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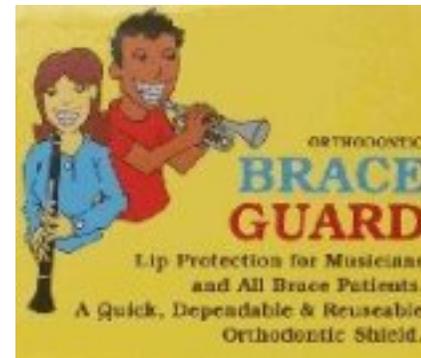
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Lip Protection for Trumpeters with Braces!

by James F. Donaldson

Q: Now that I have braces, what do I do?

A: First, adjust your attitude.

You come home with braces. They feel funny in your mouth and your teeth hurt. You've heard the terrible rumors. You can't imagine playing the trumpet with your mouth the way it is. Your teeth just hurt too much. A couple of days later, the hurting has decreased--or maybe you've just gotten used to it--and you open up the case and put the mouthpiece in the horn. You raise your horn to your lips.

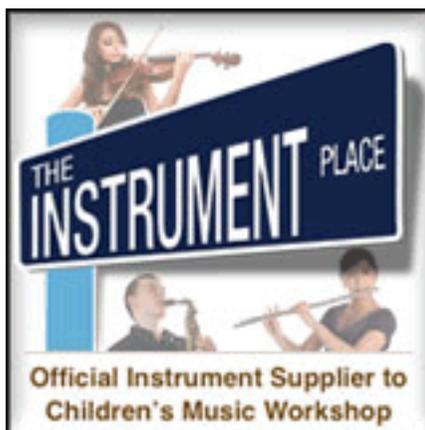
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The mouthpiece sits on your chops like you've never done this before. You take a breath, rather tentative, tongue a note, and blow. The sound is awful. You sounded better in sixth grade (sixth graders: think fourth grade). It just feels so weird. Everything feels different and weird. You play a few more notes, all low. They all sound bad. You try to go a bit higher, the buzz stops altogether, no sound comes out, and it hurts. You are first chair, but the guy on the other end can do better than you now, and he plays with the mouthpiece over near his left earlobe. You play a few more notes and then try a higher one again. Same thing happens, and it is starting to hurt. You can feel the braces start to dig into the back of your chops. Try one more time. No sound. Pain. You put your horn back in the case, shut it, and go jump off a bridge.

That is how it feels, but stop before you get to the bridge.

Don't get discouraged. Keep reminding yourself that others have done it, and so can you. In fact, it seems to Eric Bolvin and trumpet teachers everywhere that nearly every kid gets braces at some point. So be positive and be patient, but be realistic. This is a major trauma, but you are up to it. It is going to take some time for you to return to your best, but you can do it. Nearly all the contributors to this page pointed out the need to maintain a positive attitude, and to persevere. And, as Shane Porter pointed out, this is the attitude one really should have all the time: if you're going to be a trumpet player, in general you should have a strong positive attitude that will pave the road for gigging later in life. Michael Haig, who has had braces twice, recommends listening to recordings of very fine trumpet players when you start to get discouraged. Hear what made the trumpet exciting for you again.

There is also a silver lining to the cloud. Sarah Jones said that braces caused her to fix the bad habits that she had before, such as applying pressure to play or pinching to get notes out. Also because of the greater amount of air required to play with braces, she got in the good habit of using lots of air when playing. As long as you don't try to find short cuts, she says, you might easily come out a better player. When she auditioned for college after just two months off braces, the faculty that listened to her, she reports, were all very impressed. She attributes her success to being determined from the beginning.

Maybe some of this material, assembled from many who have lived through it, will also help.

Then, don't forget you've made an embouchure change, whether you wanted to or not. Think it through. Remember:

- Jean Pocius recommends that one purse his or her lips a bit, which is done without moving the corner placement (i.e., using the muscles between the corners and the rim of the mouthpiece). This

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is necessary for efficient playing for anybody, but is all the more important for those with braces. Those who have braces need to create a cushion of muscle, not of air, between the wires and the mouthpiece. Failure to do so can cause serious, permanent damage to the inside of the lips when playing with the pressure necessary to keep the lips in contact with a stretched, spread embouchure. The thicker the lips are, the better the tone quality, and the less injury to the lips.

- You absolutely have to learn to play without pressure or some day, during band, you will bleed to death. For more guidance in adjusting your embouchure and technique to do so, to play "efficiently" as Jeanne says, go to the web sites of Clint "Pops" McLaughlin and Clyde Hunt, each of whom have much relevant information about playing without pressure and developing practical range. Pop's information can be found at Trumpet College and his Net Trumpet Lessons, particularly the articles and lessons about Airstream, Embouchure Change, and Pressure. Clyde's can be found at B Flat Music, particularly the article about Mouthpiece Pressure. There is an abundance of good information here in general.

- You will become even more dependent on developing your air control. Check out New York trumpeter Rich Szabo's Breathing Exercises. This is difficult reading, but working one's way through it and understanding it, can change everything about your approach to the trumpet. All for the better.

- Stanton Kramer highly recommends the book Embouchure Design, by Nick Drozdoff, for those going through an embouchure change. It focuses on using minimum mouthpiece pressure and instrument independence.

Next, change your practice routine.

You didn't choose to change your embouchure, but you have, so your practice needs to be reflect that.

- Start by playing long tones, long low tones, really long tones, at soft volumes. Play, as Michael Haig says, until you find a spot that feels comfortable and gives you the best sound and tone, so long as it isn't extreme. Much of the muscle memory of your chops has been disrupted to the point that you have to teach the chops what to do all over again. Get a nice buzz, let the chops get the feel of the mouthpiece again. This will not come the first day.

- Focus on the notes on the lower part of the staff, like the fourth line D and down to bottom line E, unless those are too high, then work lower. Stay relaxed, but do not play lots of very low notes (below staff) or your embouchure will get flabby and your lip aperture will start to open in an unhealthy way. The last thing you can afford now is another bad habit. Be patient but do lots of them.

- Still using the lower part of your range, Kate Myers recommends practicing slurs to develop good

fundamental flexibility, starting of course with slurs of a short distance between notes (i.e., no octaves for a while--the stronger you get, the wider you can go).

- Once you can begin to play again, both Eric Bolvin and Michael Haig recommend doing a lot of exercises from the first couple pages of Herbert L. Clarke's Technical Studies. These are great for the buzz, the air, and the sound. Play them softly, at reasonable--well controlled--speeds.
- Jeanne Pocius recommends the playing softly and gently of double pedals (the octave below pedal C). Often the chops of those with braces are stiffer than usual, due to the increased distance between teeth and lips. Don't use any appliance when playing pedal tones--they shake it loose anyway and they are played with so little pressure that the appliance is unnecessary.
- Tonguing is also often disrupted by braces. Jeanne Pocius recommends that one tongue on the bottom edge of the top teeth, rather than on the roof of the mouth, to avoid any wires or retainers that may be behind the teeth. Articulation studies, softly lightly tonguing eighth notes and sixteenth notes over your useful (diminished) range are very helpful. Aim for the least possible tongue movement and the cleanest possible articulation.
- Listen carefully to your sound, compare it in your head to the sound you want. The more you focus on that sound, the better you will get. If you don't have a good sound in your head, go get some recordings of great trumpet players and listen carefully. Go hear trumpet players in concert. You can't reproduce a sound you haven't heard.
- Practice fairly short times (15 - 20 minutes, maybe only five minutes at first), resting as much as you play so you do not do more harm than good. Do not play at all once you get tired or feel some stress. Don't push, don't press. Practice, Kate recommends, two or three or four times each day. Don't over practice. If you do, it just sets you back.

Try an appliance--you never know--it might help.

Many folks have tried all manner of wax and guards and pads and strips, and have just decided to approach the problem au natural. They find that the appliances try their patience, are messy (cutting and forming the wax, trying to get it out of the teeth later), and just plain do not work. They found much better results by working religiously on reducing the pressure necessary to play. Develop good playing habits, tough it out over the several weeks, and by then you'll probably be regaining your strength, good sound, flexibility, ego and chair.

Others say that they owe their survival as a trumpet player to these devices. One encounters different kinds and colors of wax, folded pieces of notebook paper, and plumbers teflon joint sealing tape. Matt Stock recalls a lecture by trumpet player extraordinaire Mel Broiles where he suggested cutting up an old plastic soda bottle into thin strips which can be used as a homemade barrier.

Jim Fesmire discovered an additional aid which is generally marketed for denture users as a cushion or pad. They are actually a 3" x 3" sheet of polymer material which can be used with dental adhesive powder. Cut a strip with scissors to position in front of the lower teeth. This allows evening up top and bottom teeth, eliminating the overbite that follows from having braces on only the top. A strip can also be used on the top teeth as a narrow bumper also. The stuff is readily available through dentists.

Rick Sonntag invented the following solution for himself when he was 11 years old, and his son is now successfully using it:

Although somewhat tedious to make at first, the device can be re-used for months before needing to redo it. Purchase a football mouth guard (the kind that you dip in boiling water and then bite into to make an impression of your teeth). First, use sharp scissors to cut a small strip of plastic from the front surface of the mouthpiece. Cut the strip long enough to cover the front four teeth, and wide enough to cover from the gum to the tips of the teeth. Following the instructions that come with the mouth guard, drop the plastic strip in boiling water to soften it. If you purchased an unpigmented mouth guard (hazy clear appearance), you will notice that it turns completely clear when heated up. Retrieve the plastic strip using a spoon or tongs, and blow some cool air on it for a few seconds to cool the surface. Then quickly place the strip on top of the braces on the front teeth, and press down to mold the back side of the strip to the shape of the braces.

WARNING: BE CAREFUL NOT TO BURN YOURSELF!!! Be sure to blow some cool air on the plastic strip before pressing on the braces, to cool the outer surface. Also, if you use metal tongs to dip the plastic strip into the boiling water, do not leave the tongs sitting in the boiling water - let the plastic float in the water, and use the tongs to retrieve it when it has heated up. Otherwise, the metal tongs will become very hot and burn you if you accidentally touch it.

You can re-heat and re-mold the strip multiple times until it is just the way you want. Do the same for the bottom braces if needed. Remember that you want the impression to be deep enough for the braces to "anchor" the strip in place. If the plastic strip is too "thick" and creates an overbite (especially if the child has braces only on the top), you can heat up the strip and stretch it to make it thinner. Remember that it only needs to be thick enough to prevent the braces from "breaking through" when pressed down onto the braces.

Note that as the child's teeth move around, you may need to remelt/remold the device (every couple of months or so).

Steve Gallegher used Ezo Denture Cushions when he was a student with braces and now recommends

them for his students. They are a non adhesive cloth like material that is impregnated with wax, making it fairly stiff. You can cut it into a rectangle that covers two to four upper front teeth, and there's enough material in one pad to make several brace guards. After pushing it on the brace, immediately play for a while and the heat inside your mouth will mold the material to your brace. There's no wax sticking to the braces, and you can peel it off when you are done and store it in a handkerchief until the next time you play. They're good for several sessions, but do get kind of slimy after a while. They're readily available at drug stores and are inexpensive. The upper pads are preferable because there is more material there.

There are several devices which are produced commercially, one of which is developed by A. Keith Amstutz, professor at the School of Music, University of South Carolina, called the Braceguard. The Braceguard, according to the manufacturer, is a two part putty/catalyst combination that enables the student to create a custom, reusable, shield to protect the lips from being cut by the braces. It does not shift or interfere with the teeth aperture or air stream. In addition to the Braceguard, the site offers individual with braces the opportunity to ask specific questions about their problem and they will try to answer them as fast and and honestly as possible.

Another commercial product, recommended by Jeanne Pocius, is the the Morgan Bumper, advertised as a C shaped channel of soft pliable material chosen for its flexibility and adaptability. It is available in clear and (weirdly, to my way of thinking, but then I had a daughter who got black and orange rubber bands on her braces for Halloween, even though it looked she had some gum disease...) several fluorescent colors. You must trim the top edge of it in areas where the brace wires extend upward, however, in order to keep it flush. She recommends that for most kids any appliance should be used on only the top teeth.

The Morgan Bumper and the Braceguard are available through Giardinelli.

John Kool recommends Brace Relief from Pro-Tech Medical Health Supplies, 1100 Hatcher Ln, Columbia TN 38401, phone (931) 388-3766). It is a very flexible, thin polymer which has a thin channel exactly the height of the brace bands. He has been told by those using it that it is almost unnoticeable, especially compared to some other devices, which feel bulky, like athletic tooth protectors. They are under \$15.

Jet-Tone, the mouthpiece maker, also makes a product called the Lip Protector, which is available through The Brasswind.

The Braceguard and athletic mouthguards are also available on-line from Ortho-byte.com, on their Bits & Bytes page. Braceguard is available in single pack or pack of 12 at a significant discount.

Sometimes a different mouthpiece will help.

Though not in every instance, mouthpiece choice can be somewhat of a factor. Shane Porter reports that he typically used mouthpieces with wider rims that gave more cushion on the outside of his lips, so he didn't feel like he was having something cut into his lips from both sides. Michael Haig says that he found using a bigger mouthpiece will helped him. He reminds us, however, that the help of good teacher is critical in mouthpiece selection.

What is necessary, in the opinion of former Tower of Power lead trumpet player Mic Gillette, is a mouthpiece that requires the least amount of pressure possible. The two most important features of which are a comfortable rim with a slight lip on the inside, which will keep you from pushing your lips hard against it (if you do, the lip inside the mouthpiece will cause your lips to close off). This will reduce the pressure. He also recommends a V shaped cup for rapid air release into the horn. With a bowl-shaped cup, you create turbulence and back-pressure within the first half inch out of your mouth.

New York pro trumpet Rich Szabo and Greg Black, master custom mouthpiece maker, have introduced the BP Mouthpiece (scroll down, it is the third mouthpiece on the page) designed for players who wear braces. According to Black it will reduce cut lips, improve sound and range. It has a comfortable cushion rim and a v-cup to reduce back pressure. The diameter is a very versatile and popular 16.7 mm, which is roughly the size of a Bach 3C or Schilke 13C4. Rich has given me one of these (March 2001) to try and I'm passing it around my students now. I'll report back.

And finally, some folks have had success in used mouthpieces made from polycarbonate, a plastic like material which apparently is softer than brass and can result in more comfort for the player. Take a look at the Mad Max Polycarbonate, relatively cheap and it comes in the common Bach sizes.

Work with your orthodontist.

Eric Bolvin points out that most trumpet players who get braces get them only on the top. One can easily see how the change of angle alone would severely alter the embouchure, resulting in something of an overbite. For those students who get braces on both top and bottom teeth, they often have less trouble if they get them at the same time (if orthodontist thinks it sound practice) because those who get bottom braces will have a second adjustment with the additions of the bottom braces. Perhaps the orthodontist could schedule appropriately if he or she knew there was a good reason for it. The same thing is true having the braces removed. Brian Bass remembers getting his bottom braces off one day, and practicing hard to adjust, only to have the top braces taken off two weeks later, causing him to undergo the whole readjustment process again. Again,

work with your orthodontist to avoid the avoidable.

On the cutting edge (so to speak):

One fairly recent development in orthodontia are Linguals, braces that are put on the inside of the teeth. Daniel Hazelton told me everything that I know about them:

Not all orthodontists will put them on, however. You may need to search around for one. They are also much more expensive than regular braces. (When I got mine, they were 3 1/2 times more expensive than the regular kind!!) If you get them, you will not need to deal with an embouchure change, but your tongue will suffer immense pain at times. (Don't plan on your multiple tonguing getting any better!) I had mine back a couple of years ago, for a period of 2 years, and every single time I played, I used wax on my linguals, and it still caused my tongue to be extremely sore and swollen often. With all the precautions, I could still not avoid getting cuts in my tongue often, so while the biggest pro to linguals is that you will not have to change your embouchure, there are plenty of cons. I can't tell you which way is better, but I hope this helps somewhat.

I don't know if these are the the same or different, but it opens more possibilities. Trumpet professor and player Bryan Edgett writes:

I have known that my daughter, Bethany, would need braces since she got her earliest adult teeth. She also plays trumpet. Having worn braces myself, I dreaded the day when eventually but inevitably, the time would come. We had talked about them, the best approaches, and possible impact on trumpet playing.

We both play in our local church orchestra. In our group is a dentist, Dr. McDowell, in his late 70s, who also plays trombone. We discussed the inevitable with him. What he told my wife, my daughter, and me, astonished us. He told us of an alternate method for straightening teeth, approximately the same cost, that does the majority of the work behind the teeth. In addition, the "braces" portion is applied only at the end of treatment and for approximately 6 months. Moreover, no permanent teeth need to be removed. Needless to say, we were interested.

The method, known as the Crozat method, named after the doctor who invented the procedure, operates from a basic premise: everyone has the genetic capacity to form a perfect dental arch. Dr. McDowell discovered this method back in the 60s when searching for an alternative for his son. Their orthodontist at the time told them that his son needed to have 8 permanent teeth removed. Dr. McDowell decided that there must be another way. After a great deal of research, Dr. McDowell found two doctors, one in Louisiana and one in Wisconsin, who employed the Crozat method. He studied from them and introduced the procedure to the Philadelphia area. After viewing his before

and after book, showing the results of his work during the past 35 years, we opted for this method for our daughter.

Bethany has had the Crozat appliance for approximately 3 months now. Because there are no "braces," she needs no wax, no EZO pads, no brace guard, no Morgan Bumper. Her register, consistently to a", and frequently to c", remains intact. She has not had any decrease in endurance. The appliance affects tonguing somewhat but that is much less problematic than that caused by 2 - 3 years of braces.

I have begun recommending to my young students' parents that they investigate the Crozat method. Besides the obvious benefit of keeping all permanent teeth, the impact on playing is significantly less than that caused by braces.

The world of traditional orthodontics seems to be exploding these days with a number of new approaches and techniques. One other worth investigation is the Invisalign System, which they claim works through a series of invisible, removable, and comfortable aligners that no one can tell you're wearing. The system is a series of clear overlay templates that have been generated by computer simulation to gradually move the teeth.

One final word:

Getting the braces taken off is almost as bad as getting them on, for all the same reasons. You've had an embouchure change whether you wanted one or not. Although things get better faster on that end, it still is discouraging, takes time, and requires work on the fundamentals of trumpet playing to make the adjustment. For a discussion of getting one's braces off, go here.

Acknowledgements:

The information contained herein is from the contributions of Keith Amstutz, Brian Bass, Eric Bolvin, Bryan Edgett, Jim Fesmire, Steve Gallegher, Mic Gillette, Michael Haig, Daniel Hazelton, Sarah Jones, Bora Kilicoglu, John Kool, Stanton Kramer, Al Lilly, Kate Myers, Jeanne G. Pocius, Shane Porter, Rich Szabo, Rick Sonntag, Matt Stock, and Wayne Trager for all of which I am most grateful, and my own experience as a twelve year old starting the trumpet with braces, and from teaching more than thirty years worth of brace encrusted students.

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