

Zippers give bags new edge -- pipe sergeant

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The SFU Pipe Band uses a combination of technologies to get the best sound

It's an idea that Jack Lee calls tailor-made for the Simon Fraser University Pipe Band – bags with zippers.

Using an industrial sewing machine in the basement of his Surrey home, the pipe sergeant of the six-time world champion band has sewn heavyweight zippers – like those used on scuba-divers' wetsuits - into his pipers' sheep and goat-skinned bags, all in the name of keeping them dry and sounding sweet.

“It's a breakthrough this year for the band,” says Lee, currently in Scotland with his band to prepare for the World Pipe Band Championships.

“The zipper lets us get inside the bag and put in some material – silicon

– that will keep the drones dry. This more than triples the amount of time we have to tune and really get the most out of our instruments, which is key to achieving the [sound](#) we are after.

“Pipers want a wet, rich chanter sound, but also want a dry bag. The zippers allow us to achieve both.”

Once unzipped, pipers can insert an Achiltibuie moisture control system – which features small tube-like arms containing silica gel that connect to each drone (the bagpipe’s three big pipes) from inside. When a piper blows through the instrument, the silica dries out the air, and the dry air goes to the drones.

The product was designed by a friend of Lee’s (Achiltibuie, also a region in Northern Scotland, is the brand name) and is available at piping shops.

Lee says the band has stayed on top of myriad technological advances in bagpipes over the past few decades and unlike many bands chose not to switch to a waterproof, Gortex-like material. “These work well in keeping the instrument dry, but the sound is not rich - it is thin and narrow,” he says.

While half of the band members play on sheepskin bags the other half, including Lee, use goatskin bags - made by Lee himself - from hides that originate in India and are shipped to England, tanned in Scotland and sent to his home.

“The advantage of sheep and goatskin is that they give a very rich, harmonic sound, but the disadvantage is they get wet quickly, the reeds get wet and they get out of tune. We’re also dealing with the humid air of Scotland.

“This is a way for us to maintain our rich sound without the challenges

of constantly trying to keep our [bags](#) dry,” Lee says. “We think it will be a great advantage.”

Provided by Simon Fraser University

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