

How to size, break in, and take care of your grips.

By Mike Jacobs from US Glove and edited by John Deary of Deary's Gymnastics Supply

DGS & Gymsupply.com and other suppliers and manufacturers of handgrips are often asked how to size and break-in handgrips. Hopefully, this information will be helpful to novice and expert grip users alike.

The first thing to consider is the type of handgrip needed for the level of gymnastics being performed. Always consult with your coach to determine if a palm guard or dowel grip is appropriate. Palm guards are unisex and come with a velcro or buckle wrist closure and are used for gymnasts typically Level 4-5 or below. They are used to protect the palms from possible blistering while working on the bars. The best way to size palm guards is to measure the palm section of the hand (from where the hand and wrist intersect to where the fingers and palm intersect).

Dowel grips are typically used when an athlete is performing somewhat higher-level skills that may make it harder to hold onto the bars. Women's uneven bars and men's rings grips are sized similarly. The best way to size these two types of handgrips is to measure the entire hand (from where the hand and wrist intersect to the tip of the middle finger).

Men's high bar grips are sized somewhat differently. The best way to size high bar grips is to measure from where the hand and wrist intersect to the middle of the middle finger (exactly in between the two joints of the middle finger). On an adult this would be approximately 1.5 inches below the tip of the middle finger.

Always keep in mind that improperly sized dowel grips or wearing a grip not designed for the appropriate apparatus is very dangerous and can lead to catastrophic injury. Also, for this reason, never borrow a teammate's grips – it's always a good idea to have a backup pair of grips broken in and ready for use in case of untimely breakage. Always consult your coach when making grip decisions.

Some pitfalls to avoid are: when ordering grips novice gymnastics parents will usually, at their athlete's request, not follow the size chart accurately and measure down on the wrist below the intersection of the hand and wrist. This is because many gymnasts will find handgrips uncomfortable around the wrist and will want to slide them down on the wrist toward the elbow to alleviate this discomfort. What they don't realize is that if the grips slide down, they are defeating the purpose of a dowel grip. Dowel grips are designed to transfer the gymnast's body weight from his/her hand to the wrist. When an athlete slides the handgrip down on the wrist and then swings on the bars the handgrip will slide back to the intersection of the hand and wrist every time because that is where they were designed to be worn. If an athlete has severe chafing or sores around the wrist he/she will try to move the handgrip up the wrist. This method will not correct the problem because the grip will slide back to the correct position when in use. Over time this creates friction on the wrist with undesirable results. Wearing handgrips in the proper location and a good pair of wristbands should solve this problem. It is a good

idea to keep your wristbands clean and in good condition and to discard worn or thin wristbands. Clean wristbands cause less friction and less blistering and will help prevent infection when blistering does occur.

Suppliers are also often asked to recommend velcro or buckle closure. This decision is a personal choice. What does the athlete or coach prefer? Velcro is easier for younger athletes, but many higher-level coaches prefer buckles because they are more secure and the athlete does not have a tendency to wrap and unwrap the velcro closure constantly throughout a workout. Constant wrapping and unwrapping the velcro straps on their handgrips causes the velcro to wear out long before the useful life of the grip.

Athletes often complain about breaking in new handgrips. The tendency to strap on handgrips and start swinging as a method of breaking them in is not recommended. A baseball player would never take a new baseball glove and start playing baseball with it without first following a break-in process that will soften and shape the glove for use. The same applies to gymnastics grips. When leather is tanned it is soaked in various tanning agents, and when it dries, it becomes fairly stiff or firm in temper. A gymnast needs to break the stiffness out of the handgrips.

The procedure for doing this is fairly simple. Start with the finger holes pointing upward and the dowel facing you, wrap the leather around the dowel and roll the grip down to the cuff. Follow this procedure again with the dowel facing away from you. You will notice an immediate difference in the softening of the leather. Perform this step several times on each handgrip and the wrist cuffs as well. Never pinch the leather sharply together. This could be detrimental to the leather. It is then okay to start using your handgrips in slow under swings until the grips feel comfortable enough for more advanced stunts and full giant swings. The results should be surprising.

Regarding the finger holes, the rolling process above should soften them to a comfortable fit. But if they are still too small or tight for your fingers, follow this procedure. Use a small piece of sandpaper (many brands supply it with the grips). Wrap it around a pencil and slowly and carefully sand around the finger holes. This will open the hole consistently around the opening without tears. Never stretch the opening by hooking it on something and pulling and never cut the holes with a knife. This can weaken or damage the leather beyond repair or safe use.

When not in use it is a good idea to store your grips in a separate bag to protect them from damage from other items in your gym bag. This will also keep the chalk and smell of the grips from transferring to the other items in your gym bag. Another accessory that is useful is a grip brush that is used to carefully brush any excess chalk build up on the front of the grip. Use a grip brush in moderation and be careful not to damage the leather.

To answer the question of water usage on handgrips, we defer to Mike Jacobs, the author of this article and the founder of US Glove Grips and the manufacturer of such popular brands as US Glove, RKO, Millennium, Omega and Hot Shot Grips. He is recognized as an expert in the leather business for 35 years and in the handgrip business for 20 years. He has spoken with several tanneries about leather and without

exception all have said that water usage is not recommended. Water can cause deterioration and rotting, as well as stretching of the leather. This can shorten the life of your grips.

Follow these suggestions and gymnasts should have a long-lasting, safe, comfortable use of their gymnastics handgrips.

For more information visit Deary's Gym Supply at <http://tinyurl.com/vkzcf> .