

The Grip Debate

Traditional, matched, and countless variations of holding and moving the sticks

By Marc Dicciani

In 2012, I wrote an article responding to the question “Is traditional grip a useful technique that all drum students should learn?” Today, with an additional nine years of science and medical research, observation, and teaching focused on that subject, I have updated my findings and would like to share them.

Let me first make a general statement and say that good drumming is much less about the specific technique you use and much more about how you use it. There are many examples of great drummers with strong opinions and good technique weighing in on all positions of the stick grip and stroke discussion. Recently, *Modern Drummer* magazine did an informal study and estimated that 2.5 million Americans have played drums in some fashion, which would mean that there are about 2.5 million large or slight variations of how drummers hold and move the sticks. Although there are some large categories that many of these would fit into, there are limitless variations, most all of which work efficiently. Why? Because there is more sensory and motor cortex area in the brain devoted to the fingers and hands than to any other area of the body. There are many ways to use your fingers, hands, and arms to achieve similar results; our hands are smarter than we think.

Stick grip and stroke are not separate issues but are interconnected, with one affecting the other. Holding the sticks is much more than simply a binary choice of using traditional or matched grip, and matched is not just a choice of French, German, American, Hinger, and Amsterdam grips. By the way, these five grips were developed by timpanists for playing the timpani, which differs greatly from the drumset in many respects. The issue of technique and the mechanics of physical movement involve numerous physiological, biomechanical, and neurological

components of how our bodies and nervous systems work and have evolved for centuries.

A MULTITUDE OF INGREDIENTS

Again, stick grip is not an isolated issue. How you hold and move the sticks affects, and is affected by, countless factors, all of which are a part of drumming technique. Here are just a few, but not all:

- Finger, hand, wrist, and arm position and movement.



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- Stick angle placement in the fingers and hand.
- The fulcrum. What is it and where is it — the first finger and thumb, second finger and thumb, first and second finger and thumb, back-of-hand, wrist, other?
- The point where the stick rests on the thumb (middle, tip, either side, or maybe it doesn't need to rest on the thumb at all).
- If you are holding the stick between the thumb and first finger, is there a gap or no gap?
- The point where the stick rests opposite the thumb (the first finger? above, below, or in the crease of the first knuckle, in the crease of the second knuckle, using both the first and second finger?).
- The height and angle of the forearm relative to the upper arm, torso, and to the drum.
- The position of the wrist and hand (flat hand facing down, sideways facing towards the inside, somewhere in between those two?).
- Wrist and forearm motion (wrist stroke only, wrist with residual or intentional forearm motion?).
- Upper arm involvement in the basic stroke and in movement between drums and cymbals.
- Third and fourth finger positions and their role in the stroke.
- The degree of tension in the fingers, hand, wrist, forearm, and shoulder.
- The position and distance of the elbow relative to the torso.
- Posture, preferred and optimal seat height, and sitting distance and angle from the snare and foot pedals.
- Equipment and setup — the sizes, heights, angles, and distance of the drums and cymbals.

All aspects of technique and movement may vary depending on the instrument(s) and the fact that you might be playing any variety of percussion — timpani, concert snare, drumline, small jazz kit, small electronic kit, large tour/clinic kit with triggers — and where all of the components of your instrument are positioned. The type of music and volume that you're playing is also a consideration. Mike Portnoy, Tommy Aldridge, Cindy Blackman, Carter Beauford, Dave Weckl, Matt Wilson, Steve Gadd, Sherrie Maricle, Tommy Igoe, Bobby Sanabria, Questlove, Charlie Watts, Anika Nilles, and Gordon Campbell are all amazing drummers whose techniques are different from each other but that perfectly match their drumming style and goals. Together, my students and I analyze grip, stroke, and movement as completely integrated items to identify specific elements and variations that work best for each as an individual.

COUNTLESS COMBINATIONS

In addition to holding the sticks, there are also some unique combinations of moving them. For example, some drummers use traditional grip with an outside wrist turn (somewhat similar to matched grip), while some use matched grip with a more traditional inside turn of the hand and wrist. The effect of stick choice is also a factor (length, diameter, and finish), and even the drummer's age and physique, with traits such as hand and finger size, length of forearms, upper arms, and legs, height, and body type all contributing. Other factors include open-handed or crossed hi-hat playing, the adjustment of stroke and hand and wrist position when playing the hi-hat and ride cymbal, range of loudness/volume of playing, and, very importantly, the drummer's *intent*.

When you think about all these things, you realize there truly are unlimited variations, which allow for room and flexibility for every drummer's individualized choice and personal tastes. The most efficient and effective grip and movement for each individual wanting to play the drumset may be different and cannot be prescribed with a one-size-fits-all solution, nor can they be gotten out of a book, or determined only by standing or sitting in front of a drum pad — unless, of course, the goal is to only play the snare drum.

NATURAL AND SAFE MOVEMENT

Although there is no singular "best" way to hold and move the sticks, some general choices are more efficient than others. There are ways that our fingers, wrists, and arms move naturally, and that our muscles, tendons, and ligaments function optimally, which used in tandem will result in more rapid skill development, better concentration on musical playing, and a lowered risk of injury.

Whatever choices we make, we want our grip and stroke to be efficient, effective, comfortable, and done in a way that will not limit our self-expression and creativity. We also want to take maximum advantage of the physics and sound qualities of the drums, heads, cymbals, sticks, and their heights and angles, etc. This may all sound very "technical." It is — and it isn't! We don't want or need to try and rewrite decades or centuries of science, genetics, physiology, kinesiology, and medicine, but rather use all of this information to our advantage.

RIGHT-HANDED? LEFT-HANDED? BOTH-HANDED!

As anticipated, we can't get very far into this conversation without bringing up the "elephant in the room": Should the fact that you think of yourself as right- or left-handed even be a part of all of this? Decades of research by medical professionals, neuroscientists, neurophysiologists, geneticists, and cognitive psychologists firmly point to the answer as being "no." The drumset should not be cast as a right- or left-handed instrument. Many performers at the highest levels demonstrate equal facility with each hand, regardless of specific grip or drumming and musical role that hand plays. Just watch any of the aforementioned drummers play and try to identify which hand is "weaker."

Your preferred or dominant hand for writing, throwing a ball, or using a toothbrush should not be considered when making choices about how you play the drums, in the same way that that hand preference or dominance is not for violinists, pianists, saxophonists, pilots, surgeons, astronauts, race car drivers, etc. As for fine motor skills, tactile acuity varies neurally between fingers — but not between hands, so the strength and coordination *potential* of each hand is the same. All the empirical evidence dictates that open-handed playing for beginning students — not as a manufactured contrivance — is the next neurological, natural, and musical step forward, but I'll save an in-depth discussion about handedness and brain laterality for a future discussion.

For millions of years, human bodies have evolved to move a certain way, and we, as drummers, can utilize these to our great advantage. Although you can teach your hands, muscles, and tendons to move in some limited ways that are not the most natural, it makes much more sense to employ them to move normally, comfortably, and safely to play the drum set. Though personal preference does play into this, how we use our bodies is either helping or hindering our drumming development and capability.

Accepting the fact that some ways of playing and moving are biomechanically better than others, here is the one over-riding recommendation I make to all beginning drummers and those who have compromised technique and facility on the drum set: Use matched grip. (Full disclosure: I began playing drums using traditional grip, but I have long since changed to matched grip for all my playing.) Traditional grip can certainly be mastered, and there are countless great examples of this, but it's a much more difficult technique to develop, with a potentially higher risk of injury and compromised movement.

RECOMMENDATION FOR BEGINNERS AND SOME OTHERS

When starting off playing with traditional grip, you may be handicapping yourself by using a different stroke with your weaker hand than your dominant one (weaker only because you may not use it as much in your life away from drumming).

The weaker-hand grip requires utilizing smaller, less-used, and less-evolved muscles moving in ways that are not the most efficient for those muscles and their tendons. In so doing, your weak arm might never catch up to your physically more preferred/dominant arm that is using the stronger, more evolutionary developed muscles.

With matched grip, you use the same strong muscles and tendons in each arm, allowing your drumming skills to develop more rapidly and evenly. Contemporary drumming, in all styles of music, requires bimanual facility. When playing, our hands are coordinated but uncorrelated, meaning they share different parts of the same or similar rhythms. Consequently, there's no overriding reason to learn a completely different technique and muscular/neural movement for each hand.

EXAMINE THE EVIDENCE AND UNDERSTAND THE RESEARCH

I won't try to change the grip of my students, but it is my responsibility to point out and explain all the issues related to choices about technique — including sensorimotor movement, physics, and sound — in order that they become knowledgeable and capable of making informed educated decisions for themselves. Instead of handing down absolute edicts on technique, I prefer to help students think through issues in a more examined and objective way. Sometimes I'll ask students why they're using a specific stroke or a particular technique, and they'll say something like "That's how I learned" or "That's how it's done" or "That's how (name of favorite drummer) does it." These should not be the primary reasons of how we choose to play.

Drumming can be a complicated and difficult skill to develop, especially to a professional level, but also an incredibly satisfying and rewarding one at any level. The skill, technique, dexterity, coordination, and musical mastery required to perform in most settings today exceed those that were required 50 or even 20 years ago. The musical circumstances and equipment limitations that gave rise to choices about technique have changed, and as the music and equipment has evolved, so should we, continuing to grow and learn and improve our playing, learning, and teaching.

LIMITED AND UNLIMITED OPTIONS

Finally, there are those whose perseverance, love of playing, and indomitable spirit transcends all norms of technique. They are proof that desire and dedication are the most important ingredients, and which technique you use is less important than how you use it. Here are just three examples of drumming heroes whose determination, strength of character, and great playing is inspirational:

- Daniel Potts, who doesn't have arms and holds the sticks with his feet and plays incredibly well.
- David Segal was born with arthrogryposis, affecting the development of his hands, legs, and feet, and required 20 sur-

geries. He has no right-hand wrist-flexion and a virtually non-functional left hand. (David leads Can-Do Musos, Inc., an organization that provides guidance and hope to all musicians with challenges).

- Ray Levier, a world-class jazz drummer who had to learn to hold the sticks without most of his fingers after losing them in a fire.
- and thousands of others who fight every day to overcome debilitating injuries, birth defects, and physical, emotional, financial, cultural, and discriminatory roadblocks in order to do what they love: play drums.

In closing, technique and physical motor movement is a multi-dimensional, multi-variant prospect, with a high degree of latitude for individual choice and preference — ideally after full consideration of each choice and its consequences. Each choice we make produces certain results, but there is no one way to play.

Feel free to contact me with your thoughts; I'd love to hear from you. Good luck and have fun!

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