



Supercharge Your Brass Players!

by Frank Gabriel Campos

In the 1984 hit film *The Karate Kid*, Mr. Miyagi devises a martial arts training program for Daniel using yard chores. Although Daniel thinks he is waxing the car and painting the fence, he is actually learning self defense skills.

Just like a music teacher, Mr. Miyagi is in the habit business. He knows that the quickest way to high level skill is the repetition of good form until it is automatic. If repetition is the mother of all skill, then correct form is surely the father. Correct form or technique is usually the result of trial and error practice and the imitation of a good model, but Miyagi has cleverly created a way for Daniel to learn correct technique without having to think much about it. All he has to do is follow Mr. Miyagi's advice to the letter, doing it over and over exactly the same way until it becomes habit. Daniel's performance skill is not dependent upon his conscious mind; it resides in his "muscle memory".

Wouldn't it be great if there were a Miyagi-style exercise that would teach correct breathing to brass players? Without having to say a word of instruction, it would reinforce the most efficient and effective way to inhale, exhale, and support the airstream. The regular practice of this exercise would strengthen the breathing muscles and it would teach correct form naturally and easily. With daily practice, it would supercharge brass players to greater range, endurance, power and control. Could there be such an exercise?

In no other area of brass pedagogy do we see such quick improvement as when a student takes steps to strengthen the breath. Gaining physical control of the breathing is one of the most important keys to the mastery of any wind or brass instrument. Focusing on the breath is the most direct avenue to improving a player's performance, both in the moment and long term. If the simple suggestion to "take a bigger breath" helps a student's sound and overall performance immediately (and it usually will), then clearly there is potential for improvement in the student's breathing habits. A few minutes spent on strengthening the breathing each day can result in truly surprising gains in overall performance ability within a few weeks.

The daily practice of breathing exercises, known as breath work, strengthens every facet of physical performance. Breath work can bring a heightened sense of control and power to the whole body and a new vigor to the tone. Practicing simple breathing exercises over many months can result in significant improvements in range, endurance, and sound. Given time, breath work automatically fixes poor posture, eliminates unnecessary tension in the body, builds core strength and power in the breathing muscles, and teaches us to be more grounded and based in the body's center of gravity.

There are few areas more controversial and fraught with misconceptions than the pedagogy of wind instrument breathing, but when we employ breathing exercises, the breath itself shows us the correct technique. There is simply no verbal instruction that can trump this approach to teaching brass respiration. When students are doing daily breathing exercises, we don't have to talk about the diaphragm or attempt to describe which muscles need to be contracted. We let the breath itself show us which muscles are involved in active brass respiration. And in this way, they are also exercised and strengthened.

Following is the most effective exercise to improve overall wind performance that I have encountered in my many years playing and teaching the trumpet. It is called "timed panting", and here is how to do it:

Timed Panting: Sitting or standing holding your instrument as if playing, pant through the nose (by sniffing rapidly in and out) for as long as you can without stopping. Four to six 'in and out' sniffs per second is the rate. Many students will not be able to do this for more than five seconds the first time they try it. Get in at least one session of panting each day, preferably right before your play your instrument. Aim for thirty seconds of nearly continuous panting. When you can do that, go for a minute, then two or even three minutes after many months. Do not push or overdo this or any other breathing exercise. If you are working with students, let everyone know to stop panting and put the instrument in the lap at the first sign of dizziness, and let the students with asthma or illness know that they can lay out.

What exactly happens when we are panting? We are engaging and exercising the muscles around the lungs themselves, the primary muscles of inspiration and expiration. These are the muscles that control sucking and blowing. Using the muscles that surround the lungs is a much more effective and efficient way to control the airstream than relying heavily on the muscles of the lower abdominal area, which are too far away from the action and more likely to trigger the closing of the glottis, known as the Valsalva maneuver. Happily, we don't need to go into these details with our students, we need only help establish the habit of panting daily and it will work its magic on them.

We don't normally breathe through the nose when we play our instrument, and panting through the mouth is just as helpful, but there are certain benefits from doing panting this way. For instance, panting through the nose is less likely to cause hyperventilation than mouth panting, and when we nose pant, the body gradually learns to adopt the best, most efficient posture to get the air from the nose to the lungs without any obstructions caused by poor posture. When we do a little panting every day over many months, the body develops a new feeling of strength and ease. Little by little, a stronger, more stable posture is revealed. We start shedding old patterns of tension and drop ineffective ways of performing. Over time, our body becomes more efficient and energized, and one day, we find our playing has ascended to a new level. Of course, if we stop doing the daily panting, our level of strength and control will drop back to pre-panting levels fairly quickly.

Band directors will find that doing some timed panting at the beginning of the rehearsal will provide a charge of fresh oxygen that energizes everyone physically and mentally. Try playing a big passage with your ensemble, then have them pant for fifteen seconds, then play the passage again and note the difference in sound. Have the students notice that after doing as little as fifteen seconds of panting, the next words they utter will sound richer and more resonant--try it! In time, the students will hear and feel that same richness and resonance sounding from their own instruments. Everyone will hear a new vitality in the tone, a pop to the attack, and many will be delighted to discover a new ability to play in the upper register.

Timed panting is a Miyagi-style exercise that will produce amazing results in your wind and brass players with little effort or monitoring on your part. For an investment of less than a minute a day, it is certainly worth the trouble to reinforce this idea until it is a habit with all of your wind and brass players. Encourage them to experiment with this technique and they will see for themselves that it really works. Make timed panting one of the habits you establish with your next group of beginners, and watch what happens!

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