DALLAS BRASS

Breathing Apparatus and Method

Version 3.0

Michael Levine, *WindMaster creator*

Contents

DALLAS BRASS

SECTION 1: Introduction

Music is not a sport, but it *is* athletic. We depend on our bodies to help us produce a desired result. For a pitcher, the focal point is the arm; for a punter, it's the leg and foot; for wind players and singers, it's our *respiratory system* – and our ability to generate a full, steady air stream. Like any other athlete, we must train and condition.

The **WindMaster** is a simple exercise device that transforms the breath into a *visual experience* – where one can see and track the results. It will help young wind players and singers to become more *breath-conscious*. For all players, including professionals, the **WindMaster** will help maximize the natural breathing mechanism, thereby increasing the amount of air we use and developing greater breath control.

Origin of the WindMaster

The idea originated from a breathing analogy used by many teachers – particularly teachers of young players – to instruct students to *think of blowing out the candles on a birthday cake*. The visual image helps motivate the student to take a good breath.

Once, in a Dallas Brass clinic in Evansville, IN, we actually brought out a cake with lit candles and invited a student to blow them out. It was very effective. Shortly thereafter, I was disappointed to learn that lighting candles in the schools is simply not allowed! However, from that disappointment…emerged the **WindMaster**.

SECTION 2: Breathing to Play (Sing*)

Much has been researched and written on the topic of breathing in order to play a wind instrument. It is actually a rather controversial subject among both professionals and educators – how to think of the breath and how to teach the breath. Yet certain basic things are pretty well agreed upon. Here are a few…

Some Essential Breathing Points

1. Our normal breathing pattern is a great starting point – it's naturally relaxed.
2. Because playing requires much more air, we must *expand* the inhalation while keeping that easy, relaxed manner. Think of filling from the 'bottom up'.
3. Sit (or stand) tall. Keep the throat open so the air can flow freely. Think "oh".
4. ***Young Players:*** The instrument should already be up to your lips and ready to play *before* the inhalation. It is not necessary to open your mouth really wide to get a full breath. As you inhale, keep your lips positioned so that you are ready to instantly play.
5. Make deep breathing exercises part of your practice (the **WindMaster** will help).
6. Be *breath-conscious* as you play, so that you make the most of every breath.
7. Honor the breath. It's the lifeblood of the sound and the music.

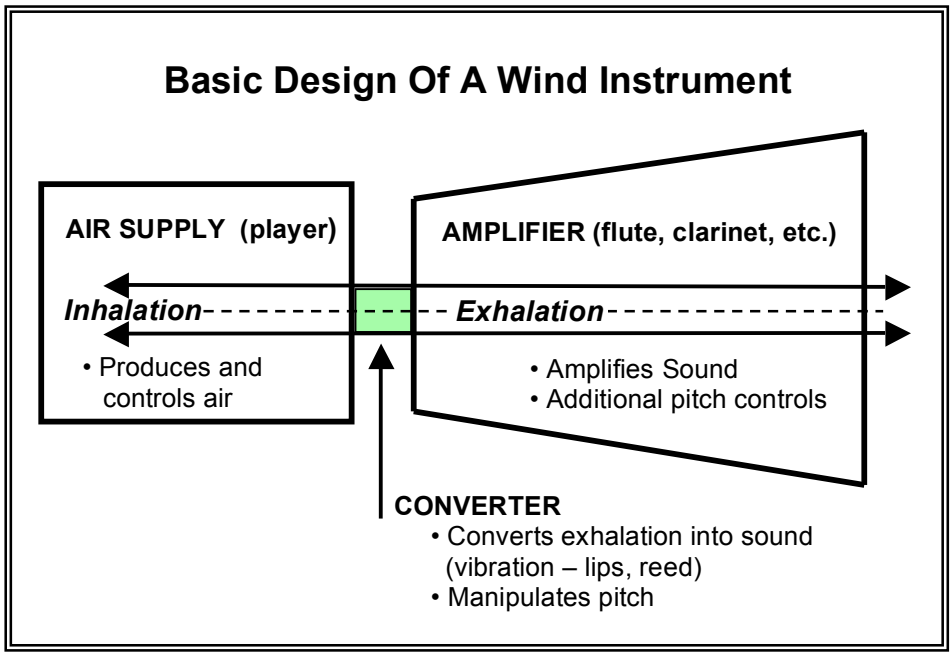
**In this manual, the words "to play" also mean "to sing". Accordingly, the "instrument" also refers to the "voice"*

The Instrument

What we often think of as the “instrument” (the clarinet, trombone, etc.), is really only *half* the instrument – the *second* half. *You* are the *first* half. Simply put, *you* produce the air, it goes through a converter (lips, reed) – creating the vibration, and is then amplified by the physical instrument. *See diagram below*.

The sound of the instrument is dependent on the *quality* of the air you put through it. This is not something to be taken for granted. It takes awareness and training. Great players are great breathers.

For singers, the entire instrument is contained within the body, but the process is the same. The foundation of the sound is the air stream.



Why Kids Don't Take a Full Breath

Despite the fact that experts concur that *deep* breathing is healthier, our bodies require only minimal airflow to function. We gently sip in a little air – and release – some 17,000 to 20,000 times a day! By the time a child starts a musical instrument, say at age 10, he or she has taken approximately 70 million *shallow* breaths. It's no wonder kids don't instinctively breathe fully when they play.

Let's say that with this normal daily breathing cycle we inhale to 25% capacity and exhale to 10% capacity [Fig. 1] *(this is by no means scientific, but seems to be basically what's going on).* What is misleading to young players is that since we always have some air in our lungs, a sound *can* be made without taking a good breath – or any *extra* breath at all! Many young players play in that air range as they are just relying on their normal breathing pattern. The quality of the sound is…well… questionable, but they are pleased if they can just play a tune no matter how inferior the sound.

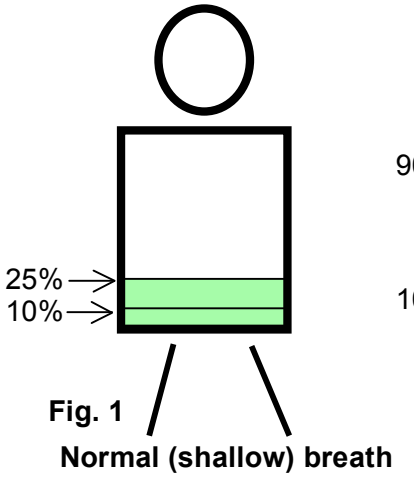


Fig. 1

Normal (shallow) breath

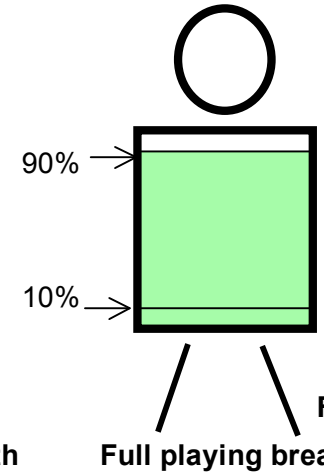


Fig. 2

Full playing breath

We should think in terms of filling up to 90% (Fig. 2)! This will enable us to support a steady and extended exhalation – for quality tone, phrasing, technique, flexibility, dynamics, range, articulations, and endurance.

The fact is, we can only blow out what we take in. ***Developing the inhalation is the primary intention of the* WindMaster.**

The Good News: We Already Breathe Correctly

Our bodies naturally know how to breathe. It's easy, effortless, relaxed. We don't have to think about it. It's like blinking. It happens all by itself.

We just need to learn how to deepen it – and to learn to do it quickly. As we develop a deeper breath, we need to stay in touch with the way the breath wants to happen naturally and to maintain the relaxed feeling.

Getting In Touch With Your Natural Breath

Sit comfortably in a chair or lie with your back flat on the floor. If you are sitting, be tall. Place hands in your lap or at your sides. Close your eyes. Imagine the most beautiful, peaceful place you can (maybe in the mountains, on a beautiful lake at sunrise, in a garden of flowers, whatever works for you). Breathe several times, slowly, and deeply through your nose as if you were soaking up the fragrance of that magnificent place. As you fill with air, feel your body expand in all directions, starting low in the stomach area and moving into the back and upper chest. And even with the expansion, everything is relaxed – the head, neck, and shoulders, in particular. It's a joy to breathe and to know that the oxygen is nourishing your body with each breath you take.

When doing this exercise while lying on your back, give yourself a big hug and feel your body expand with each inhalation.

Memorize how your body feels with each breath so that you can recreate the sensation while playing your instrument.

Doing this exercise for even *one minute* every day, will be most rewarding. Ideally, this should be done before working with the **WindMaster**. In other words, bring this breath *to* the **WindMaster**, and then to the instrument.

Staying Relaxed

In sports, it's common knowledge that staying relaxed is a key to success. It's the same in music. The tendency among many young musicians is to have too much tension when they play, which, among other things, restricts the breath (cutting off the fuel supply). If there is tension already, trying to take in a bigger breath may

result in even *more* tension, not less. So the first priority is to stay relaxed.

Relaxation is both physical and mental. Even if you are nervous, you must keep the body free of unneeded tension. And, even if you feel emotionally relaxed, the body may still be tense. Suggestions:

- Stretch a little before you play. Shake out your shoulders, arms, hands, and legs. Imagine you are about to do a gymnastics routine and you need to loosen up.
- Practice in front of a mirror. Make it *look* easy. If it *looks* effortless, chances are that it will feel that way and will begin to sound that way.

Being Ready to Breathe and Play

Young players:
Each time you begin to play, there must be <u>three distinct steps</u>:

1. **Instrument up and ready (touching lips)**
2. **Breathe**
3. **Play**

It is important to have the instrument in place to play (lightly touching your lips) before you take your breath. Bring it up *two measures* – or at least five seconds – before the first note, if possible. Then, keep the basic position of the embouchure when taking the breath. It is not necessary to open the mouth really wide. In fact, opening the mouth too wide makes it awkward to get the embouchure in position to immediately start to play.

Think of a baseball player who steps up to the plate. First, he establishes his stance (that's like our posture). Next, he takes several practice swings to loosen up (that could be a couple of deep breaths to loosen up, if we have time). As the pitcher winds up, the batter positions the bat (instruments up to our lips). The swing starts with a back swing, to achieve momentum (*that is our inhalation*). Finally, the batter swings at the ball (that is our sound).

Inhale to Exhale

Once again, the batter begins the swing with a back swing (that back swing is even more prominent in golf). In throwing, the arm goes back before the throw. It's exactly the same for the breath. A good inhalation leads to a good exhalation.

Some professionals like to think of filling up with air and then basically letting go. The air will come out all by itself. We don't have to force it.

The turnaround between the inhalation and exhalation is instantaneous – just as it is for normal breathing. One should not *hold* the breath before starting to exhale. It should be one continuous motion. It's simply a change of direction. Imagine being on a swing. Going backward is like the inhalation; going forward is the exhalation – and they must flow together smoothly.

SECTION 3: How the WindMaster Works

WindMaster Procedure

1. Position **WindMaster** in front of mouth. Hold it as close as you like, but *without* touching the pegs to your lips. Be sure pegs are *directly* in front of mouth so the head will not tilt up or down when blowing.
2. Hold unit level* and with both hands.
3. Keep body relaxed and loose, but be tall.
4. Inhale fully, staying relaxed. Keep the throat open. Think "oh". Think of filling from the bottom up.
5. Keep lips relaxed and exhale a gentle, but steady stream of air, aiming for the center of each peg (like blowing out candles).
6. Start at far left and move **WindMaster** to the left (like a harmonica) as you blow over the pegs.

** Holding the unit level is a good starting point, however, you can make it easier by tilting it away from you, or harder by tilting it towards you. Do whatever works best and feels best to you!*

The Design

The large **WindMaster** has 25 pegs; the small **WindMaster** has 15 pegs. The color groups make it easy to measure the results on each breath. This measurement is by no means scientific, but it can certainly give you a sense of your air capacity and flow.

The **WindMaster** is designed with two different workout levels (and once again, you can also make it easier or harder by a slight tilting of the unit). As you hold it in front of you:

- The *easier* side has the yellow pegs to your left.
- The *harder* side has the green pegs to your left.

Four Important Benefits of the WindMaster

1. **Isolates the breath.** The **WindMaster** enables younger students especially, to freely practice the breath without the preoccupation (and distraction) of playing the instrument, reading music, etc. They can focus their energy on breath development alone.

2. **Warm-up breathing muscles.** Typically, students think of the *warm-up* as getting the embouchure going, as well as the fingers, slide arm, and instrument itself. Warming up and stretching the breathing muscles is essential, but is often ignored. Even 10 breaths on the **WindMaster** before beginning to play will make a significant difference. Students should be encouraged to do this before band or choir (and before their personal practice as well)! Warming up the breathing muscles is an invaluable habit to teach.

3. **Jump-starts the airflow.** At the moment of use, the **WindMaster** will 'jump-start' one's airflow. It's easy to forget to consistently take full inhalations. Even a few breaths will jolt the air stream. Consider the effect on a smoldering fireplace when a bellows is used. It gives the fire new life.

4. **Builds respiratory muscles.** Breath work is a form of physical conditioning. With regular use, the **WindMaster** exercises one's breathing mechanism, increasing elasticity, developing the breathing muscles, and producing greater air capacity and efficiency.

SECTION 4: To the Users

Professionals…

- Although the **WindMaster** was originally developed for younger players (and you'll notice that much of this manual is directed towards students and teachers), it was soon realized that this device could be useful for any player – including professionals. Beyond acting as a visual trigger, it is also an *exerciser*, and all players, no matter how proficient, need to exercise their lungs. It can be used in conjunction with other breathing aids (breathing tubes, breathing bags, spirometers, etc.). Hopefully, it will be valuable to you in your private teaching, as well.

Students…

- More than anybody, the **WindMaster** was created for you! For many music students the breath is a mystery – although it *shouldn't* be. Our bodies know how to breathe perfectly. To play a wind instrument, we just need to breathe more deeply and quickly, while staying relaxed.

- The ultimate value of the **WindMaster** is as an *exerciser* – something to be used on a daily basis. I've seen some students pick up the **WindMaster**, take a breath, blow over a few pegs and put it down. That's like picking up a basketball and tossing it at the hoop – once. It may or may not go in, but either way, that's not exactly a *workout,* nor is it doing a whole lot to really improve one's shooting skills. I recommend incorporating the **WindMaster** into your regular practice sessions. By alternating the **WindMaster** with the instrument, you will more easily relate the breath to the sound. And, after all, that is the whole point.

- Playing right after using the **WindMaster** should feel and sound different almost immediately. Try to *memorize* this feeling and sound. (Clearly, this is not like memorizing facts or figures. This type of memory takes constant reinforcement, because we are so conditioned to shallow breathing).

Directors…

- Even though the **WindMaster** will help young players to become more breath-conscious and take in more air, it can't dictate *how* they take the breath. It is only a *tool* for teaching *proper* breathing. I've watched students with the **WindMaster** – with no instruction – take a big breath, but they were extremely tense. In fact, the more air they tried to take in, the more tense they got! Trying to blow over 25 pegs without working up to it, may likely cause this tension. While working with the **WindMaster**, students should simultaneously be guided on taking relaxed, tension-free, diaphragmatic breaths.

> An effective way to demonstrate the relaxed breath is to push all the pegs away from the student except the first one. Ask the student to simply blow over that one peg. (Even though it is just one peg, make sure the student takes a fairly full inhalation and exhalation, as opposed to a little blast or puff of air). The breath should go past the peg once it has flipped over.
>
> The perceived difficulty in blowing over just one peg is so minimal that the student will likely be effortless in this exercise. *That is the starting point for the relaxed breath*. Have the student blow over all the pegs, one at a time (see exercises in **Section 5**). Then try 2 pegs; 3 pegs; etc., always maintaining that same feeling of being relaxed and effortless. As one blows over more pegs, the breath simply deepens.
>
> Many people blow harder than is necessary and in so doing, run out of air when trying to blow over all the pegs. Have the student blow gently as if playing ***p*** or ***mp***.

- The approach of occasionally picking up the **WindMaster** to see how many pegs one can blow over in one breath is fine, but its most effective use is to teach the students new breathing habits by incorporating a **WindMaster** routine into your program *(a few ideas to follow)*.

SECTION 5: Exercises/Games

Tips…

- **Brief or Extended Daily Use.** The **WindMaster** can be used in several ways ranging from brief daily use, to very extended daily workouts. Even 10 breaths at the start of a practice session will have a significant effect on one's playing.

- **Focus On <u>You</u>, Not the Pegs.** As you work with the WindMaster, focus on your body as it fills up in with air and as it releases the air. Feel the expansion. Feel the muscles working. Remember, it's not about the pegs – it's about YOU.

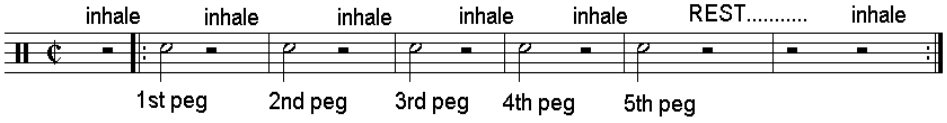
- **Importance of Resting.** Be sure to rest frequently when exercising the breath. Light-headedness is to be expected, whereupon resting a few seconds will enable the body to rebalance itself. Continued practice will result in greater breathing endurance.

- **Alternate WindMaster with Instrument.** The **WindMaster** can certainly be used on its own. However, it is best to incorporate it into your regular practice. Use it at the beginning of your practice session to warm-up the air stream and continue to use it throughout to help maintain a good airflow. In this way, you will more easily relate the breath to the music.

Exercise #1 – Single Pegs

- Begin with the easier side (yellow pegs to your left).
- Take a full, relaxed breath and blow over the <u>first</u> yellow peg. Finish exhalation even though the peg has already been blown over – just like a batter continues the swing after making contact with ball. In other words, blow *through* the peg.
- Continue in the same manner, blowing over one peg per breath, completing the entire WindMaster.

Rest after each 5 pegs



- Try the same exercise with a metronome, inhaling and exhaling in time.
- Try it with different combinations of inhalations and exhalations:

1 beat in, 2 beats out	**1 ← 2 →**
1 beat in, 3 beats out	**1 ← 3 →**
2 beats in, 2 beats out; etc.	**2 ← 2 →**

Ex. #2 – Two Pegs – as above, but 2 pegs per breath

Ex. #3 – Three Pegs – as above, but 3 pegs per breath

Ex. #4 – Four Pegs – as above, but 4 pegs per breath

Ex. #5 – Five Pegs – as above, but 5 pegs per breath

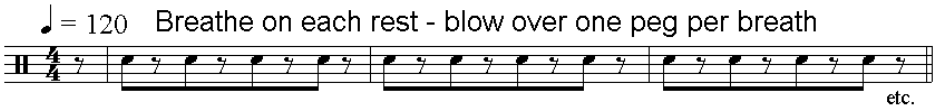
Ex. #6 – Go For It!

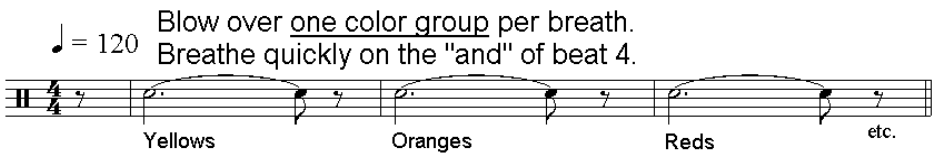
- Blow over as many pegs as you can in one breath. Strive to <u>not</u> skip a peg.
- Count the pegs (if you skipped one, only count the number of pegs up to that point).
- Reset. Try again.
- Take note of your level. Be systematic. If you are getting 7 pegs most times, then try to increase it to 8. If you are getting 19, go for 20. Most importantly, make sure you are relaxed and that the pegs are falling smoothly and in order – like dominoes. This encourages a steady air stream.

PLEASE NOTE…
While blowing over all the pegs may be the eventual goal, the act of *exercising* the lungs is what <u>really</u> matters. That can occur regardless of the number of pegs blown over in any one breath. **The WindMaster is not about the pegs, it's about exercising your lungs.**

Ex. #7 – Quick Breaths

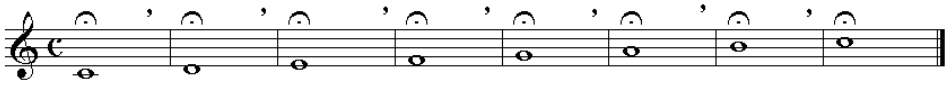
Often in music it is necessary to breathe when there is no rest. This requires a quick (catch) breath. Here are two exercises to develop the quick breath





Ex. #8 – Playing the Instrument

As you come to the instrument, after warming up with the **WindMaster**, it is recommended to begin with long tones, listening for a full, clear, steady sound. Play a scale, taking one breath per note (as if you were going to blow over the pegs), holding each note as long as possible. Notice the air filling you up and then leaving your body as you play.



Alternate several more times between **WindMaster** and instrument, playing a different scale each time. Come back to the **WindMaster** from time to time throughout your practice session (Brass players: This is ideal for when you are resting your *lips*).

SECTION 6: WindMaster Challenges

Directors: The idea here is to add fun and a little competitive spirit. Make up your own challenges as well.

All-Band Challenge

- Select 5 students (or however many) per day. This could be done before, during, or after band – whatever works best for you. At first, a number of students may feel embarrased to do the **WindMaster** in front of their peers. For this reason, it may be best to *not* do this in front of the whole band. Perhaps the TOP 10 could have a "play-off" in front of the entire band.
- Each student gets 3 – 5 breaths (you determine that).
- Count total pegs or take best single breath.
- Possible playoffs for TOP 10
- Have incentives for winners.

Students can also be graded on the results. The director should monitor these challenges whenever possible, especially so that feedback and help can be given regarding the relaxation of the breath. But in the interest of the director's limited time, students could also do this among themselves and report the scores to the director.

Section Challenge

Have sections compete against each other. To determine winner, figure section average (total the scores in each section and divide by number of players).

Playoffs Of Section Champions

Determine the **WindMaster** champion in each section of the band (perhaps combining small sections, like bassoons and oboes). Have the section champions compete with each other to determine the band champion.

Special Thanks…

Tim Andersen, former Dallas Brass trumpeter (featured on Dallas Brass *DEBUT* CD), and presently band director in Wylie, TX, for informing me that, *"you can't light candles in the schools"*.

Deanna Swoboda, Dallas Brass tubist, for dreaming up an awesome name…*WindMaster (the next choice was 'Blow Hard').*

Norman Bolter (Boston Symphony),
Charlie Vernon (Chicago Symphony),
Sam Pilafian (Arizona State University; *formerly* Empire Brass),
who have inspired me for many years…
watching them breathe and hearing the awesome results.

Yoga Instructor, **Michelle Hammarley**,
for helping me appreciate the value of the breath.

Students, Educators and **Friends**
who shared ideas and tried the prototypes.

Members of **Dallas Brass** for their creative support
and dedication to inspiring students.

If you would like to read more about breathing, check out these books on the subject:

- The Breathing Book (Donna Farhi)
- Conscious Breathing (Gay Hendricks)
- The Tao of Breathing (Dennis Lewis)

About the Dallas Brass…

Since its founding in 1983, by Michael Levine, the Dallas Brass has become one of America's foremost musical ensembles. The group has established a unique blend of traditional brass instruments with a full complement of drums and percussion, which creates a performing entity of extraordinary range and musical challenges. The Dallas Brass repertoire includes classical masterpieces, Dixieland, swing, Broadway, Hollywood and patriotic music.

In addition to their solo engagements, the Dallas Brass also appears with symphony orchestras nationwide. Symphonic credits include the Cincinnati Pops conducted by Erich Kunzel, New York Pops conducted by Skitch Henderson, and the Philly Pops conducted by Peter Nero. The Dallas Brass has performed at Carnegie Hall, the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and has toured overseas to Europe and the Far East.

The ensemble has released five recordings: *Debut, Dallas Brass II, A Merry Christmas with Brass, Nutcracker* and a pop/jazz studio recording, *Windborne*.

The Dallas Brass has a strong dedication to working with young musicians, frequently going into the public schools to present clinics and concerts for students of all ages. A major emphasis in clinics is the topic of breathing.

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www.dallasbrass.com

Your comments are welcome and appreciated.
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