

Chapter 7 - Hand Position

There has been quite a bit written about picking hand position, and most has come from the direction that there is only one way to hold and use your hand. This stems from the "my way, or so and so's way whose playing I admire is the right way" viewpoint. If we all had hands that were constructed identically this could have merit.

We do not.

There are significant differences in not just the size and length of the parts, but in the connections between the tendons inside the hand in different people. A look at the players' right hands in Tony Trishka's **Masters of the 5 String Banjo** will emphasize that different things work. Furthermore, your hand will be held differently to produce different tones from the banjo. It is important to optimize the way you use your hand and arm for minimum stress and your desired tone.

A good approach is to develop a 'home position', and move out of that to others when appropriate. This is a placement where you are very comfortable and can just 'cruise along', and relax while playing. It can be thought of as where you might play back up in a band where you are supplying a smooth flow of notes without strong emphasis. This is analogous to a calm conversation with someone, as contrasted with giving a speech.



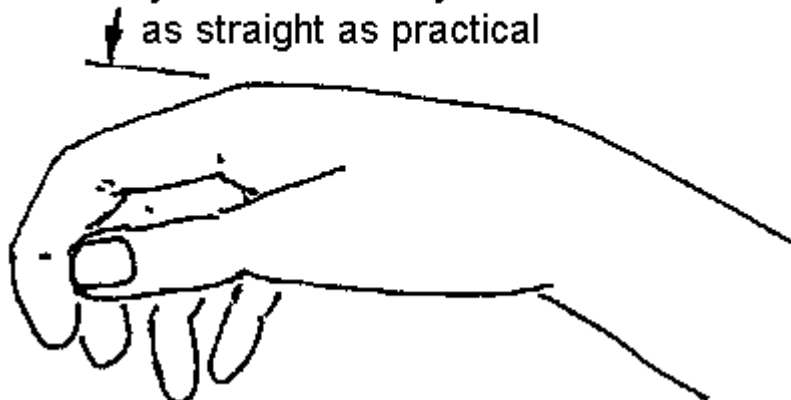
Lay your forearm and hand across the banjo as you usually do. If your wrist has more than a gentle arch or twist in it there is wisdom in holding it straighter. This is to minimize the potential of tendon damage and pain. The carpal tunnel is like a sleeve that carries the tendons from the actuating muscles in your forearm through the bottom of your wrist and then back up to the top and bottom of your knuckles in your hand.

Carpal tunnel syndrome is a common malady now, and comes from tension in the wrist and repetitive motion (*see footnote 1*). The straighter and less constricted the tendons, the less the possibility for damage. This is so that there will be minimum friction between the tendons and the carpal tunnel, either on the side of it from an excessively arched or twisted wrist, or all around it from tension in your wrist squeezing down on the tendons.

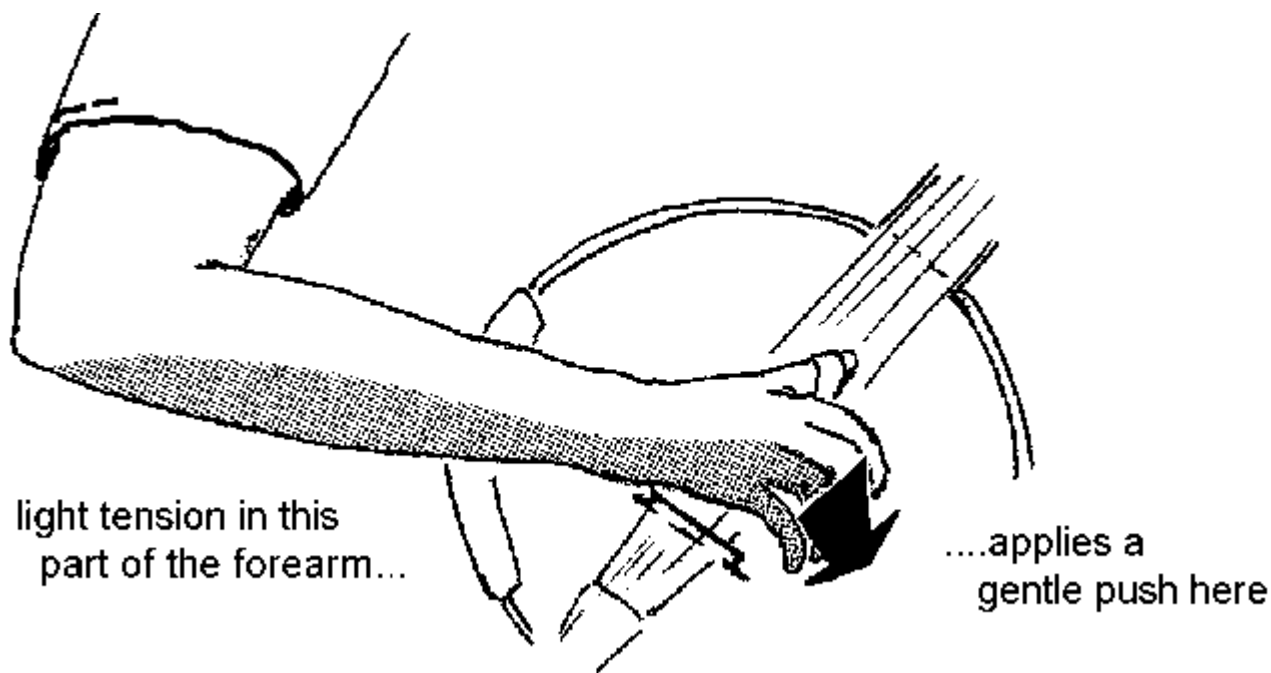
Because we are all a little different, you need to determine the optimum position to hold your hand at with respect to your forearm. Look at the inside of your wrist and wiggle your index and middle fingers. Notice where the tendons are in your wrist. Now turn your hand over and do this again, and locate the two tendons radiating out to your knuckles at the base of you index and middle fingers. The angle you want your wrist to be at is where the tendons to your fingers are straight in both the side and top view. It will probably be about ten or fifteen degrees arch looking at the side, and about the same away from your eye.

The learner is usually told that his hand must be relaxed in order to play well. This is only partly true, and is confusing. Your hand, wrist and forearm form a stable platform from which the picking fingers sound the strings. The finger(s) that are on the head of the banjo, the side of the hand, the corresponding part of the wrist and the lower side of your forearm are in light tension. These are the shaded portions of the illustration below.

about 15 degrees bend so the tendons from your forearm to your knuckles are as straight as practical



If only the side of your wrist is held rigid, the carpal tunnel is unaffected. If you look at the back of your hand and flex your fingers, notice that the tendons radiating to your fingers are away from the part we have holding your hand in position. Be aware that the push on the head of the banjo is a separate action from the pressure on the armrest.



It is not necessary to know the exact muscles and tendons involved; being aware of the feeling in the parts of your arm as indicated in the picture is sufficient. Do this by thinking about the different parts of your hand and arm, and feeling where the sensations are as you are holding the banjo. Actually touching the shaded and un-shaded parts indicated with your other hand could help you make a kinesthetic connection. Identify the feeling of the held and relaxed parts so that you can recreate that feeling when you are playing. Holding a small piece of foam or a ball under your wrist can help you get comfortable with an effective position of your hand.

It is probable that you will need to learn to release tautness in muscle groups to learn to play fluidly. Muscles not normally individually controllable can be relaxed by focusing attention on that body part and

visualizing a peaceful scene, or something like a releasing rubber band or block of Jell-O[®]. Another way is by thinking of the parts of the arm and hand in colors, whatever seems to be when tense and then changing the color to one you feel is appropriate for relaxation, and for the light tension. This is a very powerful, non intrusive technique, which with continued rehearsal becomes very effective. It is not a logical one, it just happens to work.

There has been a particular furor among banjoists over whether to plant the ring, the little or both of the fingers on the head to stabilize the hand as a picking platform. These fingers damp out some overtones that are sometimes considered objectionable, and act as a benchmark from which the range to the strings is measured by feel. All three systems are used by different professionals, as remarked before there is no one right system. Two fingers down on the head gives the greatest stability, with all things equal.

A problem often occurs at this point, because very few people have ring and index fingers that are the same length. When the learner is told to put both fingers on the head, one does not reach. It is complicated by weakness in these fingers because they are not used for a large number of daily tasks, like writing and picking things up. Then in order to feel steady, he stiffens them, because the instruction is usually to anchor the hand instead of to locate and balance it on the banjo. It is normal for the resting fingers to feel like a piece of cooked spaghetti, squirming around and not at all steady in the beginning. They are not going to feel "anchored". This is an unreasonable expectation.

The words used are very important, because we react to them in habitual ways as discussed in Section 5.. Anchor implies an active opposing trying to tear free like a ship in a wind, so force is needed to resist whatever is about to deflect the stability of your hand. Subconsciously, this calls for tightening of the muscles, for tension to meet the upset. Do you think you could ride a bicycle if you were told you had to be anchored to it to not fall off or down? That is what children do when learning to ride, they hang on tight (and are usually told to do so by well meaning adults!) and until they learn to flow with the bicycle in illogical ways, they fall down. They are less inclined than adults to do something over and over that does not work while learning a task, especially if they get hurt doing it. This is similar, it highlights the difference in fighting a system and flowing with it. Our cultures teach fighting a problem, trying to overcome it with force, especially to men.

IT WON'T WORK HERE.

STABILITY OF THE RIGHT HAND IS NOT ABOUT ESTABLISHING A MECHANICALLY RIGID/ "STABLE" SYSTEM - IT'S ABOUT ESTABLISHING A COMPLIANT SYSTEM THAT CAN RESPOND TO TACTILE FEEDBACK.

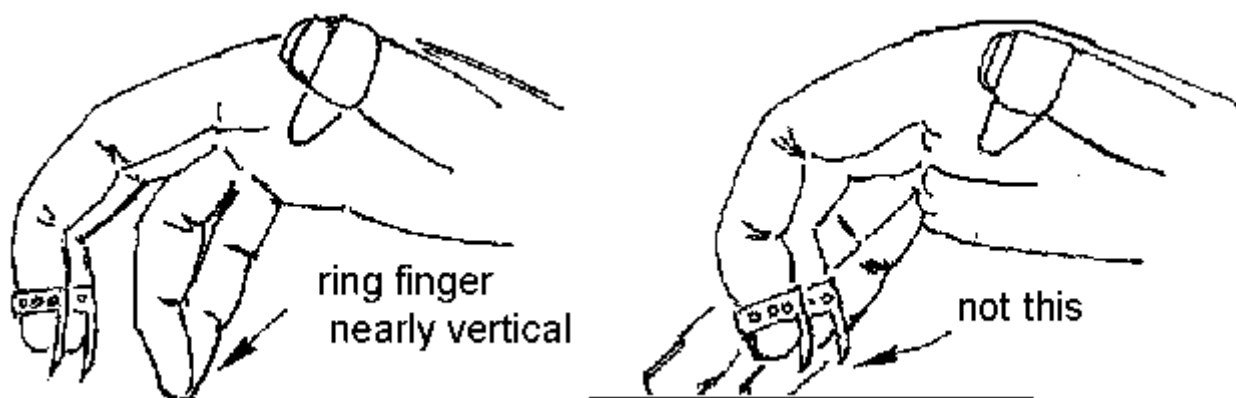
THE MYTH OF TWO FINGERS ON THE HEAD BEING INTRINSICALLY MORE STABLE THAN ONE FINGER ONLY OR NECESSARY IS A MYTH, PERPITRATED BY THOSE OF LIMITED UNDERSTANDING AND KNOWLEDGE, PARROTING THE OLD AND FALSE IN PRINT PARADIGMS. FEW THINGS DIE HARDER THAN A BAD IDEA, AND THIS IS ONE OF THEM.

A far better instruction for the technique that works is to *balance and locate* the picking hand on the banjo head, preferably BUT NOT ESSENTIALLY with 2 fingers in the home position. We can just talk about *locating* your hand.

Back to the task at hand: to get both fingers on the head, the player splays them out and then pushes on the banjo with the pads of his fingers in an attempt to stop the squirming. This way both fingers do touch

the head. This result has built up into being the "right way" for many banjo method books and videos over time.

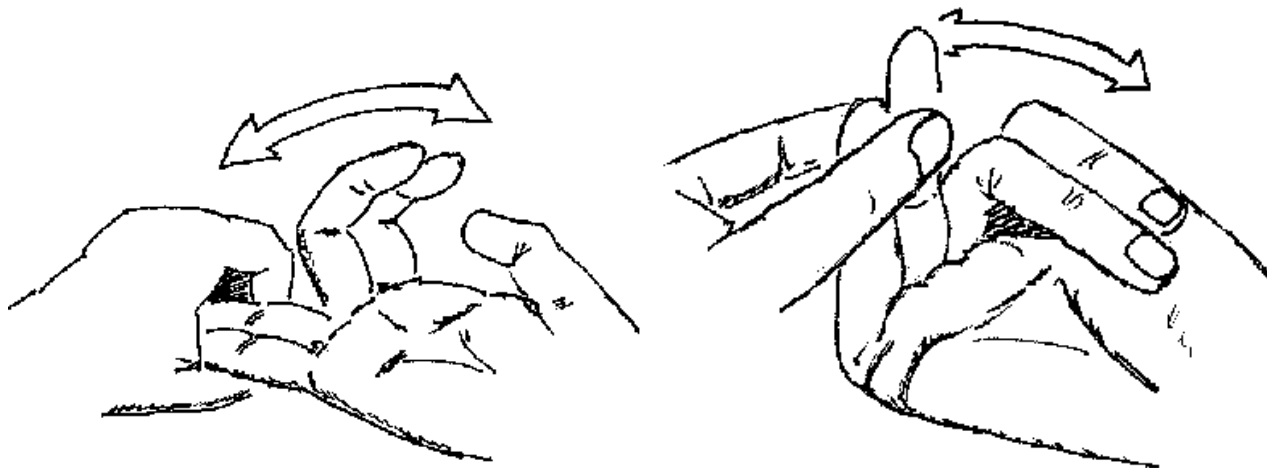
Generations of banjo players and teachers have tried to play with their two fingers splayed out as shown in the image below at right, in the misguided concept that by being more rigid, it must be better. I believe this comes from too much thinking and not enough understanding. The picking of Earl Scruggs is often held up as the ultimate model, and I have confirmed that he still locates his picking hand in 2002 in a very similar way to the way it is shown in the c. 1968 picture on p. 29 of the Scruggs book. Specifically, he curves his ring finger so that both the little and index finger locate on the banjo head in a relaxed way. This is very different from laying the fingers back against the head as in "not this" below. You can also see this in the pictures on his web site, www.earlscruggs.com



For most people's hand construction, the tendon connections and existing neuromuscular motor patterns, splayed locating works very poorly, and often leads to the learner giving up because of poor progress ... if any.

Why? Because this hand position practically guarantees built in tension in the picking hand and the tendons running down to the underside of the arm. Needless to say if the goal is fluid, effortless playing, this is counterproductive. It is like tying the boat firmly to the dock, and then trying to sail away by breaking or stretching the rope ... and this is one of the "traditional right ways"!! Follow the steps below to investigate your own hand anatomy for yourself and find if you can benefit by avoiding a splayed locating pattern.

Most people's hands have some interconnection between the ring and middle finger. To assess the degree of connection, with your right hand open hold your ring and little fingers straight with your other hand and curl your index and middle finger toward the palm as far as they will go. Next hold your ring and little finger straight out from the palm, and curl the other two in. Finally, curl your ring and little fingers into your palm and find the range of motion of your first two fingers.



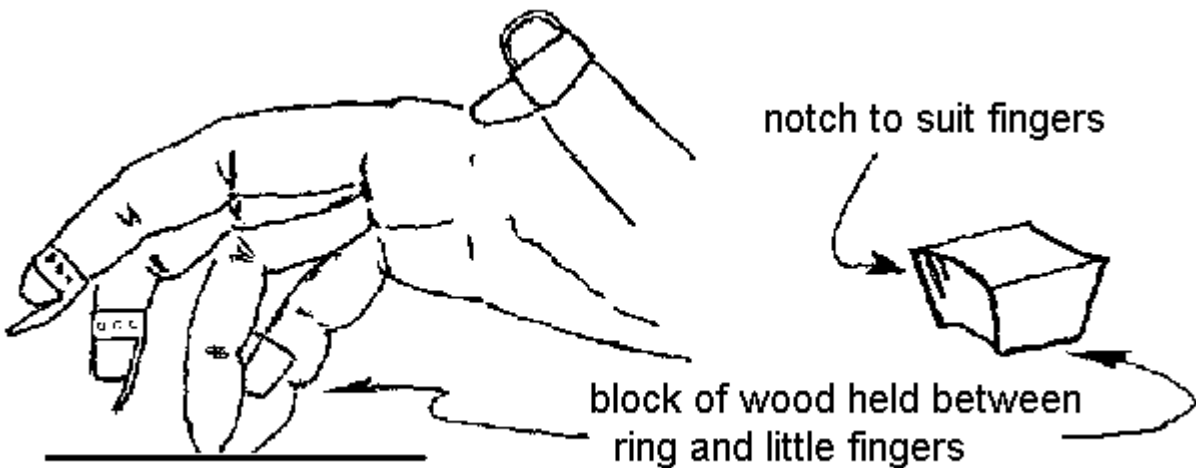
You will find there is an increasing degree of freedom of the two picking fingers as the other two are brought in towards the palm. It will be especially true of the interconnection between the ring and the middle finger which in most cases is mental (*see footnote 2*). If your fingers resting on the head are fairly vertical and balanced, pressing gently with the tips, it will probably leave your two picking fingers free to move. The one that usually really needs to be vertical is the ring finger.

It is not only OK to bend your ring finger, it is almost always a practical necessity. It will be less stable at first. You have to give up your competence to move ahead.... the Zen parable is you have to let go of the cup to grasp the jug. Again, this is counter to most of the teaching in our society that demands steady progress. Doesn't work.

Here is where one difficulty playing inside rolls can occur, if your anchoring fingers are splayed out like the picture on the right below, it will be harder to bring your middle finger to the inside strings. Keep your fingernails on your little and ring fingers trimmed if you find that long nails are causing you to have these two fingers spread out in order to get finger pad contact with the banjo head.

If you have trouble keeping your ring finger down when moving the middle finger, it can usually be trained. The time required may be anything from 15 minutes to two or three months.

The routine way is to tie the last two fingers together until you can keep both down. Tying your fingers together is another example of fighting the status quo, trying to power through, rather than easing into a solution. This is again a reflection of the culture training to fight a problem. When the two are tied together, tension in that part of your hand is inevitable, with the fingers fighting the string. It is, frankly, stupid and counter productive to do it this way, because your subconscious has to give up, be beaten rather than just guided to a different habit. I offer 4 different ways here to retrain your picking hand, all of which do not involve fighting your body, all of which have worked for some people. You may be fighting your mind though in order to stay with the strategy.....



1st approach: I personally found it much more effective and certainly more elegant to give the ring finger something else to do which is incompatible with moving when the middle finger is used. (This incompatibility idea can be used to change any habit). Instead, hold a small piece of wood or pencil eraser between the last two fingers while resting them on the head. A folded piece of paper towel will work, the material is not critical. This changes the entire feeling in the back of your hand and furnishes to your subconscious a focus of where you want your ring finger to be. It can also be effective in training the rest of your wrist and hand to be relaxed.

After a while you will not need the block any more. While I cannot guarantee results like this, when I did this I got results very quickly. The block is also useful to train yourself to have only your ring finger down, with your little finger held next to it and supporting it. This option will place your hand farther away from the strings with different angle of approach, and different tonal possibilities.

2nd approach: This is a gradual strategy based on what Bill Evans teaches in his classes. You need to plan on this taking several months. The results obtained by learners seem to fall in line with the time frames he describes.

First month: play only with the ring finger planted, without attention to the little finger. Your hand is going to be in a different position, it will change your attack and tone. Listen, adjust, fine tune, pay attention to your internal feedback. Keep your ring finger pretty vertical, not splayed out, and be attentive to how hard you press on the head, a gentle push is the aim. Play everything you know this way.

Second month: consciously add the little finger down to the head, curving your ring finger as needed. Keep the pressure gentle and avoid splaying out. You may have aching muscles or find you are gradually shifting from even pressure on the locating fingers. Rehearse tunes in your head without the banjo, playing the picking part on your knee, tabletop, etc. Be sure to actually hear the tune in your head... if you don't know how a tune sounds first, you won't be able to play it well with a banjo either.

It will probably take at least until the end of the second month before your hand begins to feel comfortable again. This is to be expected with this strategy.

3rd approach: Another effective ways of shifting your focus and action is to put a piece of double sided sticky tape on the head where you rest your fingers, as a way of providing a tactile stimulus. You will

need to pay attention to your hand as above, avoiding splaying and going back to gentle locating when you stray.

4th approach: Simply cross your little and ring fingers, and hold them in that position as you play, being aware of any tendency to uncross them. This curves the ring finger naturally, tends to keep it vertical. After a while, maybe a month, uncross and assess. Again, attention is necessary.

If the connection between your second and third finger tendons is so tight that you cannot move your middle finger far enough to pick the string without lifting your ring finger off of the head, then you probably will do better with only your little finger down. Having only the little finger down is less stable picking platform, but it will not keep you from becoming a world class banjoist. Pat Cloud, John Hartford and Alan Shelton are three musicians who anchor with the little finger alone. In my experimenting it took some time for my little finger to stop feeling as though it was a wet noodle being pushed into the head, so that my hand felt stable this way.

Notice whether you are touching and damping the first string with either of your fingers on the head, or possibly touching the string with the flesh of the tip of your thumb before the pick contacts the string, and make any necessary changes.

I recommend you experiment with holding your ring finger up inside of your hand, almost touching your palm. You can train this by holding a piece of eraser or a flatpick in your palm with it. This is the same idea as above. This keeps it clear of the strings and actually makes it easier to play the inside strings with your middle finger. Because of this it is good to be able to play both of these two ways, as well as ring finger only and no fingers down, and to be able to switch from one to another while playing.

A tactic that may help you get used to picking strings while your wrist and hand are mostly relaxed is to remove the need to stabilize the banjo for a while. Rehearse with the banjo laid flat on your lap like a Dobro®. After you have learned to pick smoothly, then add the extra task of pressing on the armrest and the head.

Flexibility in all parts of banjo playing, including how you hold your hand, will allow you more creative freedom. Working out of a home position, you can move in two dimensions, picking from a position anywhere between the extremes. You can move away from the strings by arching your hand, or closer to them with the fleshy part of your thumb laid against the head, muting it. In the other direction, you could be picking the string anywhere from right at the bridge with your rested fingers actually behind the bridge similar to Doug Dillard's hand position, to right at the junction of the neck and the pot.

The final degree of stability of your picking hand is achieved when you learn to subconsciously react to each picking motion with an equal and opposite force and micro motion in your steadying fingers, upper arm and shoulder. That way your hand does not jump as the string is released, yet it will move slightly. This is normal, you are not a rigid body. Trying to be one will only inhibit your relaxation and degrade your playing. You can speed your learning of this subtle skill by continuing to visualize a stable picking hand, again and again, as well as slow rehearsal of the instant of release of the string, with a gentle reaction to it from your shoulder and upper arm. Your hand need not be rock still, and some banjoists keep time with an up and down motion of their hand and forearm while picking.

Footnote 1 - I believe a reason for the increase in carpal tunnel complaints is that with present day keyboards, it is possible to type rapidly while still tense because it is not necessary to provide the force to cause the key to strike, as was the case with

manual typewriters. For a typist to type fast on a manual machine, he/she had to somehow learn to relax their arms and hands in order to be able to generate the required force.

If you can find an IBM 101 key keyboard say from a 286, this is a very inexpensive way to get a bucking spring one. With these the click is firm and distinct; the letters appear on the screen right when the click happens. The result can be a reduction in body tension because everything happens in synchronization, just like sound from a string happens when it is released. IBM P/N 1391401, Model M is typical. PCKeyboard.com makes 101 and 104 key new ones. Later IBM keyboards are nice, smooth and with a clean tactile feedback too, albeit without the click. If you can live with 84 keys (losing only about 4 functions actually, CTRL, F11, F12 and pause), the original IBM AT (not XT 83 key) keyboard will work too, and feel exactly like an IBM Selectric typewriter....

Footnote 2 - There is ample evidence in recent biomechanical research to allow me to make this statement. A discussion and referenced research projects are presented as Appendix 6.

~Gestalt Banjo Vol. 1~