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## Loading a Quilting Frame

In the last article I discussed the differences between long and short arm quilting machines as well as sit down or frame based machines, plus the advantages and disadvantages of each. I think one of the biggest advantages to having my machine on a frame is that I don't have to baste my quilts. To start with I don't have space to lay out big quilts and secondly, I don't have the time! Loading the 3 layers of a quilt onto a frame is a lot quicker. However, it does need to be done correctly otherwise you can distort a quilt or leave it with pleats in the back. Some people use zippers, others like Velcro and there are products available such as Red Snappers that are meant to make the job simpler and quicker. However, here's how I prefer to load my quilts:

Let's start with a picture of my quilting frame with each part named for you. Other frames may look different with the poles in slightly different positions, but they all do the same job and have the same basic components.

The first critical step is to make sure you accurately mark the centre of each of the leader cloths. Without this you WILL end up distorting your quilt and it will definitely NOT lay or hang flat.

Measure from one end of the pole (not the cloth) to the other end and divide this measurement in half to get the mid-point.

Mark this point on the cloth using a blue water erasable marker. Repeat this for each of the other 2 poles that have leader cloths and then make sure that you are happy that they all represent the same central line.

Once you have used the leader cloths a few times and are happy



with the position of the lines, go over the blue erasable marker with a permanent marker.

This process does not need to be done with every quilt. However, the leader cloths do shift and stretch so it's a good idea to check your centres every once in a while.

I like to position my leader cloths 'correctly' before I go any further. I pull the Pick-up leader cloth under the dead bar and back over the top towards the back of the frame, and the Quilt Back leader cloth underneath the Quilt Top bar and over the top to the front of the frame). This makes it more comfortable to load the fabric layers

and prevents you from loading the fabric onto the wrong leader cloth! Photo 2.



*Preparing the labels*

Before you can load your backing fabric you first need to make sure that it is square on at least 2 sides (all 4 sides if you intend turning it to quilt the borders).



*Backing not square*

Place 2 opposite edges of the fabric together (I try to use the selvage edges if possible). If the fabric is square it will hang evenly without any bubbles. If not, slide the front layer of fabric a few centimetres to the left or right until you get rid of the bubble in the fabric and it hangs smoothly. This can be tricky when you have a really big quilt, so hang the layers over the frame to help you.

Once you are happy with how it hangs, bring the 2 corners together and mark the centre of the fabric top and bottom, either by finger pressing or using a safety pin (not a normal pin as this will fall out and you'll be starting all over again!) Photo 3 and 4.

Once pinned (photos 5 and 6), roll the fabric onto the pole and smooth out any wrinkles as you go. Stop rolling when the top edge of the backing is level with the Pick-up bar.

If your backing fabric has been pieced together, try to run the seam along the length of the frame where



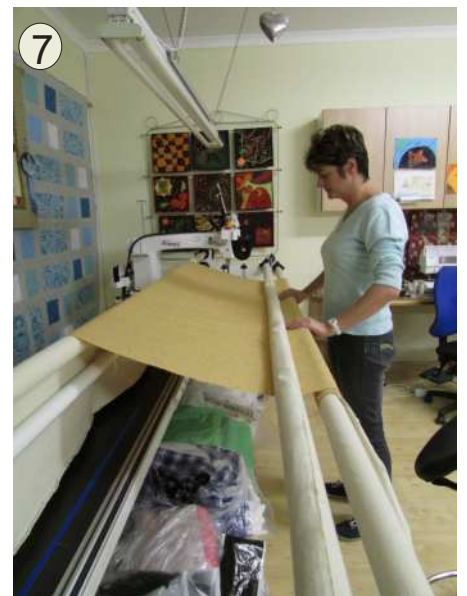
*Backing square*



*Pinning bottom edge*



*Pin from centre out*



*Roll out backing fabric*

possible. This will allow the bulk of the seam to be spread evenly and give you far fewer headaches! Photo 7.

Now we can pin the top edge of the backing fabric to the Pick-up bar leader cloth. If your machine has a dead bar, make sure you have pulled the leader cloth underneath it otherwise you will be unpinning very soon! Again, start at the centre and match the centre of the backing fabric with the marked centre of the leader cloth and pin out to the sides.

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I find it easier to stand at the back of the machine to do this. It prevents straining your back, especially with the larger machines, but if you don't have space to move around behind your machine, then you can pin from the front. Then roll the fabric backwards and forwards on the 2 poles. This should even out any bubbles and allows you to make sure there are no creases or stray bits of thread on the backing fabric.

Next, insert the batting between the Quilt back bar and Quilt top bar. Pull it gently up to the top and smooth it out. Stitch a horizontal line across the batting and backing fabric to secure the 2 layers. Photo 8.



*Adding the backing*

Use the horizontal channel lock to do this. It creates a perfectly straight line that you can attach the quilt top to, thereby ensuring you start your quilt off square. Photo 9.

Did you know that batting has a right and a wrong side? The wrong side (rough side) should face down and the right side (smooth or fluffy side) should face up.

### Hang in there! We are more than half way!

Now it's time for the quilt top itself and here we need to take care and do a little measuring.

Lay your quilt out somewhere flat or drape it over the frame and measure 3 times across the width of the quilt; at the top, through the middle and at the bottom.

Repeat this for the length of the quilt and write down your measurements.

In an ideal world the width measurements should all be the same and the length measurements should all be the same....but in reality this rarely happens!

Take this hypothetical quilt as an example. The top border measures 55 inches, the centre 54 inches and the bottom border 56 inches. We cannot stretch the centre but want our quilt to be square, so therefore we want it to measure 54 inches wide when quilted.

There are techniques and patterns that you can use to draw in the extra fabric...but only up to a point! We are quilters not miracle workers so a border that measures more than 2 inches larger than the smallest part of the quilt is going to need to be unsewn and re-measured!

Let's pin the bottom edge of the quilt to the Quilt top leader cloth. Divide the smallest measurement in half and measure this distance out, each side of the central marker on your quilt top Leader cloth. Photo 10.

In our example the smallest



*Basting the batting*



*Measure out from centre for quilt bottom edge*



*Pin corner to measured edge*

measurement is 54 inches so we mark 27 inches on either side of the central mark on the leader cloth. Find the centre of the bottom edge of the quilt by matching the inner points of your border (not the outer edges of the border fabric as this can easily stretch) or by looking at the piecing and pin this to the centre point of the Quilt top leader cloth. Then take the right hand corner and pin it to the marker 27 inches to the right of the centre. Repeat for the left corner

and then continue to pin the bottom edge onto the leader easing in the additional fabric.

Carefully roll the quilt onto the bar and smooth out any creases as you go. Keep the edges lined up so the quilt rolls on squarely and remember heavily pieced quilts with borders will be trickier due to the extra fabric of the seams in the centre. Photo 12.

Roll until the quilt top edge is level with the line we stitched through the batting and backing.

Mark 27 inches to the right of the centre line on the batting, and 27 inches to the left. Photo 13.

Match the centre line with the centre of the top edge of the quilt top and pin. Match the right corner of the quilt top to the 27 inch mark on the right, repeat on the left. Pin the remainder of the quilt top in place, again easing in the extra fabric as evenly as possible. Photo 14.

Use a large stitch to baste across the top of the quilt top (less than 1/4in from the raw edge) and remove the pins. I also like to baste down the sides of my quilt as I go.

You are now ready to quilt!

It seems like a lot of steps and a lot of work, but if you follow the sequence it really doesn't take so long. I can load a king sized quilt in about half an hour...it would take far longer to pin baste it!

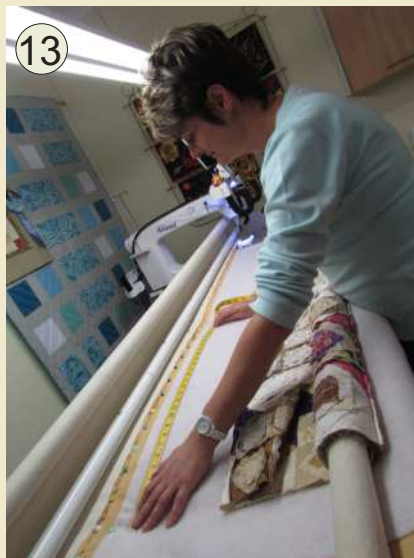
#### Some tips on choosing backing fabric

**Tip 1** Try to get backing fabric that is about the same shade as the lightest colour in your top. This allows you to choose a bobbin thread that will blend with the top so any 'pokies' will be less visible.

**Tip 2** Don't use cheap fabric or a print that you don't like just because it's



Roll quilt on square



Measure from centre for quilt top edge



Pin quilt top edge to horizontal line

cheap. Having what you consider to be an ugly fabric will put you off your finished quilt.

**Tip 3** White on white or cream on cream fabrics are produced with a type of paste. It may cause the fabric to stick to your machine making it difficult and jerky to move.

**Tip 4** Avoid ready-made sheets. They are virtually never square and by the time you have removed the hems and squared it up, it may be too small! Believe me, it's happened to me many times!

**Tip 5** Busy prints are great. They help to hide uneven stitches and minor tension problems! Plain fabrics show the quilting beautifully, but also show the wobbles!

**Tip 6** Add 4-6 inches extra backing fabric (and batting) on all sides.

Longarm quilters use side clamps to stabilize the quilt and so we need extra space. Extra fabric and batting on the sides also gives you space to try out thread colours, quilting patterns and tension before you tackle the actual quilt.

**Tip 7** If you have a large quilt, you may well have to piece the backing fabric to make it large enough. Ensure that the edges of each piece are square and that you remove the selvages. Sew a 5/8 inch seam and press the seam open. This reduces the bulk and makes the backing smoother. Wide-backs are great and mean you don't have to worry about getting the piecing right!

**Tip 8** If you are making a wall hanging, it's best to put the lengthwise grain (length of the fabric) down the length of the top. The lengthwise grain is less stretchy and will add stability while quilting and once the quilt is hanging on the wall.

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](http://www.quiltastix.co.za) or 082 562 5983