

## The 19/30s Exercise: Twenty Minutes That Changed My Trumpet-Playing Life

Rusty Russell

A few months ago I posted in a thread on the Trumpet Herald about endurance, describing a very simple exercise I call “the 19/30s.” It had, I wrote, been the key that helped resolve my lifelong struggles with endurance, range, consistency and a host of other common playing issues. I know; that’s a huge claim to make, but the simple little exercise really was the key to all that for me. Since then I’ve received many PMs and seen posts in other threads saying that others have had good results with the little exercise, many accompanied by requests for me to share an expanded description and open some discussion on the subject. I’ve resisted doing so for a couple reasons. First, I don’t want anyone to get the idea that I see myself as some kind of chop expert, or that I think I’ve discovered something nobody else knows about. I don’t. Secondly, I realize that there are any number of ways to approach trumpet playing successfully. And I really, REALLY hate the kind of arguments that often gob up forums with people defending particular methods or pedagogues or techniques as THE way.

Eventually I figured that I would make it available to anyone who wanted to download it. That way it wouldn’t take up space on a forum, or waste time for anyone who didn’t want to get too far into it. If it helps some people overcome some of the same hurdles I continually stumbled over, GREAT. If it doesn’t make sense for you, doesn’t work for you, that’s fine too. It’s not “right.” It’s just proven to be right for me, and, apparently, for some others. I have no intention of “defending” it, and certainly don’t discount any opposing ideas that work for other people. But this little exercise really did help me make workable the things that have eluded or confused me for decades. It truly has changed my trumpet-playing life, honestly has helped end the above-mentioned struggles. And at 54, having played for a living at various times and gone years without touching a horn at others, that’s a lot of struggle. I’m posting this in the hopes that someone who’s had a similarly rough path is helped by it.

First, some background. This is long. Skip it if you like. I only offer it because I think that many, many players followed similar, frustrating paths, and that the things this little philosophy “fixed” for me are the same things that many of those players struggle with – that many people come to the same place I was at. Here goes:

I started college as a trumpet performance major in 1974, on a full scholarship. I had a good sound, and for some reason had a rep for having a good jazz feel and a good ear. I didn’t have much range, topping out at a high D or so, and couldn’t really pull even that off for a whole gig or rehearsal. Still, in a studio of around 40 trumpet majors, I started my first semester having won the jazz chair in the second (of two) big bands, a section spot in the first, and the second trumpet spot in a brass quintet with other members who were juniors and seniors. I also played in the concert band, but I don’t remember where I was in that section. I should note that I never

had any desire to play lead, or scream around in the double register. I wanted to be like Miles, or Freddie. But I still wanted to cut the parts in front of me.

I had studied with the head of the trumpet studio (department) since my junior year of high school. In general, it was a good school; John Aley was an upperclassman, and David Hickman had just finished up his grad assistantship. But the prof put almost everyone through an embouchure change. Everything was focused on embouchure. And it was very physically oriented; all about doing this thing with that muscle, moving the jaw this way or that, tuck this, roll that. I have notes from one lesson, in my ancient Schlossberg book, that list – I’m not kidding – SEVEN physical things to think about and “set” before playing the exercise’s first note. This became my perspective on how you played and improved on the trumpet.

I worked hard. I wasn’t consumed, but I put in at least as much time and effort as most of the better players in the studio. And I learned a lot about interpretation, transposition, stylistic ideas... but I didn’t improve much in the chop department. In fact, I started going downhill. By my third semester, I sounded terrible, totally caved halfway through rehearsals, and my attitude & self image were in the crapper. I was informed that my scholarship was at risk, like I was on some kind of super-double-secret probation (ala “Animal House”). So I bailed. Moved back to my old hometown of Denver. Within weeks, I’d traded in a really nice Mt. Vernon Bach and a great C Strad on an archtop guitar.

Fast forward. In 1984 I moved to Nashville, and after a while landed a gig with a major-label artist, playing guitar and doubling on trumpet. Not hard stuff. I cut the gig, is about all I can say for my horn playing. That job ended, and for more than ten years I didn’t touch – or own – a trumpet.

For a number of reasons (mostly, a very cool opportunity to go to Europe, tour around for a month or so, and get paid pretty well for it), I launched a comeback about ten years ago. Fits and starts. When there was a gig, I’d get into it. When there wasn’t, I’d pretty much lay it down. Spotty. I’d dig in with the old approach when something came up, usually just barely cutting it by gig time. Then some big, big life/health stuff happened, and when all the dust settled I realized that what I really wanted to do with the rest of my life was play my horn. That was about six years ago, and I have been pretty much obsessed ever since. I’ve had some cool gigs (lucky me!). And each time, I would be a ball of nerves and fear, knowing that I’d have trouble lasting through a set, calculating what parts I could “duck” on to save chops, dreading sections that called for good flexibility... but I wanted it SO badly. I landed a gig with another national touring act. We played Bonnaroo. A little TV stuff. Big festivals on both coasts and in between. And still, the fear. The inconsistency. The struggle to not fold like an old wallet three-fourths of the way through the set.

At a certain point, I figured it was time for some serious self-assessment. I'd done this (playing), off and on, for years. Decades! It couldn't be THAT hard. Clearly, there was something wrong with my approach. Otherwise, in all that time, I would have at least stumbled onto knowing how to build enough muscle, how to tuck/roll/jut/flex/compress/manipulate whatever physical parts I had to in order to get to THAT place. The exclusive room where other trumpet players seemed to live, where they just rode on this creamy stream of gorgeous sound, seemed to do it with very little effort, to have it all under control. How do you GET INTO that room?

What followed was a series of switches that were flipped, and light bulbs that came on. Most every "bulb" was something I'd heard or read about before, but had not been able to put into practice – not been able to understand or make work for me. Each step along the way, each switch and the bulb it lit, got me a little closer to understanding the ideas that led me to the 19/30s. I honestly don't think I could have arrived at them if even one of these switches hadn't been flipped.

The switch:

I started really studying clips of the trumpet players I liked – the guys I most wanted to sound like. Randy Brecker. Jerry Hey. Blue Mitchell. Clark Terry. Arturo Sandoval. Chuck Findley. The over-arching impression I got was that they were all very *relaxed* when they played. How on earth were they putting all those little physical moves into play and *not* looking like some kind of coiled spring by the time the sound started (like me)?

The light bulb:

Several of my sound models had studied with Bill Adam, so I began reading all I could about his ideas. Those opened some things up, but I wasn't able to control much (I was practicing about two hours a day, minimum). I did understand that, in Mr. Adam's philosophy, "all the little moves" that had been my framework were seen as *impediments* to good playing. Hmmm...

The switch:

I also read about "chop docs," like Laurie Frink and Jeanne Pocius. I flew to NYC to take a lesson with Laurie. She talked to me about keeping the airstream steady. We discovered that I was interrupting the airstream constantly. I began working out of her "Flexus" book when I got home, concentrating on the airstream thing.

### The light bulb:

A year later, I used the very last dollars on my credit card to fly to Boston, rent a car, and drive to a tiny town in very northern MA to spend a couple days with Jeanne. For the first two hours – no kidding – she worked to try to get me to NOT make an embouchure. Relax the corners. Just do it – don't "hold" anything in place. Put your lips together gently, put the horn on your face, and blow air through it. If you've played for a long while, you may find that doing that is harder than you can believe. It was for me. Finally, FINALLY, I somehow broke free for a second from all the years of holding/tucking/rolling/jutting/compressing and played my first ever truly relaxed note on the trumpet. The sound that came out was HUGE. Warm and bright at the same time. Liquid, almost. We both started laughing, then scurried to the bathroom mirror so I could do it again and see what it looked like. The rest of my time with Jeanne went very well. We talked about air, the small, active, "buzzing" part of the lips, efficient use of energy... things like that. When I got home, I was thrilled – and shocked - to find that I could play for *hours* without tiring. Control was iffy at times, and there was some weird intonation stuff happening, but I could play and play and play. I also noticed that, for the first time in my life, I could slur entire octaves without much effort at all. Amazing! It was obvious to me that the relaxed thing, coupled with Laurie's ideas about keeping the airstream going, were behind that.

This was probably the 1000-watt bulb. I didn't take to or adopt all of what Jeanne covered with me. But finally experiencing what it was like to make sound with a relaxed face allowed me to see – objectively – and compare what I'd always done before. I had always changed notes/ranges by making some "move" or another with my chops. A muscle thing. A tension thing. Press the lips together more tightly (at a certain point, you can't press them together any more tightly, so you tighten the vibrating surface by stretching the "corners" back, into a smile). Stick the jaw out a little more. Change the angle of the horn. I wasn't doing any of that, at last.

### The switch:

Still a bit stuck in the analytical world, I tried to assess what *was* going on, so I could keep doing it and build on it. When I really stuck to my guns and avoided tensing anything or making some "chop move," focused on the airstream and the sound that was coming out the bell (still reading all the Bill Adam I could find!), the only change that happened when I slurred or changed ranges was happening with my tongue. Of course I'd known about syllables and tongue level and all that forever, but I'd never really made much of it.

Disclaimer: I don't care why or how the tongue affects things for (some/many) trumpet players. Countless gigabytes have been wasted on internet forums with inane arguments about water pressure in hoses, fast air/slow air, my engineering

degree is from a better college than yours, my teacher was smarter than your teacher, blah, blah, blah. It doesn't matter to me whether the tongue "channels" the air, or spins it, or narrows the stream, or forces some unseen physical change in lip placement, or whatever. Don't play me an X-Ray video, please. Heck, I don't care if it works by sending some magical, invisible signal to the Range Fairy, who instantly grants a beautiful slur to the player. When I don't try to make some physical "move" with my chops, my tongue will faithfully initiate the change. That's all that matters to me.

So, having checked out most every established method known to man over the years, I knew that Claude Gordon was all about tongue level (among several other concepts). I dusted off my yellowing copy of his Systematic Approach book.

The light bulb:

SA represents a pretty serious commitment. Thumb through it and you'll find that actually using it as prescribed will take a big, daily chunk of time. I wasn't sure I could commit to that, but I forged ahead and waded into Lesson One. Sort of. It's always been hard for me to stick to someone else's plan, especially if it's very involved. Not sure if it's arrogance, or a lack of some kind of discipline, or an attention deficit disorder... I just always seem to start forming my own little "take" on whatever I'm trying to follow. I taught myself guitar, bass and photography well enough to make my living with each, and teach in each of those disciplines. So it was almost a given that I'd end up messing with the program when I started looking into SA. With apologies to Mr. Gordon, I have still never finished all of Lesson One as prescribed, and have touched on precious little else in the book. It's still on my greater to-do list, but I got off track because...

I stumbled onto the 19/30 exercise. Yes, gentle reader (if you're still reading!), I'm finally going to describe the danged exercise. You will likely be stunningly underwhelmed, at first. I know. There's really not very much to it at all. But I put you through all the above for a reason.

We trumpet players, for some reason, tend to get stuck on the notes. It's like we believe that there's some supernatural power a specific sequence of notes has to fix our trumpet-playing issues, and if we don't do them in that sequence or we alter them the tiniest bit or we don't follow some ritualistic dictate with them, we'll not only fail to gain the intended benefit, but we could actually screw up our playing. Forever! On any given day, you can find at least two players coming to virtual blows on an internet forum over the fact that one teacher said to repeat a given four bars *one* time, whereas another vaunted mentor insisted it must be repeated *twice*. (Then

you do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around...). You *have* to play the upper octave first, before playing the pedal tone, or your kids will be born with their eyes too close together! No, no, no, no! *My* teacher said you have to play them contiguously, scale-wise, or you'll develop boils on the soles of your feet!

Bull. The one thing you can be sure of when you witness that kind of exchange is that both players are missing the whole *point* the exercise is making in the first place.

And that's why I've put you through all this. This exercise could just as easily be called the 20/30s. Or the 17/20s. Or the...

These are long tones. You may recognize them as a Crib-Notes version of Lesson One in Claude Gordon's Systematic Approach. It doesn't really matter where you start them, or whether you play them chromatically, or whether you use them as a warm-up, or if you only do them after a bit of Bill Adam leadpipe playing (like I do). I've found benefit in expanding them to include pedal tones and an ascending pattern – your mileage may vary. If you ask whether I recommend tonguing the note or starting with a breath attack, you're missing the point (at least the one I'm making). I tongue them, BTW.

**What has made them work for me is all the switches and bulbs described above. It's what I'm going for when I play them. It's what I expect them to do, and how I look for that to happen when I'm playing them. All THAT is the meat of the exercise. The notes themselves are simply the vehicle for getting all that going.**

Ready? Are you sure?

Alright then:

If you start on the C in the staff, and play every note down to low F#, you'll play 19 notes. Play C for thirty seconds. Rest thirty seconds. Play B for thirty seconds. Rest for thirty seconds. Play Bb for... (see a pattern emerging? 19 notes. 30 seconds each. 19/30s.

So now you're ready to kill me, because you've slogged through, basically, some idiot's life story for one tiny paragraph of stuff you've seen a million times. But wait...

Whether or not you play them in that sequence, or hold them longer or shorter, or tongue them or breath-attack them, or whatever, do them like this:

1. Start by taking a full, easy breath (without the horn). Then LET the air come out, resisted only by RELAXED, resting lips. Again, DON'T BLOW. Let the air come out on its own. It's about like what you would do if you were cooling a spoonful of soup. Do that two or three times. When you think of blowing, you're liable to bring a bunch of chest, neck, jaw, lip - even arm muscles into play. This is about establishing airflow. Shaking hands with the sensation of it to begin the playing session. Tension is not good. Tension, muscle flexing, all that is what we're learning to avoid. Would a runner flex or tense up her legs as she came out of the starting blocks? Would a violinist "harden" his bowing arm as he began a passage? You know how you envy those guys who make trumpet playing look easy? This is a good start to learning to play that way.
  
2. When you begin to actually play the exercise, think of *letting the air blow the embouchure into place*. This comes directly from the teachings of Bill Adam. I'm sure it comes from other places too, but that's where I ran into it. Remember that this is NOT about changing your embouchure, per se. But at least for this exercise, for these first few times, try to avoid "making" your embouchure. Here's why: Most of the time, when people play long tones, they're thinking of strengthening something. The corners. The inner muscles that control aperture. The "diaphragm muscles" (which don't actually exist). Whatever. We're not trying to strengthen anything. We're learning what it feels like when a relaxed stream of air generates a big, beautiful sound by passing through/driving relaxed lip tissue and continuing into the horn. (I know... the "buzz" of that tissue is generated by the standing wave, etc.) Don't care. This is what it feels like, and **this is what we're going for. That sensation.** That is the point of this. If you've gone through some of the frustrating stuff I've described here, you very likely haven't ever experienced that. I know I hadn't. And if it has the same effect on you as it did on me, you will discover a whole new world of trumpet playing in pretty short order.
  
3. Don't think about your lips (Claude Gordon). Don't think about your jaw, or your "corners," or your anything else (me). Get your mind out in front of your bell. To quote/paraphrase Bill Adam, "when you take your mind off the sound, problems emerge." You are still NOT blowing the air. You're *allowing it to escape*. I focus on the sound, and am peripherally aware of the air moving out of me and *through* the horn.
  
4. This is VERY IMPORTANT, at least when I do this exercise: While you are focused on the sound, accept it as-is when you start. If you begin with the C in

the staff, understand that it may sound a little dull. It may be slightly flat or sharp. You may have some air in the tone (if that's the case, and it persists, I recommend starting again, making sure that you put your lips together *gently* (Jeanne Pocius). Don't "hold" them together. Just try to avoid letting them be any great distance apart. Remember that you're not used to making a sound this way, and are likely playing on/with some lip surface that you don't usually play on. You're not "tensing" some embouchure into shape, you're not forcing air into the setup like you might usually do. Just allow yourself to have the sensation of *letting* a stream of air flow out of your lungs and through the horn, resisted without tension by your relaxed, resting lips which are "carried" to the sealing point with the mouthpiece by the air. If you're like me, this will feel a little strange at first. The big temptation is to do the things you normally do when you start a note and it's not quite right. You manipulate your lips, or your jaw, or change the "blow," or whatever. DON'T. Lemmie say it again: DON'T. Trust it. Let it open up on its own. I honestly believe this is where we get into trouble in the very first place. Some teacher or band director hears a fuzzy note or an airball or a dull tone and says, "put some air through the horn! And buzz your lips, like this: (makes spitting sound). Press your lips together!"

And thus can begin decades of doing all kinds of things with your lips, jaw, "corners," cheeks, etc. to try and overcome the obstacles you've created by, well, doing all kinds of things with your lips, jaw, "corners," cheeks, etc. (Alan Vizzutti, more or less)

**DON'T DO ANYTHING TO TRY TO GET IT TO FEEL AND SOUND LIKE IT USUALLY DOES. THAT'S WHAT WE'RE TRYING TO GET AWAY FROM!**

5. By now, you may be thinking, "hey, wait a minute... this guy made fun of having a long list of things to think about before you play a note, and now he's making his own list!" Well, not really. This list is really just reminders of things you *don't* have to do. It's a suggestion that you don't do *anything*, at this point, except for letting air escape from your lungs, though your lips (which aren't doing anything) and focusing on the sound coming out of the bell. Anyway...
6. **THIS IS THE PAYOFF!** Somewhere in the series – it usually happens for me around the A, maybe the G if I'm out of shape – that peripheral sense you've kept (without "doing" anything about it) of the air passing over/through the lips will change. The buzz will seem to "expand," the whole system will start to feel like it's one single unit, and you will hear the sound open up almost like you took some earplugs out of your ears. At least that's how it affects me if I've had a rough start from being out of shape or having a hard gig the night before or whatever. (If you've tried to do your usual "moves" to make the



sound happen, you won't get to this point!) If I'm in good shape, the difference is not as great, as it's pretty close to the goal from the beginning. But it still happens. I've described it as being like power steering. When I started driving, many cars still didn't have power-assisted steering. You had to crank the wheel with both hands to turn a corner. This is like the first time I experienced power steering. Younger folks may know what it's like when the power steering in their car goes out; all of a sudden, it takes many times the normal effort to turn the wheel. The sensation we're looking for here is like when the power steering kicks back in. The sound opens up. There's suddenly a "sheen" on the note, but it's fuller, too. You're getting substantially more (and better) sound with no increased effort. I know: Cool. Finish the series down to low F#. You should be set up, in a real good place for whatever you have to play. That's how it works for me, anyway. It has made me sound and play better in almost every way, nearly from the very start.

Couple notes: I'll say again that this is NOT "an embouchure." Not necessarily. It has *become* my embouchure, I guess, in that I do exactly what I've described above when I play. I used to look all pretzel-like when I played, with this squeezed and that tucked and this part firm and that part extended. Chops flattened to the teeth and tensed to the max... Now, by not "holding anything in place," my face looks like one of those classic photos of a "good" embouchure. A nicely padded, round-ish area around my mouth on which the mouthpiece sits. That wasn't the goal – just an interesting side effect. As for *your* embouchure, all I can tell you is that the idea here is to *let* things fall into place. You didn't have to train yourself to blow out candles, or cool a spoonful of soup, or clear the eraser dust off of your desk with a breath. Those are embouchures too. If you find that the setup this exercise (and the numbered notes above) produces is vastly different from the setup you currently use, you have the choice of trusting this, going back to your old setup, or trying to take what you can from this stuff and find someplace in the middle.

An added benefit seems to be the banishment of the dreaded "closing off my throat" issue. (You can't actually "close" your throat, btw. Not physically possible. What actually happens is the Valsalva maneuver, the same thing as when you make a "grunting" sound, or, actually, try to force a bowel movement. The glottis slams shut, involuntarily. But it feels like your "throat is closing off.") Anyway, many of the physical "moves" we try to make when changing registers or slurring can develop into triggers for the V. Maneuver. We've stopped relying on the air, try to do it with the chops, then force the air to drive the changed physical parts. V. Maneuver. Choke-o-Rama. When you're blowing the embouchure into place, letting the tongue affect the airstream, and thinking of the sound coming from the bell, everything is forward-focused. I'm not playing *into* my lips – I'm playing *through* them. This eliminated my debilitating habit of shutting off the air as described. WAY better!

Things will develop from what's happening when you first feel that "riding on the airstream" sensation, of course. There is no such thing as absolutely tension-free playing. For me, there really isn't any tension required in the middle range beyond

what it takes to keep my mouth from going totally flaccid and my lips falling away from each other. As I ascend, somewhere around high A in my case, I begin to apply small amounts of firmness right around the mouthpiece. This actually developed as I tried to understand more about “corners.” I have a small upper dental palette. The “horseshoe” shape of my upper teeth is much more narrow than my mouth cavity – my upper palette is sort of an alligator-ish thing. Like many players, I had always taken “corners” to mean the very corners of my mouth – where the lips end. That place. So “firm corners,” for me, meant holding those lip ends in place. Then I read or heard an interview with Wayne Bergeron. He was hurrying through a list of fundamental principles he’d been taught as a kid; it went something like, “blah, blah, blah... blah, blah, *corners tucked in to the eye teeth*, blah, blah...” WAIT a minute... I can’t get my “corners” anywhere in the same *zip code* as my eye teeth! Some experimentation led to the revelation that, for me, the functional principle was to keep whatever part of the lips was lined up with the eye teeth – or about where the “turn” occurs in the horseshoe - from separating from the teeth, at least by much. That clicked a BUNCH of things in for me. So, as I ascend, there’s a slight bit of firming applied in that circular area described by my eye teeth. It’s just outside the mouthpiece rim with my facial/dental structure. Has nothing at all to do with the ends of my lips. BIG revelation. No more tensed-up smile, no matter how high I play.

Learning to feel this sensation doesn’t take long. It happened the first or second time I did this exercise, and I was playing this way pretty much from that minute onward. And playing *better*. Sure, development takes years. But somehow what I’ve described here doesn’t negate *everything* you’ve built over those years. There is still a lot that you’ve built that will continue to work – some that will even work better – only you’ll do it without tension. Without the kind of fatigue that makes you crash before the end of the gig.

In my case, within a little less than two weeks, I crossed my fingers and played this way on a gig. A three-hour, no-break R&B gig in a LOUD band. I could not have made it through that gig well at all just a couple weeks earlier. That night, I finished fresh as a daisy. And during the set (I’ll never forget it... it was on “Superstition,” which we played in concert Eb – the singer was a bit burned, and we lowered the key for him), I pushed my luck and took a stinger up an octave. First high F I ever really *pasted* in performance in my life. I nearly cried on the way home. No kidding. I had wanted to “ride the airstream” like that for *so* many years. Now I get to do it all the time.

I hope you find all this helpful, or at least interesting.

Rusty Russell