

Tips and Tricks for Improving Accuracy on the Horn

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Presenter: Dr. James Boldin, Assistant Professor, The University of Louisiana at Monroe

For horn players and their teachers, accuracy and consistency in general often present more of a challenge than other instruments. Although these challenges seem to frustrate beginner and intermediate players the most, even professionals must work diligently to maintain and improve accuracy. While there are certainly acoustical reasons for these difficulties, horn players should still strive to achieve a high level of consistency. The following list of tips, together with the accompanying exercises, can be used as a starting point for the improvement of accuracy in both classroom and private settings.

10 Ways to Improve Accuracy on the Horn:

1. Sing the part loudly!

Singing is a vital part of performing on any instrument, and quite often the physical demands of brass playing make us lose sight of our musical goals. In a classroom situation, avoid putting individual students on the spot by having the *entire* class sing through a challenging passage together. Help students develop their inner ear to the point where they can sing along inside their heads while playing.

2. Buzz on the mouthpiece.

Insist upon a buzzy, *in tune* sound, supported by copious amounts of wind. A helpful tip is to have one player (preferably the strongest) play the part on the horn, while the rest of the section buzzes along.

3. Practice on the F-side of the double horn.

Practicing passages exclusively on the F horn for a limited amount of time requires more intense concentration than using the double horn, and this kind of practice can be very beneficial in improving overall accuracy. I would only recommend this kind of practice for the fairly advanced student.

4. Find a correct hand position.

Improper hand position can adversely affect tone quality, articulations, intonation, and yes, accuracy.

Three easy pointers to achieve a good hand position are:

- 1) The palm of the right hand is slightly cupped, as if swimming freestyle or holding shampoo.
- 2) Allow the right hand to conform to the shape and size of the bell - resulting in a slightly rounded shape when the back of the hand is pressed against the far right side of the bell.
- 3) Line up the knuckle of the thumb with the bell brace, and then insert the right hand until the thumb touches the upper part of the bell and the bottom edge of the hand makes contact with the bell.

5. Practice with a drone.

Like mouthpiece buzzing, regular practice with a drone helps develop our inner ear. Drone practice is especially useful for working out scales (slowly) and lyrical passages.

6. Find the right tongue position/vowel sound.

Many professional brass players advocate the use of different vowel sounds to achieve better accuracy. Some basic rules for the horn are: Low register - "toh" or "thoh" (tongue fairly low in the mouth); Middle Register - "tah" or "dah" (tongue where the upper teeth meet the gums); High Register "teh" or "tee" (tongue fairly high in the mouth). Whistling can also help students feel the various vowel sounds and tongue settings.

7. Learn to "taste" each note before playing it.

Philip Farkas mentions this technique in his quintessential book *The Art of French Horn Playing*. Evanston, IL: Summy-Birchard, 1956. Our kinesthetic sense is one of our most powerful, and can be used to great advantage in improving accuracy. Encourage your students to not only hear each note before playing it, but to also develop a feel for the actual embouchure and tongue setting each note requires.

8. Find a good mouthpiece.

A high quality mouthpiece can make a real difference for intermediate to advanced players. For beginners, a mouthpiece with a fairly thick rim and shallow cup usually gets the most immediate results. For more advanced players, consider trying one of the following mouthpieces:

- 1) Laskey 75G¹
- 2) Schilke 30B²
- 3) Moosewood B12 cup with M1 rim³

9. Focus on the music, not the notes.

With all this talk about technical matters, it's important not to forget that we must go beyond playing individual notes and create real phrases in our performances. Quite often students (and professionals) deliver their most accurate performances when they are NOT focused on just "getting" the notes, but are instead going after each phrase with a definite goal in mind. Coming up with simple one or two-word phrases to help your students get "in character" for a specific composition or passage is a fun and useful way to improve overall accuracy.

10. Practice getting in the "zone."

This final tip is of course related to No. 9 above, and is one of the more elusive concepts to describe, let alone teach. Professional athletes, musicians, and many other people who perform consistently at a high level have described the sensation of losing themselves in the task at hand, to the point where everything else fades into the background. Although there is no one quick and easy way to find this state of mind and body, numerous authors have written brilliantly on the subject. Some of my favorites include:

- 1) Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Harper Perennial, 1990.
- 2) Farkas, Philip. *The Art of Musicianship*. Rochester, NY: Wind Music Publications, 1976.
- 3) Gallwey, W. Timothy. *The Inner Game of Tennis*. Random House, 1974.

Accuracy Exercises: Feel free to adapt and/or expand these simple exercises.

I. Mouthpiece Buzzing - practice with and without a drone. Continue into upper/lower range if desired.

The image shows two staves of musical notation for mouthpiece buzzing exercises. The first staff is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 60. It begins with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The exercise consists of several phrases of notes with slurs and accents. The second staff continues the exercise with a final phrase ending in a double bar line.

¹ Available from *Woodwind and Brasswind* for \$54.95

² Available from *Woodwind and Brasswind* for \$34.99

³ Available from <http://www.hornmouthpiece.com/> for approx.\$130.

II. **Note Tasting** - during each whole rest, concentrate on feeling (and hearing) the next note in the series. Repeat the attack of any missed note at least three times correctly before continuing. As the range expands, use the appropriate tongue positions and vowel sounds to ensure accuracy. Continue as high and as low as comfortable. For additional practice, vary the dynamic level and/or note length with each entrance.

$\text{♩} = 72$

III. **Diatonic/Chromatic Accuracy** - Practice with and without a drone. Exaggerate indicated dynamics, and repeat any missed note or interval three times correctly before continuing. (Also try on the F-side of the horn).

$\text{♩} = 60$

*Alternate dynamics and articulations as in previous exercise.

♩ = 60

*Practice at a slower tempo if necessary to ensure accuracy and clean articulations.

♩ = 120 +

ff-pp (2x)

Additional Resources on Accuracy

Although any solo, etude, or exercise can be used as an opportunity to improve accuracy, the following resources include specific information and exercises related to this very important part of horn technique.

Brophy, William R. *Technical Studies for Solving Special Problems on the Horn*. New York: Carl Fischer, 1977, 23-24.

Farkas, Philip. *The Art of French Horn Playing*. Evanston, IL: Summy-Birchard, 1956, 67-69.

Hill, Douglas. *Warm-ups and Maintenance Sessions for the Horn Player*. Eau Claire, WI: Really Good Music, 2004, 19.

Reynolds, Verne. *The Horn Handbook*. Portland, Oregon: Amadeus, Press, 1997, 28-32.

Tuckwell, Barry. *Playing the Horn*. London: Oxford University Press, 1978, 14-16 and 42-45.