

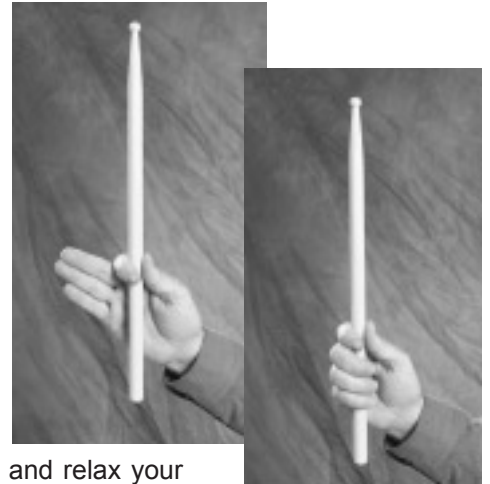
# Gripping the Sticks

by Mark Wessels

There are many variations in the way that a percussionist can grip a stick or mallet – each with its own merits, depending on the instrument and musical style that is to be performed. This article is excerpted from my book entitled *A Fresh Approach to the Snare Drum*, and reflects my personal preference for what works best for most young players.

## The Right Hand Grip:

Grasp the stick between the fleshy part of the thumb and the first joint of the index finger about 5 inches from the butt end of the stick. This point of contact is called the “**fulcrum**” and acts as a pivot point for the stick. The thumb and the index finger should be horizontally even with the butt of the stick lying in the heel of the hand. Curve the tip of the index finger gently around the stick and wrap the remaining three fingers lightly around the stick. Avoid squeezing the stick with the back fingers!



The proper playing position can be achieved by first standing without the sticks in your hands.

Allow your arms to hang loosely by your sides and relax your shoulders. Lift your forearm until it is slightly below parallel to the floor. Notice that the hand is naturally flat (or almost flat) and that the elbow is in a relaxed position, a few inches from your side. This is called the “German grip,” one that is best suited for band, orchestral or marching snare drum.

For drumset or mallet percussion instruments, you may wish to slightly turn the hand clockwise (pointing the thumb to the 10 o'clock position), which allows for easier movement from one surface to another. This is called the “American grip.”

The positioning of your snare or practice pad is very important! Adjust the height of the drum so that the top rim is 4 inches below your belly button (about a hand's width). In a seated position, the rim of the drum should be a few inches above your legs. As you pull the stick up to playing position, check to see if the elbow and forearm is in the correct position, then make slight adjustments to the drum height from there.

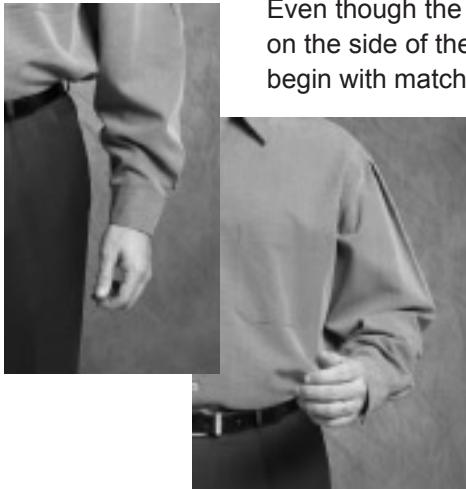


## The “Matched” Grip:

The matched grip (where the right and left hands grip the sticks similarly) is commonly used by percussionists because it also applies to all other percussion instruments. I recommend that all beginning students start with matched grip because of the relative ease that young students have learning to play with two hands that grip the stick and move in exactly the same manner.

To obtain a perfect matched grip, simply go through the steps above for establishing a proper LEFT hand grip. Finally, place the tips of your sticks in the center of the drum at a 90° angle. If you choose to play with the American grip, use a slightly smaller angle. Always keep the shoulders, arms, elbows, wrists and fingers relaxed!

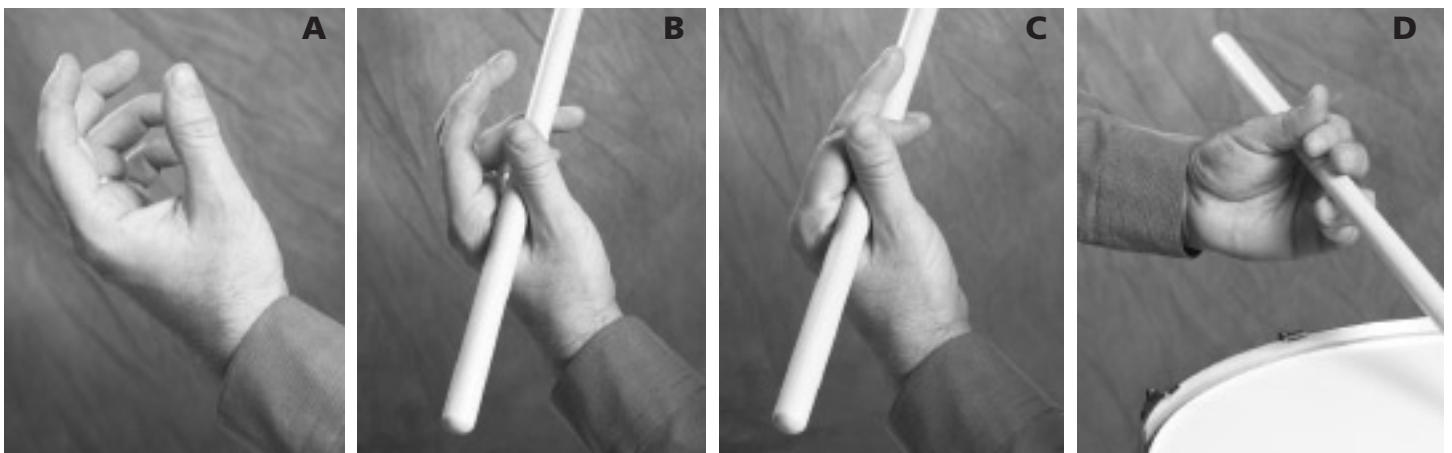
## The Left Hand Traditional Grip:



Even though the left hand traditional grip was developed at a time when drummers held their drums on the side of their bodies, many players still use it today. Although I recommend that young players begin with matched grip, here are instructions for the left hand traditional grip.

Start with the arm hanging by your side, shoulder relaxed. Pick up your forearm, maintaining the relaxed hand position, with the thumbnail facing up. You should always be able to look down and see your thumbnail. This is the same position that you'd have if you were to shake someone's hand.

To grip the stick, open your hand as if holding an imaginary tennis ball (fig. A). Lay the stick in the webbing of the hand between the thumb and index finger. The shaft of the stick will rest just above the cuticle of the ring finger (fig. B).



Wrap the index finger around the stick and place the pad of the thumb on the side of the first knuckle. Think of the thumb as pointing away from the index finger, as if you were "hitchhiking" (fig. C). The middle finger rests lightly on the stick and the picky curves under to provide support for the ring finger. As you move the stick into playing position, remember to point the thumbnail toward the ceiling (fig. D). Place the tips of the sticks in the center of the drum, with a 90 degree angle.



*Mark Wessels is the author of "A Fresh Approach to the Snare Drum" and "A Fresh Approach to Mallet Percussion," two best selling books for beginning percussion, with over 100,000 copies in print. In addition to being a respected clinician and adjudicator in the U.S., Mr. Wessels is the Director of Internet Activities for Vic Firth Inc. You can find out more about his methods online at <http://www.mwpublications.com>.*