
A Gripping Argument

By Anthony Morris, WSPD

Reprinted by Holbæk Pipe Band with permission

Anthony Morris, WSPD, offers some thoughts on the merits of matched grip drumming versus the traditional grip in modern pipe bands

Why do side drummers grip their left and right sticks differently? The answer is tradition. In a time when side drums were all worn on slings, had no leg rests and sat at a forty five degree angle, it was essential that drummers had distinct left and right grips. Side drums were angled up to the right, so the left stick had to be held up high and gripped by the thumb. The right stick was held lower and gripped by the fingers.

Nowadays, when all side drums sit virtually flat and most are carried on harnesses, there is no need at all for the right and left stick to be gripped differently. But the majority of Pipe Band drummers persist with what is called the traditional grip. Why do they do this? There is no rational reason apart from that is the way they have been taught.

Simple physics suggests that to get the left and right sticks to sound as much alike as possible, they should be held in the same way. Most kit drummers do in fact hold both drum sticks with their fingers, in what is called the matched grip. This not only makes drumming more even, but makes it easier. The fingers are more nimble and quicker than the thumb, and can work together in unison.

The matched grip is particularly good for children, who struggle to get their small hands around the thick sticks that Pipe Band drummers use. Why make learning to drum more difficult and require youngsters to control a big stick with a small thumb? It is difficult enough to get beginners to stick with Pipe Band drumming as it is.

I know some people are going to say that such and such a drummer has won the world solo drumming championship ten times and he plays with the traditional grip. My reply is that a particularly talented performer who puts in enough practice could just about play with any grip and sound good. The average young kid with small hands is another matter. They need playing to be made as easy as possible.

And it is not just young drummers who can benefit from adopting the matched grip. Older drummers who struggle to get an even roll, possibly because the left thumb is getting a bit arthritic, should consider changing their grip. In my own situation, my rolls went from bad to worse as my left thumb slowed down (and that was before I even reached the age of thirty). This convinced me to try using the matched grip. After a few months of re-training my left hand, my rolls improved out of sight. My left hand has never become quite as easy to play with as my right, but I put this down to being right handed.

So I urge all you drum tutors out there to seriously consider teaching your learners to play using the matched grip. The traditional way of doing things no longer makes sense when the reasons for the tradition have long since vanished.
