

Hard Sole Dance Moccasins

By David Downing (Warrior with Coup, '71)

Moccasins are the standard footwear of the Native American dancer. At any pow wow, one may observe moccasins with numerous decorative and stylistic differences according to the particular tribes represented. However, dance moccasins have long been an essential element of dance regalia. As a hobbyist it is imperative that authenticity and accuracy be considered carefully at all times. By following the procedures outlined in the sections below, you will construct a basic pair of hard sole moccasins in a short period of time, which are authentic, comfortable and durable. Now, get out there and dance!

Patterns

Finding an even, hard surface to stand on, place your feet on a rectangular section of a paper shopping bag. Making sure that your weight is evenly distributed, ask someone to trace the perimeter of each foot. Keeping the pen or pencil in an upright position, allow the shape of the foot to determine the tracing line. When finished, round off the toe area so that you have a simple curved line (Figure 1). If you have held the pen upright, you will find that the curved area on the inside of each foot will be nearly straight. Avoid adding any extra size to the pattern, a common mistake for beginners. Your goal is to have a form-fitting moccasin. Once you have completed the sole patterns, cut them out making sure to use your pattern top-side up for one foot and bottom-side up for the other foot so the outside (smooth side) of the leather is on the outside of each sole. Label them left and right, and begin preparing the moccasin uppers.

For the moccasin uppers, you will again use the large panels of a paper shopping bag. Once those panels have been prepared, fold them in half twice to produce four equal sections. Using a pair of scissors, begin cutting lengthwise on the centerline of the bag, moving up approximately half way. Opening the space you have just cut, place the bag on top of your foot, stopping where your center cut ends. The center cut should be long enough that the pattern covers your entire foot with extra material extending beyond your heel. The centerline you have cut should begin where you normally tie your shoe. When you have found this position, make a perpendicular cut of 2½" where the centerline begins (1¼" on each side). This will form a "T" at the top of the arch. Once this is completed, take a few minutes to shape the bag around your foot, allowing the material to extend 1/8" to ¼" beyond where it touches the floor (Figure 2). Again, you should leave approximately 1 inch of material beyond where it meets at the back of the foot. Make sure the upper edge of the paper is the same height on both sides of your foot. This will be the upper edge of your moccasin, where it surrounds your ankle. Following the shaping of your pattern cut off any extra parts of the bag to

complete the upper. Before making a second upper pattern, test your completed pattern on the opposite foot by turning it over. If one foot is larger than the other, you will have to prepare a second pattern. If the pattern fits your other foot, you are ready to apply the pattern to actual materials (Figure 3).

*An additional tool for determining a precise T-cut is as follows:

1. Cut two strips of the paper bag approximately one-half inch in width.
2. Measure one paper strip across the arch of the foot where you normally tie your shoe. The paper strip should touch the ground on both sides of the foot.
3. Fold the paper strip in half, and make three marks: one in the center, one at the 1-inch mark on both sides of the centerline. This can be used to check for accuracy at the arch of the foot and upper.
4. If desired, cut one additional strip, which should extend from the center of the arch to the front of the foot, making certain that the strip touches the ground.

This will form a "T" shape, and will allow you to check the accuracy of the front section of the moccasin, and the proper width of the upper at the arch.

Supplies

With patterns in hand, travel to a leather supply store near you and ask for the following:

- For the uppers, you will need two pieces of elk or deer hide, several ounces in weight. Make sure that the hide is substantial enough that stitching will not tear. Remember, these uppers will be sewn to hard leather soles. Allow two inches of hide on each side of your upper pattern for tongues and laces and welts.
- For the soles, select thick pieces of latigo, cowhide, or alum-tanned leather.
- In addition to leather, you will need: a roll of imitation sinew, glover's needles, a pair of needle nosed pliers, scissors, an awl, a small block of bee's wax, and a cutting tool or utility knife.

Once you have obtained the necessary materials, cut out the moccasin uppers and soles.

In addition, you will need to cut out two pieces of leather (2"x2") for tongues, and two ¼-inch strips which should be long enough to go around the perimeter of the sole leather with a slight overlap in the back. These strips are to be used as welts. Welts are commonly used when sewing the moccasin upper to the sole in order to protect stitching and keep out dirt and moisture. Thus, the life of the moccasin is extended significantly.

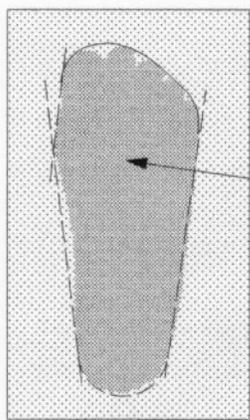


figure #1

Pattern paper.

Your foot outline smoothed to shape after tracing the actual foot and toes.

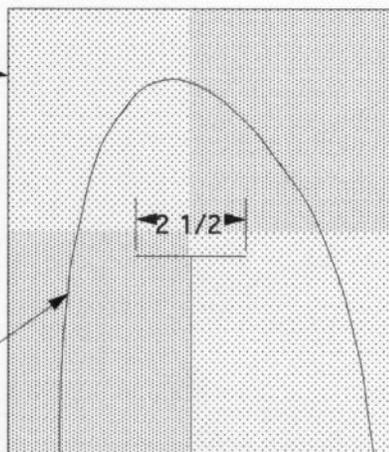


figure #2

Moccasin upper pattern after shaping around your foot to the floor (+ 1/4") all around the bottom edge. Let an inch or more hang off the back, for adjustments later.

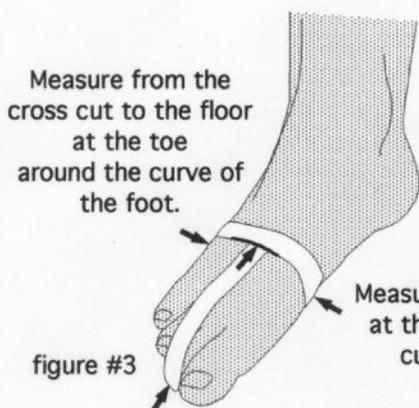


figure #3

Measure from the cross cut to the floor at the toe around the curve of the foot.

Measure from floor to floor at the point of the cross cut for the tongue.

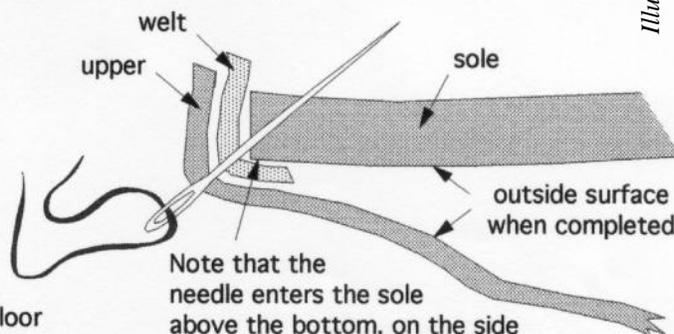
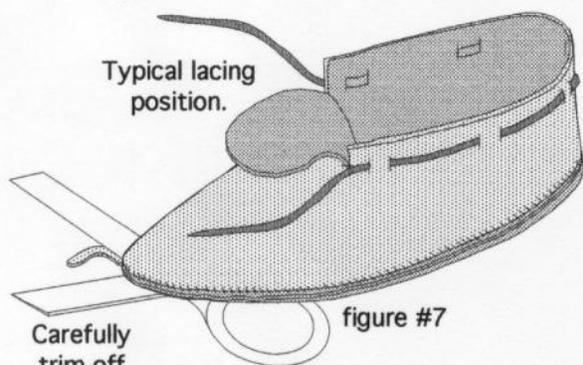


figure #4

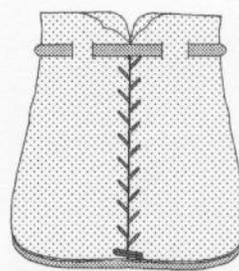
Note that the needle enters the sole above the bottom, on the side of the sole.



Carefully trim off excess welt.

figure #7

Typical lacing position.



Baseball stitch.



Whip stitch.

figure #5

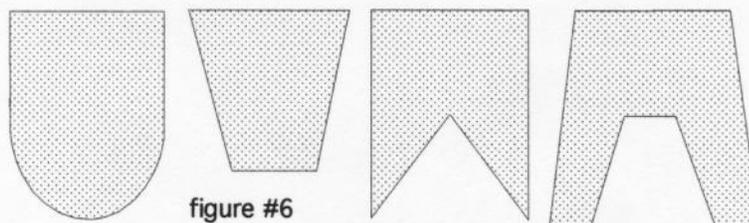


figure #6

Several popular tongue shapes.

Putting the Moccasins Together

Typically, any beadwork or decoration for the moccasin upper would be added at this time. However, It is perfectly acceptable to decorate the moccasin after completion. Therefore, go ahead with your project. With a completed pair of dance moccasins, you can participate in pow wows and ceremonies while giving yourself time for

accurate and authentic design research.

To prepare the sole, spend some time working the leather with your hands. This will provide for greater pliability and flexibility throughout the sewing process. Next, using the blunt side of a pair of scissors, scrape the side of each sole. This will enlarge and soften the area, allowing for easier needle penetration. If the sole is difficult to

work with, use an awl to pre-punch holes in the sole at intervals of 1/8 inch. Each hole should enter the side of the leather, exiting the top of the sole at an angle (Figure 4). Make sure to bring the needle or awl through the sole away from the immediate edge so that tearing can be avoided. If any tearing occurs, move over 1/8 inch and continue the process. Close stitching will provide stability to the moccasin and eliminate any bunching of the leather while sewing.

To prepare the sinew, remove a long section from the spool. Split the thread in two, making certain that each thread is long enough to complete one half of the moccasin sole.

Roll the sinew against a flat surface to create a uniform shaped, round thread. As you sew, occasionally rub the sinew with bee's wax to keep it from fraying.

The moccasins will be soled inside out and turned when completed. With the moccasin upper on the bottom, place the sole on top with the smooth side facing upward. After aligning the center of the moccasin upper with the welt and sole, begin stitching at the toe, using a whip stitch. Each stitch moves in a clockwise direction through the moccasin, welt, and sole, always in that order. On the first stitch, knot the end of the thread to the moccasin and upper, securing its placement. Continue to sew until you have completed approximately one third of one side of the moccasin. Using a second needle with sinew, repeat the same process, moving in the opposite direction around the perimeter of the moccasin. This process allows for evenness and balance as the sole is connected to the upper. When the entire sole has been attached, begin turning the moccasin right side out. To accomplish this, lightly wet the sole, avoiding the leather upper, particularly if you have used brain-tan. Then, starting at the toe, begin to turn the moccasin. Continue this process slowly and carefully. By taking your time, you

will avoid tearing the leather or the stitching. When you have completed turning the moccasins, place them on your feet and close up the back area. Using a light mark or crease, indicate the proper closure and then proceed to remove any excess leather as you prepare to close the heel. Again, take your time when trimming the leather and making adjustments. You may always trim more, but adding leather is difficult.

After overlapping the ends of the welt, sew up the back of the moccasin using a whip stitch or baseball stitch (Figure 5). I prefer using the baseball stitch when sewing the back of the moccasins and securing the tongue. Using two threads, this stitch is stronger, and allows for a clean approximation of two pieces of leather. Either stitch is suitable for this project.

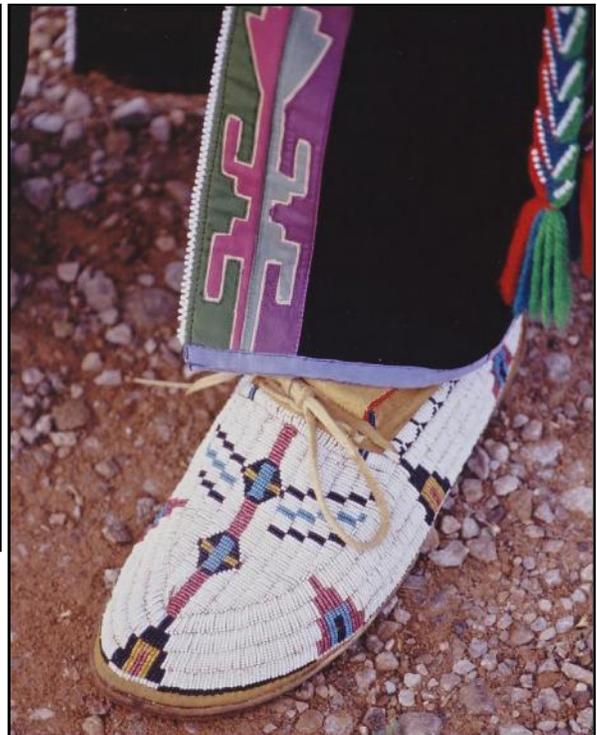
When closing the heel area, the stitch should stop at the top of the heel, leaving a flap.

Finishing Touches

Once the moccasins have been soled securely, you may attach the tongues and laces (Figures 6 and 7). The tongues should be sewn directly to the "T" using either a whip stitch or baseball stitch. Approximately one inch from the top of the moccasin flap on each side, cut three sets of slits for the laces, separated at equal distances. Finally, make any adjustments to the flaps if they are uneven. Take your time cutting and sewing the leather. Your lace should cross the back of the moccasin on the outside so it holds the moccasin against your heel.

Decoration

Most often, moccasins are either partially or fully beaded. Before commencing on any beadwork project, be certain that you have researched your design, and that it is consistent with the tribal style of dance clothing you have chosen to construct.



Two fine examples of Southern Plains Cheyenne moccasins. Above, partially beaded moccasins from the White Hair Memorial Museum Collection, Hominy, Oklahoma. At right, fully beaded moccasins owned by Norman Akers.