

## Hot, Dry, and High (Weather Woes ...)

By Mark Wygent © September 2000

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I began to fashion and market Great Highland Bagpipe reeds nearly 20 years ago. This obsessive endeavor had its frustrating beginning in April, 1981, in Denver, Colorado, where the semi-arid climate (nearly desert-like lack of moisture in the air), coupled with heat and altitude, presented musicians of my ilk some serious challenges. Twenty-one years previously, I had begun my piping instruction in Detroit, Michigan, where the climate and altitude more or less mimicked conditions in Scotland. We were very wet there, after only short periods of practice.

I have stated elsewhere that moisture is the bane of our collective existence as pipers, and we must control *it*, before *it* controls us. Moisture is indeed a problem in places like Denver, Phoenix, and Las Vegas; but instead of an overabundance of moisture, there exists a noticeable and distressing dearth of it.

"What?!" you exclaim and sputter. "Too little moisture would be a Godsend! I would gladly swap my inundated instrument for a parched equivalent." Maybe. But then again, maybe not. For example, those of us who have been playing for awhile, and who, as a consequence have tested many reeds dry and right out of a promising box can attest, the chanter reed will not pitch and balance properly until it has absorbed a small amount of moisture. That high-pitched, tortuously imbalanced top and bottom hand that one encounters more often than not with a brand new, bone-dry chanter reed, should be multiplied by an approximate factor of six if it is to be played in a hot, arid environment; and if your intention is to play the thing 2,000 feet or more above sea level to boot, multiply by an additional factor of six to attempt to imagine how difficult it is to maintain proper intonation, balance, and pitch in many places throughout our world.

So what's a piper to do?... Move to a new locale, or control for moisture. When the weather turns cold, heat from our bodies naturally migrates from us to our external environment. When we jump (oh so foolishly) into a large body of cold water, the selfsame event recurs. We simply cannot compel a frosty winter morning to become warmer due to our presence within it, and we certainly are unable to make the ocean warmer by jumping into it. The condition of hypothermia can be life-threatening, and a similarly unpleasant, analogous circumstance rears up when we attempt to take our beautifully maintained and slightly damp bagpipe out of doors in hot, arid, and high climates. *All* of the water begins to evaporate precipitously, the effects of which condition will be commensurately worsened if we are playing cane reeds all round.

Assuming the latter circumstance is the case, I will offer the following simple suggestions for an easier time of it when playing in a hostile, dry environment... (Obviously, if you are playing some variety of synthetic drone reeds, the following will pertain to cane pipe chanter reeds only.)

1. One of the easiest and probably most well-known cures is to add water to the inside of the bag, in its usual form, or to throw in several ice cubes. This last option is probably better, as some of the ice will turn to water vapor, which will more readily and quickly nourish the reeds.
2. Remove your cane reeds from your bagpipe on the morning of the competition. Get a thick paper towel, and wet it thoroughly with some water. Carefully wring the water from the towel without shredding the paper, until it is damp. Fold it into quarters, lay your reeds between two doubled layers of the towel, and put the whole neat package into your refrigerator for about 15 minutes. (This can also quickly rejuvenate a set of reeds that was going well the last time you practiced, maybe a week, or a month, or longer ago.)
3. Use the ingenious and well-designed Geoff Ross Canister Bag system, but instead of drying out the dessicant within the box, add some water to it, which will end up blowing humidified air directly onto your reeds. Very elegant indeed, and very simple to repeat as desired.
4. For Pipe Chanter Reed Only: Go to your local supermarket and purchase a sponge (any color will do) that is approximately one inch thick. Take it home, grab a nickel, and trace the outline of the coin onto the sponge. Having located scissors, slowly and (more or less) accurately, cut out a circular piece of the sponge. Make a hole down the center of the sponge with an awl or (better) a small hole punch. Now push your chanter reed into the center of your wee sponge, staple end first, until the yellow-hemped portion (or reed's seat) is completely through. Gently pull the sponge up onto the lower half of the reed body, so that the sponge is in contact with the thickest (lowest, or bottom) portion of the reed. Add some water to the contraption, and, believe it or not, if you don't take too much time tuning-up, it will hydrate your pipe chanter reed even through a piobaireachd! While everyone else's pipe pitches like piccolo, your chanter will still be in tune with your drones.

*Best of luck. - Mark*

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