FEATURE ARTICLE

So you got braces...now what??

My collaborating colleague Dr. Thomas Dust and I have spent many hours over the years discussing and researching the psychological and physical events surrounding a trumpeter acquiring braces. Tom is a professional trumpeter and the son of a dentist, in addition to being Professor of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta, and I am a professional trumpeter and brother of a periodontist, in addition to being a Professor of High Brass at Northern State University in South Dakota.

My personal high school experience went as follows: There I was, a high school sophomore and I had it all...first chair in a leading Wisconsin large high school band program, when my mother said it was time to get top and bottom braces to correct “those two crooked front teeth from your father’s side of the family.” Suddenly, I was sitting third chair, with thoughts of playing lead trumpet and exciting solos in jazz ensemble, symphonic band, orchestra, pep band and marching band...gone.

I was devastated. I tried wax, pushing hard, not using any pressure at all, new and unusual embouchures, consulted with my band director and local teachers, but nothing seemed to help a bit! (I did persevere, but not in a direction I would advise anyone reading this article to go...I bit a hard sticky caramel bar which pulled off the braces on my top front teeth. The contract became so frustrating for the orthodontist and my mother that they both gave up on my top teeth.) My teeth eventually straightened on their own, and bottom teeth braces did not seem to bother my playing. I became a professional trumpet artist, and now a university professor of trumpet.

My other much more positive and realistic options were 1) to have quit, which meant redefining my young teenage self in a different way, which seemed far too high a price to pay for just getting some dental work done and 2) search the world over for a method of playing trumpet with braces. In 1973 there was no literature, method or appliance available to a young player with braces, at least that I could find. The most learned advice I could find was “use soft wax” and “bad luck...get used to it.” Interestingly enough, I have since learned when researching this article, that our very own professor John Colson here in South Dakota had actually done research into this...
topic in the early seventies. Unfortunately that was before
the internet so my ability to research the topic as a high
school sophomore in Wisconsin was admittedly limited.

Dr. Dust and I have been searching for and experi-
menting with appliances and methods of playing in which
a young trumpeter enhanced with braces would experience:

1) a minimal loss of range, technique and sound,
2) the benefits of the braces their parents are paying
for, and
3) a technique which would result in continued mus-
cular and musical development on the trumpet, which
transfers positively without radical change to playing
when the braces are removed.

We researched the Morgan Lip Bumper, the Jet Tone
Lip Protector, Brace Guard and Manhart’s Brace Base
(polysiloxane dental impression putty), Teflon pipe tape,
and Infolab’s “Brace Relief” kit.

For my contribution to braces research, I enlisted tbe
services of the Aberdeen Dental Studio and the expertise
of owner Mr. Steven Pauly to make me a set of top and
bottom braces, and I hit the practice room!

We found that the Morgan Lip Bumper and the Jet
Tone Lip Protector (flexible, thin plastic shields which fit
over the brackets and wire in a line) smooth out the sharp
edges of the braces but slightly enlarge the “lump” that is
the real problem of the braces on the top front teeth. I
found I could play by transferring virtually all the pressure
of the mouthpiece to my bottom lip...a very unnatural
feel, but I eliminated the “goose call” missed notes from
the piece of top lip constantly pivoting in the mouthpiece
due to the lump under the mouthpiece.

Teflon pipe tape proved to be tricky to get in place and
keep in place, and due to its very thin and light nature
there is an elevated danger of inhaling the tape. The thin-
ness of the tape eased somewhat the edges of the brackets
when precariously draped in place.

The quick hardening polysiloxane dental impression
putty mentioned above with the Brace Guard and Brace
Base products allowed me to play almost as well as before
I put on the braces and formed a smooth base on top of the
teeth, brackets and wire for my embouchure. It seemed
the harder I pushed the mouthpiece into the relaxed top
lip with the smooth base under the lip, the more the lip
relaxed and played with my pre-braces sound quality, vol-
ume and range. The elevated platform over my teeth was
disconcerting at first, and each brace protector I made was
slightly different. I made 5 different styles before I got a
“great” one (it convinced me to make a digital movie of
my efforts and include it with the putty!).

"Going natural" and toughing it out was extremely
painful, and the brackets and braces caused me to tense up
the muscles in my top lip to fight the pain and control the
flip-flopping of the top lip in the mouthpiece below the
wire. If a student actually gets calluses so he or she can
push harder, the sound pattern is still inconsistent due to
the lump of the brackets and wire. My best success was
experienced when I treated the embouchure as described
above with the Morgan Lip Bumper and the Jet Tone Lip
Protector, by transferring the mouthpiece pressure to the
bottom lip.
TOP TEN THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN YOU GET BRACES:

1) Do not panic! You are the same fine person and musician you were the day before you received the dental appliance. You will be remembered by how well you handled the adversity!

2) Keep blowing! It is the wind that activates the air in the trumpet and the lips that vibrate. There will be a great tendency to shrink or squeeze your blowing in response to the strange feelings.

3) If you tense up your top lip and squeeze your air in response to the pain and strangeness, you will have a tense and spitty sound...guaranteed!

4) Try a number of methods, and go with what works.

5) If you have pain, sores and bleeding, stop! Practice with more breaks, shorter phrases.

6) Listen to the best trumpet playing you can find, and constantly imagine it is you.

7) When you play, insist on the best sound and carry your articulations, music and range through that sound.

8) Do not go to extremes to find the range you had yesterday: Your range today with braces will feel different, at least for a while...you had better follow the best sound you can make.

9) Accept that it is going to feel different!

10) Go slowly when the braces come off...you will have grown and changed musically since the braces were first put on, and instantly demanding your old range, sound and endurance usually deforms an otherwise fine embouchure. You must relearn the trumpet for a bit!

Information on the products mentioned above can be found on the web at:

**Morgan Lip Bumper:**

**Jet Tone Lip Protector:** Offered through Brasswind:

**Brace Guard:** Offered through Music123:

**Manhart’s Brace Base with Video:** [http://www.northern.edu/manhartg/](http://www.northern.edu/manhartg/)

**Teflon pipe tape:** Used to seal threaded plumbing joints—available to you at your local hardware store!

**Brace Relief:** [http://www.infalab.com/](http://www.infalab.com/)

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