



Tidings of Comfort & Joy...Garter Stitch Heels!

by Lucy Neatby

Understanding the various stages of shaping and how they affect the fit and function of the sock.

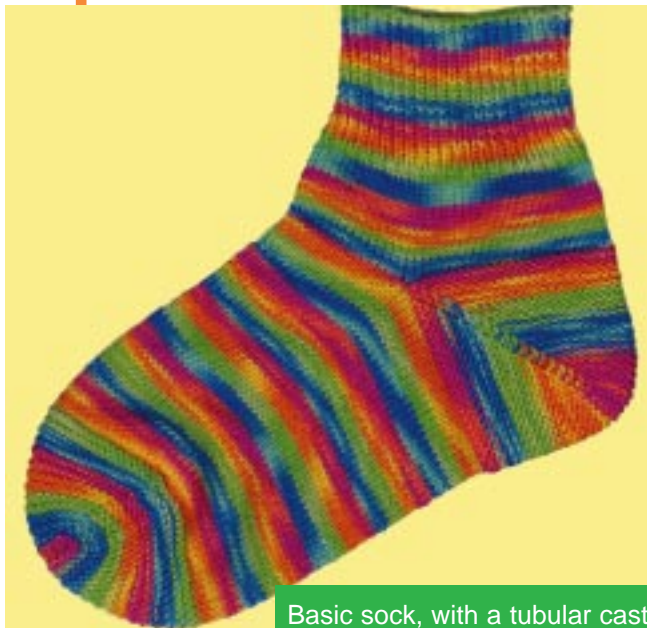
The comfort and delight of a pair of well fitting hand-knit socks is beyond dispute. In addition, socks are a peculiarly satisfying and possibly addictive expression of the knitting art. New sock knitters experience a sense of wonder as their first sock miraculously takes on its three-dimensional form. This momentous occasion is usually reached by meticulously following a pattern, with little underlying understanding of the significance of the various stages of shaping and how they affect the fit and function of the sock. Acquiring this deeper intimacy requires an enquiring mind and close personal relations with many socks.

Seasoned sock knitters constantly crave their next sock challenge and may seek to improve upon aspects of past socks that they perceive to be less than “sock nirvana”. There are so many fascinating variables: the shape of the intended foot,

adjustments to better fit slender ankles, high insteps, pointed or stub toes, or the type of wear anticipated. A hiking sock differs considerably from the immensely popular “coffee table” art socks, worthy of wear in the transparent ankle boots now available! Now we make our yarn choices: fine or thick, wool with a nylon blend for longest wear or a totally decadent pure merino wool, cotton blends for warmer climes. The color choices are quite staggering - fortunately we are no longer restricted to khaki, gray and brown. Yarn producers have become very sophisticated in their offerings; even working from a single ball of yarn, wild colored stripes, fetching speckles, faux Fair Isle and undulating shades can all be achieved without a yarn end in sight.

There are many technical aspects of socks over which firm opinions are held. From which end to begin? The classic North American sock knitter usually begins from leg or ankle end, whereas many Eastern European knitters start from the toe. Both methods have their merits. What type and how many needles should be used in the work? I firmly believe in 6" long, five per set, double pointed needles, however others are to be found who adore a single short circular needle or two long circulars. Many knitters gradually evolve to their personal “perfect sock” formula over the years and stick with it. This approach is not necessarily limiting: within the defined size and shape of a sock there is infinite scope for design and color, using a practically infinite variety of stitches.

In my quest for the ever better sock, I often use certain highly favored techniques but endeavor not to let these preferences close my mind to trying something different. My latest quest was for a well fitting,



Basic sock, with a tubular cast on, garter stitch short row heel and wedge toe.

long lasting, comfortable heel. I am very fond of the traditional Common heel, however, it has limitations: the hardest wearing part under the heel is also the thinnest and needs to be reinforced. I address this by working the short rows of the turn of the heel with two yarns alternating - even in a single color sock. This type of heel also is somewhat mathematically challenging and throws intricate sock patterning for a loop. When the heel is completed and the sock is in the round again, it has a very different and declining number of stitches for many rounds. All of these factors set me thinking about short-row heels. The drawbacks of these are that stockinette fabric is a little thin for a durable heel, and that the fit is often too skimpy for many ankles. The antidote to both of these problems would therefore be, to work in garter stitch and make the heel over a larger proportion of the sock circumference. The heel would then be deeper and the bend in the sock better proportioned to a less than ethereal ankle. I find that the resulting heel fits neatly into many top-down or toe-up socks and offers a snug elastic fit, extra warmth, durability and cushioning.

Garter Stitch 60% Short Row Heel

Work as usual until the desired length of leg is reached. For the majority of ankles the heel is best set in over 60% of the total number of sock sts. For ultra-slender ankles, try the traditional 50% of the stitches.

The heel knitting directions are given here in general terms, the specific stitch numbers given to illustrate are for an 80 st sock having a 60% (48st) heel.

Calculate your planned heel width, multiply the total number of sts in your sock by 0.6. Round up or down to an even number. $80 \times 0.6 = 48$ sts.

The remaining 40% of the stitches (36 sts), will not be worked during the construction of the heel and will be referred to as the Instep sts.

Begin the heel by working to half the calculated heel width (30% of the total, 24 sts) before the center back.

Heel Row 1, RS facing

Change color if desired (this is preferable for your first Short Row heel as it helps with orientation), do not cut off the old color yarn. The tail of the new yarn can be linked around the original working yarn and woven in at the back of the work as the initial few heel sts are worked, thus closing any later gap and neatening the tail simultaneously. Knit the first half of the heel sts (24 sts) onto an empty dpn, the second half less one (23 sts), onto another dpn. S1, bring yarn between needles, return the slipped st to the LHN (next to the Instep sts). If using a new color, note that the last stitch of the heel remains the original color.

Divide the Instep sts onto two dpns along with the one "wrapped" heel st.

Heel Row 2, WS facing

Turn the work around WS facing, with an empty dpn (use a second dpn for the last half of the heel sts), knit until only the first Heel st remains unworked (k 46), s1, bring yarn between needles, return the slipped st to the LHN, (next to the instep sts).

Subsequent Right and Wrong Side Rows

Turn the work around RS facing, knit until one heel stitch remains unworked on LHN, (k 45), wrap, return the 'wrapped' st to the adjacent needle holding the instep sts.

Turn the work around WS facing, knit until one heel stitch remains unworked on LHS (k 44), wrap, return the 'wrapped' st to the adjacent needle holding the instep sts.

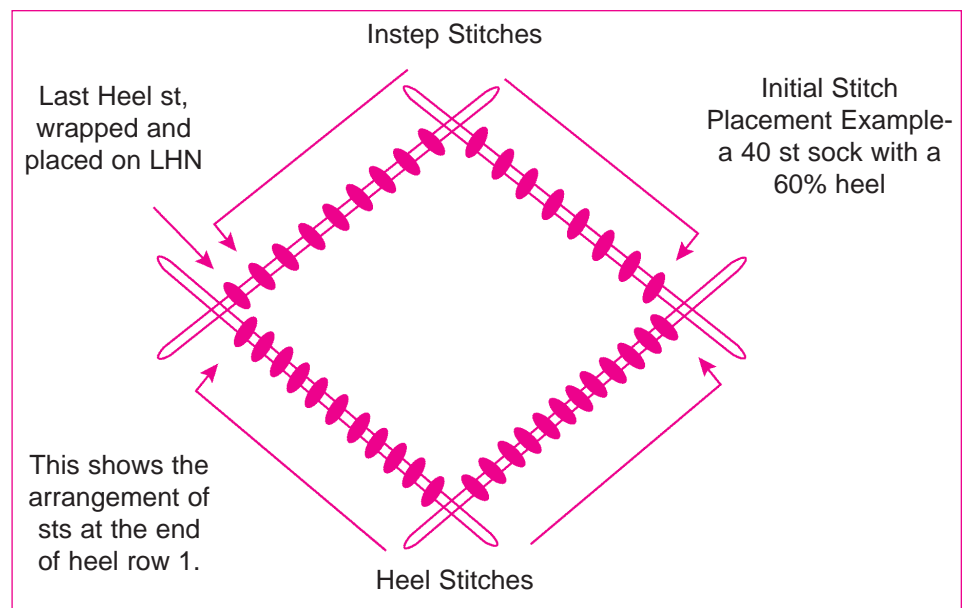
Rpt these last two rows, end with a WS row, approx (k8, wrap) or until the heel is deep enough for your foot.

There should be the same number (20) of 'wrapped' stitches on either side of the remaining central (8) sts. When checking remember that the first 'wrapped' st on the LHS is in the original color.

Suggested Stitch Distribution

Initially when working the heel sts using two dpns on both RS and WS rows, knit two extra sts onto the old needle before introducing the empty dpn - this staggers the junction of the work and helps to prevent distortion down the center back of the heel.

When the number of working heel sts is sufficiently reduced, work them onto a single dpn, use the spare needle to hold the middle section of the Instep sts, this makes things far more comfortable to work.



Heel Increase Section

RS Facing. Knit an equal number of sts as the previous row (k8), knit 1 previously 'wrapped' st from next needle - (work this stitch as usual leaving the 'wrap' around the base of the stitch - don't knit into the wrap and stitch as with stockinette short rows), slip next heel st from the Instep needle to the RHN, bring the yarn between the needles (making a wrap) and return it to the Instep needle. Turn.

WS Facing. Knit across all the sts on the heel needles (k9), knit 1 previously 'wrapped' st from next needle - work stitch as usual, slip next heel st from the instep needle to the RHN, bring the yarn between the needles (making a wrap) and return it to the instep needle. Turn.

RS Facing. Knit across all the sts on the heel needles (k10), knit 1 previously 'wrapped' st from next needle - work stitch as usual, slip next heel st from the instep needle to the RHN, bring the yarn between the needles (making a wrap) and return it to the Instep needle. Turn.

Repeat these two rows ending on a WS row when the wrapped st is the outermost heel st. Do not transfer this wrapped st to the LHN. Turn. Cut off heel yarn leaving a tail.

Resuming with the Main working yarn, tighten up any slack that has crept into the last stitch worked in Main and knit across the Heel sts. The tail of the heel yarn may be woven in as you go.

When finishing the sock, a duplicate stitch of the main color yarn may be used to reinforce the supporting stitches on either side of the heel. This heel interferes very little with whatever type of stitch patterning is being used. In the case of a pattern which condenses the stitch width, for example, cables or stranded patterns, a smaller needle size may be used for the heel section before resuming regular patterning and needle size. A specially tough yarn may also be chosen just for the heel and the heel gauge adjusted to match the rest of the sock by the careful selection of needle size.

Toes

A matching short-row garter stitch toe may be made by the same method, (using 50% of the stitches), however it is not easy to make elegantly graduated shaping, it looks rather short



and clumsy. The joining too involves a fairly challenging length of grafting on the underside of the foot. I prefer to pair this heel with a conventional Wedge Toe worked in garter stitch. This toe can be gently shaped and is marvelously pliant to the shape of the foot.

Garter Stitch Wedge Toe Shaping

Move the beginning of round marker to the side of the foot (1/4 of the total sts beyond the mid-point of the sole). Place a second marker at the opposite side. Rearrange the stitches on the needles, dividing the sts a quarter per needle, from the initial marked position. Twenty sts per needle. Cut main yarn and continue in contrast color yarn.

Toe Rnd 1 (K1, ssk, knit to 3 sts before side marker, end k2tog, k1) 2x.

Toe Rnd 2 Purl.

Toe Rnd 3 Knit.

Toe Rnd 4 Purl.

Repeat Rnds 1 - 4 twice, followed by Rnds 1 and 2 only, until the toe is nearly long enough.

More frequent decreases are now required; substitute [(P1, ssp, purl to 3 sts before side marker, end p2tog, p1) 2x] in place of Rnd 2.

Try the sock on regularly for best possible fit. For easiest grafting, complete the sock at the marker at the end of a purl rnd, with 16 to 20 sts remaining.

Whatever your favorite sock style, seek to take one small technical adventure with each new sock.

Abbreviations

LHN - Left hand needle.

RHN - Right hand needle.

dpn - Double pointed needle.

S1 - Slip one st purlwise from LHN to RHN unworked.

Turn - Turn the work around and work in the opposite direction even though there are still unworked sts on the RHN.

W - Wrap the next st by slipping one stitch from the LHN to the RHN, bringing yarn between needles then returning the slipped st to the adjacent needle. Make this wrap of yarn around the stitch reasonably firm, not slack.

Ssp - Slip the next two sts knitwise, one at a time, to the RHN. Return both slipped sts purlwise back to the LHN. Purl two sts together through back of loops. If preferred a straight-forward p2tog may be substituted here with very little outward difference.



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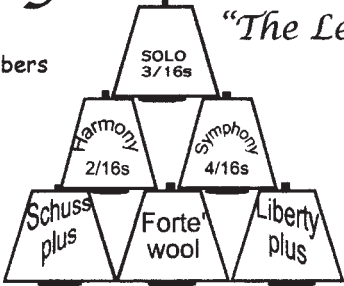
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