

(Note the date that this article was originally published... a lot of it seems mainly common sense to me, but have things changed that much in 18 years? Anyone have anything to add?)

Choosing Your Backpack

Don Swanson *The Leader*, January 1977

War surplus, army rucksack or trapper nelson, pack board--not much of a choice when compared to the mind-boggling array of packs available to today's camper. Making an intelligent choice from the variety available today can be an exercise in frustration unless you have a clear set of guidelines to help you make your selection.

Various articles talk about the pack being the most important piece of equipment; the next most important to your boots, your sleeping bag or whatever strikes the fancy of the particular writer. The fact is that the pack is a key piece of equipment for any camper and backpacker. The following points or guidelines should help you in your selection of a pack. Keep in mind that selecting a pack will involve some compromise. No one pack will meet all the needs of an active hiker and camper. Cost will always be a major factor but a carefully selected pack is an investment in future adventure and enjoyment. It should and will last for years with just a little care.

The Pack Frame

The pack frame provides the base for your pack and the only way to ensure that it will feel comfortable is to put it on. The waist belt should buckle just around the top of the pelvic girdle, the shoulder straps should form a wedge at the shoulder and not be too far apart where they attach at the top of the frame. Have a friend hang on to the pack to simulate a weighted pack. The weight should be on the hips through to the legs with the shoulder straps primarily holding the pack against the back.

Check the construction of the frame. A variety of approaches are used to attach the side and cross members ranging through heli- arc welding, epoxy, machine screws and nuts and a number of machined couplings. While any of these seem to work well on the better quality back frame, a good weld appears to be the best joint on less expensive frames (under \$30.00). Nothing can be more frustrating than having your pack frame "come apart" on the trail miles away from home.

A simple test will check the amount of stress the frame will withstand. Put the bottom end of one side member on the floor and lean on the top of the opposite side member.

Carefully increase the pressure until you have an idea as to what it will withstand. (Be careful you don't break it or you may be buying a "damaged" pack frame.) This test simulates putting the pack down on one side member with a full load. It isn't

likely to have to withstand any stress potentially more damaging than this.

Back Bands

Back bands serve several purposes. They distribute the weight evenly, keep the pack frame and hard objects within the pack bag away from your back and may allow some circulation of air for cooler hiking. Back bands should be adjustable. Some use a cord or lace while others use a turnbuckle arrangement. The prime disadvantage to the turnbuckle is difficulty in making temporary repairs on the trail.

Back bands come in three varieties--padded, mesh and nylon fabric. The mesh back band allows for better air circulation but no one type seems more comfortable.

Hip Belts

An important development for carrying a load on your back is the addition of the hip belt. In a study conducted at Western Kentucky University, it was found that the use of a hip belt reduced fatigue. In fact, the longer the exertion, the more valuable the hip belt proved to be.

The test involved ten men and five women. Each person walked for 25 minutes on a treadmill with the incline increased during the test. Each was tested with and without a hip belt. Exertion was tested by monitoring the heart rate.

The test also showed that the most benefit is received by men and women who have weak backs and shoulders. It was reasoned that this would be the direct result of transferring the weight from the back and shoulders to the legs.

There are three basic belt designs: padded one-piece; padded two-piece and the unpadded one-piece.

To some, the padded is the better belt as it tends to be more comfortable. The one-piece belts allows the pack to move or "float" when you walk. The two-piece holds the pack firmly against your back. Which is better? Actually it's a matter of personal preference. One last item to remember: the belt should have a quick release buckle.

Shoulder Straps

The shoulder straps are our next consideration. They must be padded and wide enough to be comfortable. There should be a degree of firmness to the padding so that it doesn't "roll" when the pack is loaded and you've been on the trail for a period of time. The two points at which the straps attach to the top of the frame should not be too far apart. The straps should be long enough to allow for adjustment and should have a buckle which allows them to be adjusted.

Pack Attachment

Backpacks

Now let's take a look at the pack bag. The point where the pack attaches to the frame is as good a starting point as any. Look for at least three points of attachment or support along each side of the bag. While this is the minimum desired and is adequate, four points of attachment spread the strain on the bag better. The grommets used to attach the bag should be reinforced.

Compartments

The two most common packs are the single compartment and the divided, with two compartments. The two-compartment pack is the most popular. A nice feature found on some packs is a zippered bottom to the upper compartment. When considering one of these, be sure the zipper is heavy duty. There are some packs with a number of compartments. The prime advantage of compartments is helping to keep your packed gear in order. The major disadvantage is the compartments restrict the placement of large items.

Stitching

Check the way all seams are stitched. This includes straps, belts and bags.

Stitches should be small, the more to the inch the better. Thread should be nylon or one of the cotton wrap nylon type. Stitching should be straight, even and not run off the edge.

Reinforcement

Points of stress should be reinforced. This can take the form of extra stitches or reinforcing material such as leather or an extra layer of material. Look for this at the end of zippers, where straps attach, where the pack bag fastens to the frame and where buckles are attached.

Waterproofing

Don't be misled by the dealers' claims that the packsack is "waterproof." At best, the more expensive packbags will keep out a light rainfall but a heavy or long rainstorm will result in wet gear. Two steps help to keep gear dry. First, a rain cover for your pack and second, use plastic bags to pack gear before you put it into your packsack.

Pockets

Outside pockets can be handy or a nuisance depending on your point of view. They're great for holding those small items which you use frequently. The pockets do tend to catch on brush if you plan to do any bush-wacking.

Pockets should be well stitched with zipper closures protected by storm flaps.

Zippers

The key point to check is that the zippers are heavy enough to withstand the load you will be carrying. Nylon zippers are less likely to jam in cold weather and all zippers should be covered with a storm flap (look for reinforcement, particularly at ends).

Storm Flap

The top of the pack bag is usually covered with a storm flap. Be sure this is large enough to cover the top when the pack is loaded and to come down over the sides and front. The flap should have some means of securing it such as draw-strings or straps.

No one can tell you which pack is best for you. You know the amount of use it will get, the kind of use and how much you can afford. When deciding, try them on, use on a short trip if possible.

Last but not least, tell the parents of your Scouts (Venturers will probably decide for themselves) what kind of pack you recommend. Why not hold a "what to buy for your son, the Scout, for birthdays and Christmas" night?