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The notion exists that imperfections in piecing can be quilted out or hidden by the quilting. To a small extent this is true. Quilting can suck in areas of excess fabric and make it virtually invisible, but too much extra fabric is exactly that: too much extra fabric! Perhaps you quilt your own tops, or maybe you send them to a professional quilter. Miracles do happen but rarely in the quilting world, so look critically at your finished tops and decide: is it ok if the quilting isn't perfect because my piecing isn't perfect, or do I want to undo a few seams and sort out the problem so the quilting can be much better?

I love helping beginner quilters, so I rarely turn their quilts away because of a few imperfections. I want to encourage people to continue quilting, not put them off by criticising every imperfection. However, as a patchworker, it's your duty to do the best you possibly can, and cut your quilter (if you use one) some slack.

Here's how I would go about quilting a top:
Start by laying your quilt top out on the ground or another flat surface. You will immediately see whether it lies nicely flat, or if you have a few problem areas. The quilt in my example

(photo 1) here had some issues, but all the better to help you understand how to fix them before quilting, or during quilting.

The most common problems I encounter are wavy borders and puffy blocks (I like to call them lettuce leaf borders and C-cups!) Both are a result of not measuring your fabric correctly. "Measure, measure, measure" is my personal motto and after a few initial disasters when I was learning to piece I'm now fanatical about it!

Sashings around blocks are essentially smaller borders so the same



Help!

Something's not right!

Come on, admit it! We've all done it at some time or another...made a quilt that just doesn't lie flat or square. Maybe yours was when you were rushing to finish a project and tried to cut a few corners (as it were!) or perhaps like me, it was when you were a beginner and didn't know all the tips and tricks...

techniques should be used... See tips and tricks.

Looking at the quilt in our example, you can see it doesn't lie flat. The sashings around the blocks were cut too small which makes the blocks puff up... These are definitely C-cups!

On the back of the quilt the seams are all different widths, some seams have been pressed open and some have been flipped. I already know that I'm going to be challenged to keep the seams straight when quilting and I have to tame the C-cups without getting pleats.

Open seams also mean that I can't stitch in the ditch (otherwise I will be stitching on thread and not fabric which will weaken the quilt - photos 2 and 3).

Before I start to quilt, I have to decide on what technique to use and what thread will work best. In cases of quilts that have issues, custom quilting is the best technique to tame those unruly places. An allover pattern will be faster but you are going to end up pushing the excess fabric around and at some point you will end up with a patch that just can't be saved.

Your batting choice can also help to tame a wobbly quilt. Polyester, wool and 80:20 battings have more loft than 100% cotton. The extra loft (puffiness) of the batting helps to suck in more of the excess fabric than a thin batting would. A double layer of batting would pull in even more but will be more difficult to handle, more expensive and also result in a heavier quilt. In this case, I opted to use a single layer of polyester batting.

I'm going to custom quilt this top and after laying a variety of threads out on the top I've decided that it's going to be best to use a number of different





colours. I generally try to find one colour that will blend with the whole quilt but that's not always possible (photo 4).

It's critical to set the foundation for your quilting correctly. On a frame based machine you need to load the quilt square, making sure the borders and sashings are running straight. I like to use a longarm centring tape for this. If you are quilting on a domestic machine, you will need to ensure that you have kept borders and sashings square when you baste the quilt (photos 5 and 6).

Next I will usually stabilise all the border, sashing and block seams with Stitch in the Ditch, but remember, I said this quilt had open seams so I can't use SID. Instead I quilted $\frac{1}{4}$ inch away from the seams on both sides. Once everything is stabilized, I can go back through the quilt and deal with the block, sashing and border patterns (photo 7).

Remember, we said that the sashings were cut too small, so that means the blocks are really puffy. By outlining each block with the echo quilting I have effectively isolated the extra fabric. It's now contained in a smaller area and I can work with it more easily. Open designs (ones where lines don't cross too much) and straight line designs are especially useful for trying to suck up extra fabric.

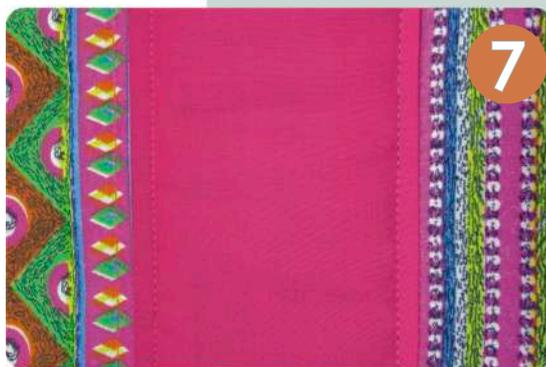
In this quilt I used a combination of piano keys (parallel straight lines) and diamonds (alternating diagonal lines) to pull in the fabric and flatten it.

You can see in the picture of the finished block that it's not perfect; there are still areas of puffiness and at the intersections of lines there are some small pleats, but it's not bad given how much extra fabric there was (photos 8 and 9, 10 and 11).

With puffy blocks you can also use lots of steam and even spray starch to try

and reduce the puff if the fabric is 100% cotton, but this won't work with synthetic fabrics. Also, you could try putting extra batting under the block; cut a square of batting to the same size as the block and use spray adhesive to stick it to the back of the block before you do the SID/echo quilting. The additional thickness of batting helps to pull in the extra fabric. I was pretty pleased with how this quilt turned out. It took a lot of thought and effort to get it quilted, but in the end most of the sashings and blocks were square. There are some areas in the sashings where it isn't brilliant, but given the amount of fabric I was trying to work in, I think it turned out pretty well (photo 12).

I've often heard stories from unhappy professional quilters who have received complaints from their customers over a pleat or puffiness in an area of their quilt. Please remember, if your piecing isn't perfect and your quilt top doesn't lie flat





before it's quilted, then it's extremely unlikely to do so after quilting. The extra fabric that's causing the waves and bubbles has to go somewhere, so pleats and puffiness are going to happen. It is not the quilter's fault if your quilt top was not flat to start with.

Tips and Tricks:

- Always use a ¼" seam. If you don't have a ¼" patchwork foot on your machine it is well worth investing in one.
- Measure, measure, measure!
- Trim all blocks to the same size **before** you add sashings.
- Measure through the centre of your blocks and quilt to get the correct measurement for the sashing or border strips (the edges tend to stretch so if you measure at the edges you will get a piece that is actually too long and cause waviness).
- Cut border pieces down the length of the fabric if at all possible. This means you must buy more fabric, but

using the length of grain is less stretchy and therefore easier to attach properly.

- Keep checking your work as you go. Don't wait until the end to discover you have C-cups and lettuce leaves, rather fix small problems before you end up with a major nightmare.
- Pin border and sashing strips into place, working from the centre out to ensure they are attached correctly.
- Use a walking foot or even feed foot to attach borders, it gives you a much better finish.
- Press seams to the side of the darker fabric and fix "switched seams" as you go so the whole seam faces the same direction.
- Don't sew on a strip and cut it off "to length". First measure then stitch. Many people make this mistake and you will never get a flat, square quilt.
- Work especially carefully if you are doing mitred corners. These are notoriously difficult to get right without meticulous measuring and

they are a frequent headache when it comes to quilting.

- Stay stitch around pieced blocks before adding sashings. The joins between pieces can gape open and cause you to add more fabric in the border than is actually necessary. The same applies to pieced borders. Stay stitching these will prevent stretching during quilting and keep your quilt square.

Till next time, Happy Quilting!

Claire

For more information, to attend a class or to have a quilt quilted please contact Claire at www.quiltastix.co.za or 082 562 5983

