

Preserving the Shetland Knitting Belt

RACHAEL MATTHEWS

I recently had the opportunity to talk with June Hemmons Hiatt, author of the unparalleled *The Principles of Knitting* (known in the knitting world as “PoK”), which has been inspiring knitters since 1998. One tool that June discusses in the book—the knitting belt—is of particular interest to me. This quintessential British tool was almost lost to history. Shetland knitters saved the day: They used (and continue to use) a knitting belt that they called a “makkin belt,” a leather pad stuffed with horsehair. A tool such as this makes it possible to work at a greater speed, with less fatigue, and with less strain on the hands and arms.

June explains the history of this fascinating tool:

Prior to the introduction of the knitting machine in the late 1500s, professional handknitters throughout Europe apparently used some sort of device to support the right needle, most often a carved stick that was tucked into the waistband or a belt. The technique was honed to maximum efficiency

because these professionals needed to knit quickly, all day every day. As a result, “supported knitting” really is one of the fastest ways to knit. The method is done with minimum of movement, making it less likely to cause repetitive motion injuries. Also, because the needle is supported, the right hand is used exclusively to move the yarn and control tension, which means the fabric is remarkably even—it almost looks like machine knitting. Shetlanders have been professional knitters for hundreds of years, exporting their beautiful Fair Isle garments and lace shawls. Unless they were knitting to order, every garment made would be different, and the knitters placed a high value on creativity. The majority of the garments had quite traditional styling due to demands of the market, but they always responded to current fashion trends and were remarkably inventive when it comes to pattern and color.

Having used a traditional Shetland belt since the 1980s, June recently redesigned the tool for greater ease, and her son, Jesse, is making them in his New Orleans studio in a range of colored leather. June explains the problems with the traditional knitting belt that led them to make the new, more stable version by creating a contoured shape to fit the knitter’s body: “A Shetland belt is like a tiny football—both the bottom and the top curve out. As a result, it tends to rock up and down with the knitting and back and forth as needles are inserted and removed.” The new patented design is made with thick bull hide on the top, stiff California latigo leather on the bottom, and it is filled with horsehair like traditional belts.



June Hemmons Hiatt’s favorite Shetland knitting belt, worn while writing both editions of her book, *The Principles of Knitting*.

Photograph by and courtesy of June Hemmons Hiatt.



June Hemmons Hiatt (left) and Hazel Tindall after lunch at Hay's Dock in Lerwick, Shetland. 2015.
Photograph by Jesse Hiatt and courtesy of June Hemmons Hiatt.

Those who continue to work with a knitting belt are considered to be the fastest knitters in the world today. Shetland knitter Hazel Tindall has a trophy for being the fastest knitter in the world at 266 stitches in three minutes, and she says those kinds of speeds are common among Shetland knitters. When June launched the knitting belt at a Vogue Knitting Live event in New York City, Hazel Tindall and Wilma Malcolmson flew from Shetland to collaborate on a talk, help with a workshop, and sit in her booth to demonstrate this method.

June recalls, "It was an immense privilege to have these two fabulous knitters there with us. They were a joy to spend time with and were immensely gracious to all the American knitters who had never seen anyone knit this way. The typical reaction to seeing them knit was wide-eyed awe."

Watching a Shetland knitter in action, it is tempting to think our own knitting speeds would improve if we tried working with a belt, but that's not always so. "Traditionally, they learned to knit with a belt at a very young age (Hazel says she learned to knit before she started school)," June explains, "and they knit frequently throughout their lives. Few people who come to the technique later in life will ever approach the kind of speed that is common among these professionals, but they will definitely be faster using a belt than with any other method they use."

I collect northern English wooden knitting sheaths or knitting sticks; cousins to knitting belts in the "supported knitting" method. June's redesign of the Shetland belt has made me revisit them. Some are comfortable, but others I suspect were carved to fit the waist and hip of a different-shaped knitter



June Hemmons Hiatt's knitting stick, a gift from a friend, shown with a Shetland shawl knitted by Yvonne Robertson.
Photograph by and courtesy of June Hemmons Hiatt.

and are not adaptable. Sheaths and sticks vary in shape, size, and woodwork skill. Some are turned on a lathe, while others are often carved into the shape of a goose wing. Some people give sticks and sheaths as love tokens; these are carved in fruit woods and boast elaborate carved patterns that can be traced to certain valleys or dales. The most used sheaths are often plain looking and made from any old piece of wood such as a piece of an old door. Carving my own knitting sheath in cherry wood, I enjoyed considering my deportment, the weight of my work, the ways my body received the action of knitting, and the way the sheath fit with the waistband of my jeans. The limitation of most traditional sheath or stick designs is that there is only one hole for the holding needle, which can limit the choice of needle size. The hole is often reinforced by metal or bone to protect it from the movement of the metal needle.

The longer double-point needles typically used with belts and sheaths are difficult to find. I asked June how she is dealing with this problem: "We sell Prym needles. The long DPNs usually come in 30 centimeters [12 in]. I think a 14-inch [36 centimeters] length would be better, but they are not made by anyone at the moment. There used to be 40-centimeter [16-inch] needles, but they are very difficult to find these days, and most people find the longer ones force the hands out from the body. Shetlanders



Red PoK Deluxe Knitting Belt with PoK logo buckle, handmade by Jesse Hiatt.
 Photograph by Jesse Hiatt and courtesy of June Hemmons Hiatt.

often use these longer needles, but I get the feeling they aren't keen on them. Driving the right needle deeper into the knitting belt shortens it, centering the tips and bringing the knitting closer."

The Lerwick Museum on mainland Shetland is a treasure trove of knitting artifacts, including a traditional knitting belt that looks so supple it seems to have retained the warmth of the original knitter who used it. When I first tried the Shetland knitting belt, I found it more malleable than the wooden device, but it still took a bit of adjustment to fit my body. I asked June how long it takes for belts to feel comfortable: "The one you saw is likely to have been used for a lifetime of knitting—hundreds and hundreds of hours and lots of wear and tear. I suppose you could use something like a wooden mallet to gently beat it up a bit. It's more comfortable worn lower down on the right front of your abdomen (not around to the side); I wear mine halfway between my waist and my lap, close to my hip bone."

I wondered how well American students take to



Jesse Hiatt learning to knit with a knitting belt. 2016.
 Photograph by Robert A. Hiatt and courtesy of June Hemmons Hiatt.



Jesse making PoK knitting belts in his New Orleans studio. 2015.
 Photograph by Jeff Tiedeken and courtesy of June Hemmons Hiatt.

the challenges of learning to knit this way. June says they are eager to try it and catch on very quickly, "Americans are such a mixed lot. With so many cultures bumping up against one another, they are quite open to learning new techniques. And unlike in Europe, which has deep knitting traditions that are still alive and well, we have a lot of young knitters who didn't have a relative to teach them, so they have no past to dispose of."

June also adds that there is no reason to give up your current method of knitting: "I knit with every method, and while the knitting belt is my favorite, there are three others I use relatively often because they are better suited to a particular project or type of yarn."

Our tools often outlive the items we make. There is great satisfaction in being able to purchase a knitting tool not only as a knitting aid, but also as a continuation of a folk tradition. ❖

FURTHER RESOURCES

Hiatt, June Hemmons. *The Principles of Knitting*. 1998. Rev ed. New York: Touchstone, 2012.

Matthews, Rachael. "Knitting in Cumbria." *PieceWork's Knitting Traditions*, Fall 2011.

Tindall, Hazel. "Kempin Like Mad: Diary of a Shetland Knitter." *PieceWork's Knitting Traditions*, Spring 2014.

RACHAEL MATTHEWS is a knitter who works with socially engaged projects, rethinking the reasons for knitting. For eight years she ran Prick Your Finger, a yarn shop, gallery, and project space, from her home in East London. Her latest book, *The Mindfulness in Knitting: Meditations on Craft and Calm* (Brighton, England: Leaping Hare Press, 2016), explores the magic in creating textiles as demonstrated by her many customers, students, and colleagues.