



By Willem Moolenbeek

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Some Sound Advice

To get the best tone from any wind instrument, it is crucial to have a well-supported air supply. The word "support" gets thrown around in the world of music making in a fairly casual manner. Choir directors often encourage the group to "sing from the diaphragm." The diaphragm essentially separates lungs and heart from the digestive tract. Diaphragmatic support is essential for a good response.

Grunt Work

Sit with good posture and place your thumbs between the hip bones and lowest ribs at your back. Bring the index fingers forward around the sides of your abdomen, in the soft area between the hip and ribs. Take a big breath and grunt. Grunting happens when we try to push air out of our lungs through our throats while at the same time closing off the air passage.

At that instant of grunting, you should feel that soft area between the hip and lower ribs get harder. Muscles are trying to push the air out, but since we have closed the throat, the air now pushes down on the diaphragm and this displaces the relatively fluid mass of our digestive system, moving it down and outward. This happens very quickly and goes away as soon as we relax and breathe normally. Try this a few times to get a sense of the effect.

Try grunting and attempt to maintain the pushing and expansion of the waist while at the same time exhaling and inhaling. This is essentially what occurs when a wind player produces a well-supported tone. Of course, once you get the hang of this you do not need, nor want, to make the guttural sound in the back of your throat that we associ-

ate with grunting. Now try this and play something. The saxophone's response should be more immediate and resonant.

The Belt

This effect can be further observed and developed by using a 4- or 5-cm. wide belt that is placed around the abdomen in that soft area between the hip and lower ribs. Tighten this so that it is just comfortably snug. Then when you grunt (establish the support), the belt will tighten as you expand. Try maintaining that level of tightness while exhaling and inhaling, and then while blowing on the horn.

Start by playing a long tone on middle E. I like to use middle E for many exercises since it responds well on most saxophones. Feeling the tension of the belt allows you to maintain the support without thinking about what is going on with your breathing or diaphragm. If you feel the belt, everything is working.

A similar effect can be observed when we play very loudly. At that point we are usually trying to push the air out faster than it can exit between the mouthpiece and reed. This sense of "back pressure" is very similar to what is felt when supporting the tone. One of the most effective exercises for developing tone, support, and stamina can demonstrate this.

Crescendo, Decrescendo

Play a note for twelve beats. For each beat, increase the dynamic by one step. Start a long tone as *pp* as possible. Increase the dynamic gradually and evenly between beats so that each beat is one dynamic level louder than the previous one. Stay at *ff* for two beats and gradually get quieter in the same way. Observe the sensation of pressure in the chest when playing *ff*. Try to maintain that feeling while at the same time decreasing the dynamic.

Remember that as you get louder and softer, you are increasing and decreasing the air speed. Use your metronome and find a tempo that allows you to do this in one breath and gradually slow this tempo so that you can do the crescendo and decrescendo over a longer period of time.

If you spend a few minutes of every practice session focusing on this seemingly simple exercise, it will pay off in increased stamina, dynamic control, and, most importantly, good sound.

