

FIRE BATON TWIRLING

FOREWORD: Fire baton twirling, when properly executed, is probably the most spectacular form of all baton twirling. Because of its dangerous and daring effect, it is a “natural” in winning audience approval.

For years, fire baton twirling has been a topic of conversation and discussion among twirlers, their parents and other interested persons. Articles have appeared in many nationally circulated publications listing its pros and cons. Some authors have advised twirlers against using fire batons. Contending they are too dangerous. Still others have encouraged their use, insisting that the danger is very small.

IS FIRE BATON TWIRLING DANGEROUS? Actually, the element of danger in using fire batons is very small if the performer is given a sound basic understanding of fire batons, their use, and the necessary precautions that must be taken before, during, and following each time they are used.

WHAT IS A FIRE BATON? A fire baton is merely a regular baton shaft, or facsimile thereof, with a wicking type material wrapped or bound to each of its ends and fastened tightly to prevent any part of the wicking to loosen. The shaft is made of metal. To use a fire baton, the performer merely soaks each of its ends in a fuel solution and ignites them. The flames are quickly smothered after being used.

WHO CAN TWIRL A FIRE BATON? Any twirler who has mastered the art of one baton to the point where they could be considered “Advanced”, should have a sufficient twirling background to successfully twirl a fire baton. Fire baton twirling should not be attempted by beginner or intermediate twirlers.

WHY IS FIRE BATON TWIRLING SO SPECTACULAR? For some reason, the public enjoys watching a performer compete with danger. Fire baton twirling looks dangerous and in comparison with other forms of twirling, is dangerous. When executed in the darkness by an advanced twirler it appears both spectacular and thrilling to even the most critical of onlookers. A smart performer, realizing these points, will make their exit leaving behind a completely thrilled and “we want more” audience.

A smart performer will help to create a tense atmosphere by performing to stirring music appropriate for the occasion. They will stand in a poised, posed position while their fire baton is being ignited. They will appear confident and daring. After all, you’re putting on a show, be a **GOOD PERFORMER.**

THE NECESSARY PRECAUTIONS. The performer who enters the field of fire baton twirling should do so cautiously and intelligently. They should never practice alone and there should always be someone present who can handle any unforeseen situation. It is best always to have a fire extinguisher at hand, a pocket size one if nothing else.

It should be kept first and foremost in your mind that the safety of not only the performer is at stake, but also the safety of all the bystanders and property near them. The spray line of your baton, at the start of your performance should not be allowed to come in contact with persons or property.

City ordinances and State regulations vary considerably. Many city ordinances prohibit the use of fire burning equipment inside buildings. Still others allow the use of such equipment as fire batons if certain regulations are adhered to. You should personally contact the local fire department of the city in which you are performing in order to become familiar with the various city and state fire regulations governing that area. At all times, you should adhere to those regulations and no chances should be taken. Some cities have ordinances whereby a firefighter must be on hand when such acts are presented.

DRESS PROPERLY. Dress for the occasion. A little forethought must be used by fire baton twirlers. Flared skirts, loose costumes, and long coat tails should be avoided. Shakos and other bulky hats should not be worn during performances. It is best that long slacks and trousers do not have cuffs and that blouse sleeves are not excessively full. Loose ribbons, cords, pocket flaps and other braiding should be fully secured or not worn.

HAIR. Probably the most important hair-related precaution a twirler can take is keeping their hair protected. Twirlers with short hair can merely pin it up tightly. Those with long hair should either wear a bathing cap or spray with a flame-resistant fluid.

FLAMEPROOFING UNIFORM AND HAIR. There is a very simple but effective way to flameproof your entire uniform. Twirlers may also use the same process to protect their hair. This flameproofing solution is absolutely harmless and it will not stain. Needed to make the solution are: nine ounces of Borax, four ounces of Boric Acid, and one gallon of hot water. Dissolve the Borax and Boric Acid in the water and fill sprayer with the solution. Apply flame proofing mist to both sides of fabric or spray directly on hair. Any regular sprayer will work. Towels and clothing can be soaked as well. This treatment should be repeated after each cleaning or prior to each performance. This solution is approved by the National Board of Fire Underwriters.

QUALITIES TO LOOK FOR IN A FIRE BATON. In general, a fire baton is center balanced and will usually weigh a little more than a regular baton. Fire batons with excess wiring and screening wrapped around its wicking is taboo. Wire and screening quickly become red hot and will have the same effect as a heated branding iron should it come in contact with your body or apparel.

The proper length fire baton to be used can be determined by measuring the distance from the pit of your arm to the first joint of your index finger. Fire batons with sharp metal ends protruding out of the wicking are not recommended, for obvious reasons. Thickness of shaft is a matter of individual preference although most factories make fire batons come in 3/8" or 7/16".

THE NECESSARY EQUIPMENT. Prior to each performance, a fire baton twirler should take inventory of their equipment to make sure that nothing has been overlooked. A well-equipped fire baton twirler will have the following items:

1. **Fire Baton:** Should be in first class condition with wicking fastened tightly to shaft. Frequent users find it wise to carry a spare.
2. **Metal Case:** Case should be air tight and have tight fitting cap or lid for storing.
3. **Towel:** One to be used for wiping and drying. Towels can be made flameproof by immersing in flameproofing solution described elsewhere in this information.
4. **Matches:** for lighting purposes. Wooden table matches are preferred to bendable, shorter lasting, paper matches. Cigarette lighter will work fine, also.
5. **Fuel Container:** Glass jar or tin can used to pour fuel in for dipping purposes. Again, a nonbreakable container is preferred to one that is breakable.
6. **Fuel Can:** Metal can is preferred to breakable glass containers. This container **MUST** be painted red and bear the word **FUEL** across its front in black letters. This is a law in most states.
7. **Fire Extinguisher.** Ready for any emergency that might arise. Usually, a pocket-sized one can be purchased at little cost.
8. **First-aid Kit:** In case of burns or other minor injuries. Tape and dry bandages are most important.

TRICKS TO USE WHEN TWIRLING FIRE BATONS. It should be noted at this point that above all things, a twirler should never attempt a trick with a fire baton that hasn't been well practiced for an exhibition. For the most part, fire baton twirling is usually done in the dark. Should this be the case, keep your routine simple, using only twirls that you are sure of and that can be done without any hesitations, breaks or stops. Rolls, slides, bounces and any other tricks where the baton will come in direct contact with the body should be avoided, for obvious reasons.

REMEMBER. In the dark the audience cannot usually appreciate your intricate work. Keep it simple, using a bag of figure eights and reverse figure eights as you do fast turns and such.

KEEP IT SMOOTH. Construct your routine with smoothness foremost in mind.

TRICKS THAT ALWAYS MAKE A HIT. Although just about every fire baton exhibition will make a hit with the onlooking public, there are a number of simple tricks that seemingly win an extra-large portion of applause. Fast leg tricks of almost any kind go over well. Horizontal twirls and especially tosses with clever catches and releases seemingly draw an extra-large amount of applause. Most movements requiring fast body turns and pivots with quick legwork goes over well. Needless to say, aerials of most all kinds will go over great.

Fire baton exponents soon learn which tricks will make the greatest impression on their watchers, this usually depending on your individuality in presentation, your speed and your smoothness. After all, no two performers look exactly alike. Be light on your feet and move fast and gracefully. Keep your fire baton spinning smoothly. Most any of your tricks will make a hit.

WHAT KIND OF MUSIC TO TWIRL TO. Adding to the thrill and excitement of a fire baton exhibition is the music that helps to create the background or atmosphere. Almost any fast and stirring number will do the trick. If live music is available, you will have to use a number that musical units can play in the dark, without having to read the music. If live music is not available, recorded music should be used. By all means, have music of one form or another available each time you perform. It will help to put excitement into the air. A snappy circus march, jitterbug tune, or fast jive number will work great.

Probably the most appropriate music you could use would be any of the many fast numbers that bear “fire”, “flame”, or “danger” in their titles like: “There’ll B a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight”, “Thunder and Blazes”, “Fire Ritual”, “Fire Song”, or “Sabre Dance”.

THE SPRAY LINE. Almost in every case, regardless of how well a fire baton is prepared in advance, a fire baton will throw off a tiny spray line for a few seconds after it starts spinning. A fire baton must be shaken vigorously and twirled a few times before being ignited. It will usually throw off a dangerous spray. The centrifugal force motion of the fire baton when being twirled causes this spray to be thrown from its ends. It is best, always, to use a few two-hand spins at the start of your routine, as two-hand spins will not allow the spray line to cross your body.

It should be noted at this point that should a spray cause little spots of fire to appear on the floor or your clothing, that they can be put out by merely patting them lightly with your free, non-twirling hand or stepping on them lightly with the sole of your footwear.

TWIRLING INSIDE. Fire baton twirling done inside an auditorium or gym is especially effective because of the sound and shadow effects created by your baton while in motion. The audience is close enough to hear the “whoosh” made by the baton as it is being spun. The flame creates just enough light and shadows to create a thrilling atmosphere.

Inside performers must heed a number of added precautions. You must not get too close to the audience. It might frighten some of the children or older folks. Also, the spray line might cross some of the bystanders, causing a panic. Aerials, that might get out of control, should not be attempted. Prior to making your appearance or turning out the lights, you should become completely familiar with the specific location of curtains, roof beams, seats, and any other obstacles that should be avoided while performing.

On the whole, fire baton twirling done inside, especially in a gym, is highly effective and spectacular.

TWIRLING OUTSIDE. Twirling a fire baton outside can be highly effective if weather is agreeable. Wind and slippery, dew-covered grass provide twirlers with two additional hazards. However, outside a performer has more freedom. They are not usually confronted with the problem of avoiding this or that obstacle or staying a certain distance from the spectators. Fire batons should not, however, be used when the wind is extremely strong. You should always keep your back to

the breeze. Outside an advanced performer can execute aials with more confidence and less fear.

NEW BATON. Whether your fire baton is factory made or homemade or new, it is highly recommended that it be used at least once or twice for practice purposes before being used for an actual performance. A fire baton will usually react better to flames after it has been burned a couple of times.

THE PROBLEM OF THE RED CAN. Probably the problem confronting fire baton users most frequently is the "Problem of the Red Can". In most states, it is against the law to purchase fuel without the use of a **RED** container with the word "**FUEL**" printed across its front in black letters. By all means, every twirler who is using a fire baton should obtain a **RED**-colored container for the use of securing and carrying fuel. This regulation is vigorously enforced and can result in a fine if not adhered to.

BEST FLUID TO USE. The kind of fluid to use for a fire baton is a topic of controversy among experts. Actually, there are a number of fluids and mixtures that will work very satisfactorily. Without a doubt, fuel or a mixture of fuel and kerosene are the best fuels to use. Although alcohol could be used, it is not recommended. Fuel and kerosene burn at approximately the same heat temperature. Fuel burns faster while kerosene burns slower and with more color. However, kerosene is much harder to light and will go out easier. For best results, use either plain fuel or a fuel-kerosene mixture. A mixture can vary to quite an extent just as long as it includes at least one-third part fuel. Half and half will work well as will a two-thirds gas and one-third kerosene mixture. If a mixture is used it should be prepared well in advance and be mixed well.

SOAKING THE ENDS. The length of time the wick ends of the baton should be soaked prior to a performance will vary in accordance with the kind of fuel being used and the length of time the performer wants it to burn. Also, whether it will be put to immediate use or whether a period of time will elapse between the time it was soaked and the time it is ignited. The actual methods of soaking are basically the same.

In preparing your fire baton for use, merely pour some of your fuel into a jar or can container. Note that the container used must be large enough to hold the wick end of your baton. Fill the container with just enough fuel to cover the wicking. First, dip one end of the fire baton into the fuel container, letting it soak for a minute or so. Then invert the baton, letting the other end soak for the same length of time. A towel or rag should always be placed around the shaft just below the soaked wicking that is at the top, so that dripping fuel will not run down the shaft.

The soaking of each end should be repeated at regular intervals so one end does not absorb more fuel than the other. All in all, each end should be soaked for at least three or four minutes. It is best not to soak one end a full three minutes, then the other the same length of time, as the end that was first soaked will evaporate to a large extent. Inverting the fire baton at shorter but regular intervals is much to be preferred.

For those twirlers who frequently use a fire baton, there is another simple way to prepare it that will not require as much attention during the preparation process. Take a square tin can that is

longer than the wrapping on the ends of your fire baton; cut the can lengthwise-halving it. Make a notch in one end of each half for your baton to rest in. Then pour your fuel into each of the halved cans and let both ends of your fire baton soak simultaneously. The baton should be turned at regular intervals, allowing all sides to be immersed in the fuel. This system is probably a little more effective than the first as it will allow a more even distribution of fuel.

After both ends of your fire baton have been adequately soaked, the baton should be shaken vigorously, to shake off any excess of gas. The shaft should be wiped completely dry.

IMPORTANT. The leftover gas should be immediately poured back into its original container and sealed. **DO NOT POUR EXCESS FUEL ON GROUND.** You should then carry your fire baton several yards away from the area in which soaking took place, before igniting. This will eliminate any “flashback” that can be caused by the gas fumes or drippings. The performance then starts.

Should a period of time elapse between the time the fire baton is soaked and the time that it is ignited, the ends should be wrapped tightly in a non-absorbent material to prevent severe evaporation. Those who have metal cases will find that they can be used for this purpose.

LIGHTING YOUR FIRE BATON. for best effect, light your fire baton with due ceremony. Since you will usually be in full view of the onlookers at the time the baton is ignited, make a show of it!

A helper or bystander should do the actual lighting of both ends of your fire baton. A match or cigarette lighter can be used for this purpose. Of course, the cigarette lighter is much to be preferred. Wooden table matches are to be preferred over the bendable, short-lasting paper matches.

While the ends are being lit, the performer should stand in a graceful poised position with right leg, knee bent slightly, in front of the left leg, weight being placed largely on the forward leg. The fire baton should be held in a horizontal position with your right hand extended at arm’s length to the front. The left arm should be held in a poised position, elbow to the rear, forearm extended straight up, fingers relaxed.

After both ends have been properly lit the performer should always execute several fast two-hand spins to shake off any excess fuel.

FIRST AID KIT. Needless to say, it would be wise to have a first-aid kit available any time a fire baton is being used. A dry, air-tight bandage is probably the best temporary relief for burns.

PUTTING YOUR FIRE BATON OUT. Extinguishing your fire baton at the close of each performance should be done quickly and without needless effort. There are a number of ways to do this and the way to be used should be planned well in advance of every performance so that proper equipment and know-how will be at hand.

A metal case of this type is valuable to a fire baton twirler in more ways than one. It will confine the smell of a burned fire baton to the case, after each performance. It can also be used as a container to help prevent evaporation after it has been soaked. Metal containers can be purchased from most manufacturers who sell fire batons and from many other companies.

All efforts should be made to obtain a metal case. However, if this is impossible, there are a number of other ways to extinguish your flames. They can also be smothered by quickly dipping each burning end in a pail of water. As a last resort, a fire extinguisher could be used. The important thing is to extinguish the flames quickly and without any needless effort.

Some instructors use a time-tested system whereby the ends of the baton are soaked for a given amount of time, so as to go out at the end of the selection of music. This system is not recommended for a number of reasons. One can never be sure of the exact burning time because of the inconsistency of the various fuels and the atmospheric conditions. A difference will also be noted between a new fire baton and one that has been used a number of times. Besides, during the last portion of your routine, the flames die down too much.

THE SUPER ADVANCED STUDENT. To the super advanced baton twirler, the possibilities in fire baton twirling are limitless. After having used a fire baton for a number of times, one should start to acquire that professional touch and gradually develop one's own individual style of performance and presentation. The first few performances should serve as the experimental stage. During that time one should become fully familiar with what can and what cannot be done with a fire baton and which moves and combinations go over best with the spectators.

Remember, no two twirlers look alike or twirl alike, thus it only stands to reason that what goes over big for you might not for another twirler and vice-versa. Experiment as much as possible with new ideas and you will soon be completely original and have a style of your own.