

# Basic Reed Conditioning and Care

by

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“The Woodwind Guy”

There are many different ways and approaches to working and adjusting reeds. Everyone has their own way of doing things and feels that theirs is the best way. One should always keep an open mind when working with reeds. This pamphlet contains some of the methods that have worked for me over the years. Over time, as you work with reeds and learn new approaches, you will have your own way.

The one thing that you must remember about reeds is that ALL REEDS ARE NOT EQUAL AND ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE. What this means is that every reed is different; just because you have two brand new Vandoren #3's does not mean that they will be the same thickness or respond the same way. Each reed has its own personality, so to speak. The second part of the phrase refers to the fact that the reed will not stay the same forever – they change. Made of cane, they are influenced by the humidity, how long they have been in use (individual playing sessions and overall playing-life of the reed), the player's body chemistry, and storage/care.

Along with this, it helps to realize that reeds also have different pitches to them; some will play sharper/flatter than others.

All this may seem overwhelming. Don't worry; through simple, basic conditioning of reeds we can reduce some of the outside influences on the reeds, getting them to play closer to the potential.

**Strength Variance:** When you buy a particular strength of reed, what you are actually choosing is a *range* of strength. Like cloths, not every of the same size will be the same, each will respond and feel different. Basically it is the Goldilocks principle: some will be too hard, some too soft, and some just right.

## **Conditioning**

Step 1: When you get a new reed, place it in some water for 5-10 seconds, just longer enough for it to get wet. With you index finger, rub the vamp of the reed going from the center to the tip of the reed. This will help seal some of the pores, trapping some moisture. Place the reed face up on a flat surface to dry, preferably on glass. Another approach is to place the reeds face down to dry. This method dries the reeds out quicker.



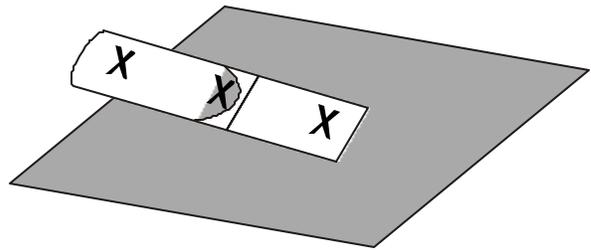
Let the reeds dry about 30 minutes. Do not let them dry over night because that will totally dry out the reed, making things worse.

Step 2: At this point I break the reed in by playing the reed briefly (5 minutes, a few scales). I try to stay in the mid-range of the instrument, not playing to high or loud. The purpose is to get the reed use to vibrating. Some say that this is not needed, but reeds last a little longer for me if I break them in slowly.

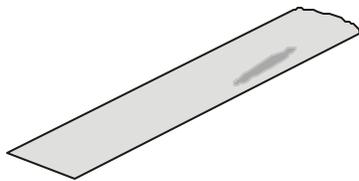
I will do this brief playing two or three times before I will submit the reed to a regular practice session. It is during the breaking-in stage that I make adjustments.

Step 3: After the first or second initial playing, giving it time to expand because of the moisture and vibrations, it is time to flatten the back. By making sure the back is flat creates a better seal between the reed and the mouthpiece, and thus better response.

Step 4: With the sandpaper (you can use either sandpaper [400 or 600 grade] or a Mill Bastard File) on the glass (or flat surface) carefully rub the backside of the reed. (Place fingers at the spots marked) Make sure not to let the tip of the reed (the first X) go on the sandpaper – this will remove part of the tip and make the reed softer. Just do a couple of swipes will do the trick.



Step 5: Take the reed, place fully on a clean piece of paper, and rub it back and forth. The whole reed should be on the paper. This will help close the pores and also show if the back of the reed is flat.



By holding the backside at an angle up to the light, you should see a shiny surface. If there is a dull spot (see example) that means that the reed is not totally flat. It is okay if there are dull spots at the bottom of the reed but not in the middle. If there are dull (dark) spots on the reed, make a few more swipes across the sandpaper. (Remember not to let the tip of the reed go on the sandpaper.) Rub the reed again on the clean paper again. Repeat this until the reed is flat; generally once or twice will do the trick.

After the red has been in use for some time, check to see if the back is still flat - it sometimes warps a little. Also, rubbing an older reed on a clean piece of paper will occasionally keep the pores closed and make the reed more responsive.

Since each person's body chemistry is different, how long a reed will last will differ (with everything else being equal). Those with a high acidic ness may go through more

reeds than others. There is no standard life expectancy for a reed.

**Basic Reed Care:** Reeds are like socks in that you do not want to use the same one every day – alternate them. What this means is that you should have a couple of workable reeds. While this may seem excessive and expensive, it is actually cheaper. By having several reeds that you rotate when you play, you do not prematurely wear-out a reed and thus they last longer.

Store the reeds in a reed holder that will keep them flat and protected. Do not keep them in the cardboard reed holder that they sometimes come in. If possible, the reed holder with the rubber band is best (Vito is one brand that makes these [or use to]): the rubber band holds the reeds without making indentation into the heart of the reed.

Obviously, you want to take care of the reeds to make sure they don't chip or crack, so use the mouthpiece cap every chance you get. The cap will protect the reed from any potentially destructive bumps.

## **Closing**

Obviously, the more you play, the more you will use reeds and the quicker they will wear-out, and thus the more you will need. By following the tips outlined here, you can make the reeds that you have last and perform better.

Later, we will learn how to adjust a reed and try to make a bad reed a little better. (We can never make a bad reed good or great, but we can sometimes make them usable for practice.)