

BREAKING IN A PIPE

By Patrick Dennis

Since first starting to smoke a pipe a little over 10 years ago, I have received verbal advice and have read many articles describing the proper technique to use in successfully breaking in (seasoning) a briar pipe. Some of these methods seem to be medieval and barbaric in nature, such as using a red-hot poker, packing the bowl with hot coals and filling the bowl with alcohol and setting it afire. There are four less extreme methods that I have tried:

*Using honey and/or alcohol to coat the bowl before smoking for the first time.

*Filling the bowl up to the top and proceeding to smoke it down to ash.

*Only filling the bowl half way for the first few bowls and then adding tobacco gradually until you're at the top.

*Filling only a ¼ of the bowl for the first dozen smokes and then very gradually adding tobacco until you've reached the top.

Of these four methods, I have used the latter one to successfully break in hundreds of pipes and is the one that I will attempt to define and defend here.

The burning of tobacco in a pipe produces smoke that is a combination of mostly gas and steam with particles and flavorings that vary with the type and flavor of the tobacco you're using. It's the steam that we have all been taught to try and avoid as much as possible. We are told to beware of the moisture content of the tobacco and to use a pipe cleaner often to remove excess moisture from the dottle that lies in the bottom of the bowl.

To coat the bowl with a sugar product such as honey I think hurts us more than helps. Sugar melts at around 240 degrees, a temperature that is easily reached inside the bowl while smoking. If you don't like the effect that steam produces in your mouth, caramelized sugar isn't going to be high on your list either. I don't enjoy the taste of burning honey, but would rather taste the natural sweetness produced by the briar alone. This point should raise the awareness of the benefits of buying a good quality briar in the first place, instead of a pipe you have to add a treatment of any kind to in order to get it to perform properly.

My goal with any pipe is to be able to smoke it down to the last piece of dottle at the bottom. Smoking tobacco that is at the proper moisture level, proper filling, use of the tamper to help maintain an even burn and using a cleaner regularly while smoking are all techniques that will help in achieving that goal. Preparing your pipe for the rigors associated with that desired goal is why I recommend breaking in the bottom of the bowl first above all other methods.

When first applying a match or a good soft flamed pipe lighter to tobacco on the first light produces very high temperatures at the onset. The tobacco flares up, sometimes a small flame leaps up for just a moment before that first false light extinguishes itself. After using the tamper, the first relight produces that same high temperature, as well as the second and third before things settle down and you start

to approach that "sweet spot" that is strived for with every bowl.

If you follow the practice of smoking a ½ full or completely full bowl during the break in you will not achieve the char or cake at the bottom that you will at the top. This isn't just theory on my part, I invite you to prove it for yourself. Take a bowl that has been seasoned in this manner and by using a knife, gently scrape away a portion of the cake that has formed at the top. Make note of the amount of pressure you've applied and the amount of the char you've removed. Now move down to the bottom of the bowl and apply the same procedure there. You won't be able to remove anywhere near the amount of cake from the bottom as you did from the top before you begin to see bare wood. This is because the pipe was allowed to break in from the top down, with the bottom of the bowl never receiving the same attention that the top of the bowl did.

Fill your virgin pipe with just enough slightly dry tobacco to fill the first ¼ of the bowl and fill it somewhat on the loose side. Make sure that the tobacco is even across the top. Use a match so as to be able to control the flame and while applying the flame to the top of the tobacco puff gently several times to allow the tobacco to light evenly. Continue taking short gentle pulls, using a tamper to mix the coals up with the unlit tobacco so that the entire top stays lit evenly along the sides. If a relight becomes necessary, follow the same procedure, insuring an even light across the top.

Smoke slowly and steadily. You may want to dump out some of the surface ash that forms so as to have a clear view of the top of the tobacco, regularly moving the tobacco and coals around, insuring that the sides are burning at the same rate as the middle. Using a cleaner while smoking will aid in removing the moisture that you really don't want to settle at the bottom of the bowl. This is a good time to mention the advantages of having a pipe that has been well drilled and will accept a cleaner while smoking. Continue smoking the pipe until all the tobacco has been burnt to an ash. At this time, I use the pick of a pipe tool to gently loosen the remains of the smoke and any unsmoked tobacco, while taking care not to "bump" the sides or the bottom. Using an alcohol moistened cleaner to clean the stem and the shank, without disturbing the bottom of the bowl and your pipe is ready to rest and completely dry out before smoking again.

If you follow this procedure for the first 10 to 12 smokes you will see the char begin to form. When it looks right, begin to add tobacco in ¼ bowl increments, being patient in allowing the char that will begin to form on the sides to match the cake you've established on the bottom. Follow this procedure right up to the top, smoking the bowl down to the bottom every time.

You have now given your pipe the chance to become the pipe you will enjoy every bowl full through. You will notice that the pipe will start to smoke cooler and dryer. The taste and flavor of the tobacco will begin to improve and that "sweet spot" will tend to grow in size and the amount of time you have to enjoy it. The rest is a matter of maintenance, which is another story.