

GUIDE TO RESKINNING A DJEMBE

by Peter Batty

(from the Skin to Skin website: <http://www.skintoskin.co.uk/reskinning.htm>)

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Putting a skin on a djembe is a complicated process, especially when you do it for the first time. It's also hard work, but the satisfaction of playing a drum you skinned yourself makes it worth the effort, IMO. These pages give a fairly detailed guide to the process, which people have successfully followed. But, please remember that there are all sorts of ways to achieve essentially the same result: this is what has worked for me. If you need more help, feel free to e-mail and ask. Good luck! pb

REMOVING THE OLD SKIN

Things to do when taking the old skin off:

Notice the way the rope is threaded, both horizontally around the drum (see "Mali weave" below) and vertically (running through the loops on the top and bottom rings). This may help when you have to do it yourself!



Don't unthread all the rope from the rings. Do it about halfway round the drum, just enough to lift the rings off and separate them, so you can remove the old skin. It's less work when you come to re-thread it.

Notice how the top rings best fit round the drum and maybe make some marks on them so you can line them up again when you put the new skin on. If necessary, try bending the rings a little to make a more even fit.

Tip While the drum has no head, you might want to treat the shell, which helps to keep it in good condition. You can use African "shea butter", or linseed oil. Note that if you use oil, it can take a couple of days for it to be fully absorbed.

CHOOSING A SKIN

The best skin to use is goat. That's the skin traditionally used in West Africa and is the one that produces the characteristic djembe timbres.

Obviously, find a skin that has no holes or splits in it - hold it up to the light and look carefully at the skin; any holes should be visible, even through the hair.

Tip Thick or thin skin? Strength is one consideration, and so is the sound: thin skins tend not to be as strong and to sound more metallic, thick ones are stronger and sound "drier".

Don't worry if you can see scars on the skin; scar tissue, apparently, is likely to be stronger than ordinary skin tissue.

When you've chosen your skin, soak it in water until it is soft and pliable. Overnight is plenty long enough if the water is cold, a couple of hours if warm.

Tip DON'T leave the skin soaking for too long - it will stink and eventually even be weakened, so much so that it may fall apart when you try to use it!

FITTING THE SKIN

Drape the wet skin over the djembe shell, with the spine (a band of coarser hair, often a different colour to the rest of the skin) central.



Place one of the top rings over the skin and shell, lined up as previously determined.



Gather up the skin hanging down and fold it over the ring into the centre of the drum. Then put the next ring on top, so that the skin is sandwiched between the rings.

At this point I usually cut off some of the skin, to make it slightly more manageable. If you do this, don't cut off too much! You want a good 6 inches to still be protruding from between the rings.

Tip You can use any kind of sharp blade to cut the skin down - knife, razor blade, scissors. I find a good large pair of scissors are easiest to use.

PULLING THE SKIN THROUGH THE RINGS

Now you have to pull the skin through the rings to get all the creases and folds out. Grasp the skin edge and, using the heel of your hand as a lever against the rim of the drum, pull it through between the rings, working your way round the drum.



Once you've pulled all the creases and folds out, repeat the exercise, this time pulling the skin strongly. Grasp it on the opposite side of the drum, lean your elbows on the rim right in front of you, and pull! Work your way round the drum.

Tip While you're doing this, take care not to pull the rings off one side of the drum completely and have to start again! If you've got the bottom ring in place on the bowl of the drum, this isn't likely to happen.

How tight you want the skin to be at this stage is up to you - the looser it is, the lower down the body of the drum the rings will end up, when you tighten the drum properly.

Tip I've found that, if the centre of the skin has about a centimetre play when I lightly tap it, that's OK.

THREADING THE ROPE



Pass the free end of the rope down through the loop at the bottom ring and back up through the next;



at the top, thread it up through the loop



and then back down through the next.



When going down at the bottom and up at the top, thread through the loop that already has a strand of rope running through it (not the one that's empty).

Don't pull anything tight yet, keep it all loose (let the bottom ring hang free). When you get back to the beginning, with a rope "noose" hanging down from the top of the drum, tie the spare end off loosely through it.

Tip If you've not got any spare rope, go back to the start and pull again, a bit harder, taking up all the slack as you go. You should end up with some spare. You can also tie a short piece of rope on to the end, so you can get all the way round. Take it off when you no longer need it.



Then go round the drum again, pulling the rope up and down through the loops, but still not tight, until the bottom ring reaches the drum body.

TIGHTEN & CUT DOWN

The first tightening:

Starting at the "noose", pull the rope down through the bottom loops, then up through the top ones, taking up the slack as you go. Work your way round the drum. Tie the loose end off again when you get back to the beginning. Aim to get the rope fairly tight (so it springs back when you pull it away from the drum.)

Tip Sometimes the bottom ring ends up skewed. Up-ending the drum on a flat surface and then tightening it that way can help reduce this. But ultimately it's a matter of the fit between ring and shell; how you tighten can only make so much difference.



Now it's time to cut the skin down. How much depends whether you want to have skin folded down over the rings at the end or not. If, like me, you prefer not to, remember that it'll shrink as it dries and, if it's cut too short, may not be held securely between the rings. I've done that a few times, the skin slipped out of the rings when I tried to tighten it to playing pitch, I wasted a goat skin and had to do the whole thing again!

Tip If, on the other hand, you want to leave the skin long and folded down over the rings, the way to stop it sticking out from the drum when it dries is to fold it down when it's wet (one or two vertical slits cut in it will help), then hold it in place while it dries with a loop of rope running round the drum.

SHAVING - the scary bit!

Best done when the hair and skin's still damp and when there's a degree of tension in the skin, so that it doesn't bounce away from the blade too much. I use an ordinary double-edged razor blade.



You need to grasp it firmly between fingers and thumb and bend it into a curve towards you.



Then start to shave off the hair, working always in the same direction as the hair growth, and towards your body.

Tip There are other ways to remove the hair than with a blade - you can use depilatory creams, or electric beard-trimmers. I use a razor blade, because that's how I learnt to do it. (Do Brazilian djembistas leave a strip of hair in the centre of their drum, I wonder?)

Be careful! With experience, you can actually exert quite a lot of pressure and shave quite fast - but at first it's best to be slow and tentative. I guided someone through this whole re-skinning process once. I said, be very careful when you're shaving; he picked up the razor blade and stuck it straight through the skin, first stroke!

TIGHTENING THE SKIN

I usually wait for the skin to dry, then set about properly tightening the drum. Pull the rope through as before, but this time getting it really TIGHT. Use your strength! When you reach the end, pass the rope through the noose and pull it down as hard as you can, then tie it off.

Tip There are several tools available to help with pulling the rope. I use a gadget called a "clam cleat", from a sailing shop, which grips the rope and allows you to pull very hard, without wearing holes in your hands! It also helps to sit astride the drum.

Leave it for half a day or more. The tension will go out of the skin and rope as they stretch. Go round again, pulling the verticals to take up slack, then leave it for a while again. Do this as many times as you like.

Take your time - taking longer at this stage may challenge your patience, but it does seem to help the drum hold its pitch for longer. By the second or third pull, most of the "give" should've been taken up and you can move on to the final stage.

Tip You're unlikely to get your djembe to playing pitch just by hand-tightening the verticals. To do that, you'll need to use the "Mali weave." This is also how you maintain pitch later.

THE "MALI" WEAVE

Reaching and maintaining pitch:

If you've just tightened the verticals, start by passing the rope through the bottom loop directly below the noose.



Then, whether tightening a new skin or maintaining pitch, find the first pair of rope verticals not already crossed (it doesn't matter which way round the drum you go.)

Tip First time round the drum it's obvious which are the next two uncrossed verticals. But, when you're working on a higher row, it's not so obvious. Look at the top ring - it's always the next two verticals there that you have to cross.



Thread the rope behind (or "under") both these verticals and pull it through.



Bring it back in front of the second one, then thread it behind the first,



and pull towards you.

The first vertical will slip



over the second.

Thread the rope behind the next two verticals, come back in front of the second and behind the first, and pull. Continue round the drum until it's as tight as you want it.

Tip What do you do when you've got to the end of one row and want to begin another? You'll find there aren't two adjacent uncrossed verticals.



Re-use the second vertical of the last pair as the first of the next. Don't forget - look at the top ring to see which should be the second of the pair.