

Maintenance & Cleaning

1. The Pull-Through (or "Swab")

This is a cloth attached to a piece of string with a small weight on the end. You can buy these or else make one yourself by attaching a weight to one end of a piece of string (or any type of thin cord) and a piece of chamois or cloth to the other.

The string needs to be slightly longer than the length of the saxophone body from top (without the neck or crook) to bell if you imagine it straightened out.

The weight must be smaller than the opening at the top, and the cloth must be small enough to fit snugly in that opening, but large enough to touch the sides as the instrument flares out (as far as possible).

To clean the sax just pop the weight in the bell, turn the horn upside down so that it comes out of the opening where the neck goes and pull the pull-through through. You can also clean inside the bell with just a plain old cloth or chamois. Do not use any cleaning product or polish for this as it could get onto the pads which might cause the leather to stick and/or shorten the life of the pad.

Tips

A small piece of lead or other heavy metal is good for the weight on a swab, but you might like to cover it with some material, plastic or leather to stop it from scuffing the inside of your saxophone

An e-cloth can make a good pull-through for this as they are very absorbent

You will need to pull the swab through a few times and not too fast if you want to get the maximum benefit from it.

I have seen commercial pull-throughs with a chimney sweep type bristle behind the cloth. This is useful as it will hold the cloth against the wider parts of the bore

2. The Padsaver

This looks like a thin fluffy Christmas tree and fits inside the body. These are possibly better at collecting water from the wide part of the bore, but not so good at the very bottom of the bore as they don't reach down that far. I prefer not to leave these inside the saxophone while packed away unless it has had a good chance to dry out first. Give it a good clean every now and again in some warm water and detergent, then rinse well and dry.

Which One is Best, swab or padsaver?

They each have pros and cons, so a combination of both is useful.

Sticking Pads

Some dealers will try to sell you special products to stop pads sticking. These can be worse than useless. Although they might work in the short term, any kind of powder or liquid product will attract more dirt and goo so sooner or later the problem will return with a vengeance.

First of all check that the problem is not caused by a weak, loose or bent spring (if in doubt visit your friendly repair person). You can sometimes retension the spring by bending it with a special tool (or a pencil tip which has had the lead broken off or a screwdriver that has had a groove filed in the tip). If the problem is caused by a build up of residue on the pad, you can remove this with plain old lighter fluid on a pipe cleaner or by closing the pad gently on piece of clean rag with lighter fluid and pulling it through. In an emergency on a gig a clean piece of paper (e.g. new £20 note or dollar bill) might work for a while.

Pad Clamps

Another practically useless product that will part you from your money. If the pads are seating properly these are totally unnecessary. If the pads are not, then clamps may help in the very short term, but if they do help that's a sure sign your saxophone needs a trip to the repairers. They may even do harm as they compress the normally open pads much more than a closed pad is normally held by the pressure of the spring, and could cause the leather and felt to lose some of the natural springiness.

Cleaning Inside the Neck and Mouthpiece

There are swabs and small padsaver type things available for this, but I find it better to use a bottle brush or small toothbrush followed by a rinse through with tap water - some antiseptic mouthwash won't do any harm either. It's best to do this regularly (at least once a week) or very nasty smelly beige coloured gunge will build up and your saxophone repairer will give you nasty looks when you take the horn in for a service. You can also use the fluffy brushes that are made for recorders, but like the padsaver, wash these occasionally and don't leave inside the neck or mouthpiece when they are packed away.

If the build up is bad, it can be a good idea to soak first in warm water and detergent. If the gunk is really dried on, then apply vinegar on a small pad to the inside affected bits and leave for a while.

Cleaning Outside the Body of the Saxophone

I prefer a plain e-cloth for this. They are good because they are designed not to need any cleaning products or polish which could get on the pads, springs or inside the rods where they would probably cause some eventual harm.