MORE than 3/4 Inch high, have the top joint sit on the help line

• Impossible to Double

Tone

• Keep hand on bag for striking motion

• Keep your thumb FAR off hole until pipes safely struck in.

The “S.T.A.R” Strike-In System

- Keep ‘E’ finger ON HOLE until the right hand is safely on the chanter.
- Use the “flam” method of striking the bag.
- In final tuning, try to memorize the perfect pressure.
- Try to recreate that pressure during your attack.
- When in doubt, err on the side of caution.
- Don’t fish! Pick a single pressure and stick to it for the length of the E. This is by far a bigger issue than most pipers in the band realise. Learn where the “sweet spot” blowing pressure for your chanter sits, normal operating tonal pressure you play so not over or under blown and ensure each time you start that the E is blown at that pressure.

Ensure all strike-in actions happen synchronized to the beats of a Pipe Band Introduction.

(hand on bag at ready)

1. Rolls,
2. Rolls,
3. Rolls

1. [Rest]
2. Strike**
3. Tuck

7. ‘E’

1. ‘E’
2. Tune start

** Use the “flam” technique to coordinate strike/blowing when striking in. Let’s look in a bit more depth at each of the 4 divisions of the “S.T.A.R” system.

Set up;

Bagpipe setup and maintenance isn’t just important for tonal quality and tuning it’s also essential for strike-ins. Reeds that are too open, leaks that come from the bag, joints, and reed-seats can and will cause problems with your attacks. Set up and continually maintain your instrument by asking the 4 questions of bagpipe maintenance every time you get your pipes out of the box.

The 3/4 Inch Rule

To guarantee a great strike-in ensure the first (lower) tuning pin of your bass drone tunes no more than 3/4 inches high. Why? Well, it’s pretty simple: The higher the bass drone tunes on the pin, the more likely you are to double-tone. Make sure it tunes low by adjusting the top tuning slide, the “nose-screw” of the bass reed.

Technique;

Keeping the Hand on the Bag

Keeping the hand on the bag (as opposed to taking the hand off to “strike”) offers more stability, consistency, and control during the strike-in. A must develop habit.

Thumb Off!

Keep your thumb well off the High A hole during the strike in process. Why on Earth? Well, it makes sure that, if you DO have an early chanter sound, it’s a quiet wee High A sound (pointed away from the judge) rather than a nasty D or E sound pointed right at the judge. ‘E’-Finger ON! Meanwhile, keep the ‘E’ finger on the hole until your bottom hand is safely on the chanter. If you neglect to do this, it won’t be long before your right hand accidentally settles over the wrong holes. The result? A big fat LOUD ‘B’ sound right in the face of the judges!

The “S.T.A.R” Strike-In System

Bonus: The “Flam” Method.

Drummers use a technique called a flam, whereby one stick hits the drum a split second before the other.

In order not to accidentally double-tone during the strike-in, we too should do one thing (strike the bag) a split second BEFORE we do another (blow air into the bag). This “flam” process happens during the “strike” on beat 5 of the roll-offs.

Air-Pressure;

No Fishing please. “Fishing” refers to changing pressures during the attack in order to try to “find” the correct pressure to

blow the E. This is a very bad habit because the effect of fishing for a note is very abrasive to the ear, which will ruin the band’s attack.

Instead of fishing, it’s far better to try to memorize the best pressure for the attack, and then attempt to recreate that exact pressure on the attack. Even if it’s a tiny bit flat/sharp, keeping the pitch unwavering will produce the best possible effect.

Then, with practice, your memorization skills will become perfected, allowing you to hit the pitch “bang on” every time!

Rhythm;

Strike —> Tuck —> ‘E’

You can and should align these processes directly with the beat of the roll-offs. It ensures everything happens exactly when it should, and that you get off to a rhythmic start with the tune you’re about to play.

So there you have it, a simple step by step guide to having a proper “Pipe Band Style Attack” each and every time you start. Anything less and the music you reproduce from that point onwards will always be slightly undervalued by your listener, or at least your important ones, the ones who hand out the prizes come competition day. Take pride in all you do. This is the start point of the first impression your listeners have of you, let’s always get that bit right!

Remember, if it’s not working for you ASK. There’s probably some little detail you’ve missed and we can show where the problem is.