

SELECTING A PIPE BAG

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We should never underestimate the value of careful selection when it comes to choosing a new pipe bag. There are so many on the market and their performance, comfort and suitability should be understood so that you get the appropriate bag for you. This will vary depending on your needs, size and shape, playing requirements and in many cases what your band will insist upon. Most bands prefer to have a similar playing set up for most instruments, but as we will see there are still many options available without affecting the bands performance.

Let's look first at the most common types of bags available.

- The hide bag (sheepskin, cowhide etc).
- The synthetic bag (goretex or similar fabric).
- Composite (leather or similar with synthetic lining).

The Hide Bag

The majority of hide bags on the market are stitched seam bags, although some have a glued seam. They require seasoning with some type of bag dressing and therefore you have a moist set up. This can be good and bad. Due to moisture issues you may have a reduced playing time, but also you may have a more constant environment within your bag and the stability that comes with it. Many pipers comment on the tonal qualities of hide bags and the resonance that comes from them, often from having no restriction to the drones and the bag having direct contact with the stocks. The moist environment can also give a warmer/fuller chanter sound.

A hose type water trap can be used that will increase the playing time, but also the selection of an appropriate leather can also increase your playing time before your pipe is affected by moisture. Hides such as sheepskin will absorb a lot of moisture if properly dressed. They may dry out in hotter/dryer climates and therefore a chrome hide bag may be more suitable which will not absorb as much moisture, but also will not dry out as much. Usually chrome hide bags have a very long life, whereas sheepskin may require replacement every season or two. One of the disadvantages though is when the bag is wet, then it is wet, there is little you can do in the short term to dry your pipes and increase your playing time whilst at an event.



Sheepskin bag

Hide bags do tend to mould to your shape and can be very comfortable. The stitched seam gives the bags a more elliptical shape and often they are cut in such a way as to keep your forearm away from the bag and this increases playing comfort. An expert in tying bags in can get the angles right for drones and blow stick etc. to personalise the fitting of a bag making it very comfortable.

Care should be taken with what you put into the bag to dress it. Some products are little more than a sealant that can enhance moisture problems. Other products assist moisture to pass through the bag walls and these can be very beneficial.

Advantages

- Comfort
- Tonal quality
- Tonal Stability (at least in the short term)
- Different hides have various advantages
- Good for clean cut outs

Disadvantages

- Needs to be tied in by someone with experience
- Can have a reduced playing time due to moisture control issues
- Requires dressing and regular maintenance and playing

The Synthetic Bag

A more recent development in piping is the synthetic bag. These can be excellent for people who do not play often or want a more maintenance free set up. When combined with an appropriate moisture control system they can greatly increase playing time. Some bags let quite a lot of moisture pass through the walls and this also can help lengthen playing times; however some bags despite the manufacturer's suggestions are almost impervious to moisture and are far from breathable as is often claimed. This does not necessarily cause problems but will require a moisture control system of some type to enhance playing times.



Synthetic Bag

The bags are of varying size and shapes. Many will find that various brands are comfortable for them, but some are not. It is best to try them out. Some can be more “balloon shaped” and put pressure on your forearm whilst playing or increase the strain on your neck and shoulder.

The nature of many of the synthetic materials means that the pipes are not well insulated and often putting them down for a few minutes can affect the tuning significantly. They also by nature are a dryer system to start with and depending on your moisture control system your chanter can either stay quite dry or moisten very rapidly. This of course will change the balance, pitch and tone as you play. Any moisture control system that affects airflow will also affect your instruments tonal qualities. This can give you greater refinement possibilities, or lose harmonic depth depending on the set up you use and how you manage it.

Most bags have pre-fit grommets to fit stocks into the bag and so the ability to alter angles etc. by someone who is experienced at tying bags in can be reduced.

Advantages

- No seasoning required and regular playing not essential
- Zip bags can be opened to insert a moisture control system
- Receptive to numerous moisture control options
- Increased drone refining options

Disadvantages

- Loss of chanter stability in some cases
- Increased moisture problems without an appropriate MCS
- Loss of drone harmonics with some MCS
- Some brands may not be comfortable to you and should be tried before purchase
- Little insulation during temperature changes
- Can be difficult to cut pipes out cleanly with some set ups

Composite Bags

The most recent bags on the market are the composite bags. These have a leather or similar outer and a synthetic lining. In affect they are almost the same as synthetic bags, however give the feel of a leather bag instead of the light nature of the synthetic material. They also offer some insulation against temperature changes, particularly when you put your pipes down for a few minutes between playing sessions.



Many composite bags tend not to be as much of a "balloon shape" as some of the lighter material synthetic bags on the market.

Most times these bags will be a little more expensive than other synthetic bags and have many of the same advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

- No seasoning required and regular playing not essential
- Zip bags can be opened to insert a moisture control system
- Receptive to numerous moisture control options
- Increased drone refining options
- Offer a little more temperature insulation than purely synthetic bags

Disadvantages

- Loss of chanter stability in some cases
- Increased moisture problems without an appropriate MCS
- Loss of drone harmonics with some MCS
- Some brands may not be comfortable to you and should be tried before purchase
- Can be difficult to cut pipes out cleanly with some set ups

Selecting a Bag

It is possible to alleviate or even eliminate some of your problems when selecting a bag. Decide what sort of moisture management you need depending on your playing requirements and also the importance to you of any tonal benefit of hide or sheepskin. Select an appropriate seasoning and leather type for your environment and personal moisture issues. Some people do blow more moisture into the bag during playing than others.

If you do not play regularly a hide bag will not be a good option.

Size is very important for comfort and articles on “making your bagpipe fit” can be found on the School of Piping website. I often recommend that pipers try someone else’s bag for size and shape before making a purchase. There are no fixed rules on what size is best, so testing is essential to get the best comfort. An experienced tutor or vendor may be able to offer some good advice on sizing etc. but this is never an exact science.

Swan or goose necks are often a good idea as they can prevent any impediment to air flow to the chanter and often place the chanter on a more comfortable playing position.



Swan neck sheepskin bag

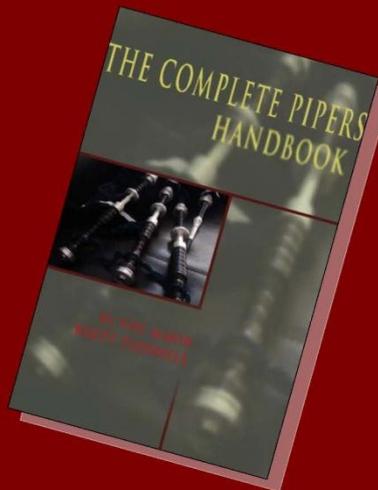
Most synthetic bags have a goose or swan neck and straight neck bags will usually only be found as a stitched seam hide bag. They have a different feel to them that some pipers prefer.

Some hide bags come with holes pre-cut, but those without can be cut by the person tying the bag in, giving even more flexibility to personalise the bag to the pipers size and shape.

Most experienced vendors who are pipers will be able to help you with recommendations and also to set a bag up to fit you as best possible.

More information on fitting and tying in bags, moisture control systems, making pipes fit and tonal refinement can be found in **"The Complete Pipers Handbook"**

Now available from the new **School of Piping Shop** site at http://www.schoolofpiping.com/shop/advanced_publications.html and also numerous stockists around the world.



The Complete Pipers Handbook

is a must for every serious piper. Never before has a more comprehensive guide been published. Maintenance, set up, refinement, tuning, setting up bands, performance psychology and **much more!**

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