



By Jim Basara

I am always receiving a number of questions about buying guitars on eBay and about the number of eBay postings for guitars with broken headstocks. It kills me when I see a beautiful instrument decapitated. A certain number of breaks are inevitable, but too many are caused by people who either don't know any better, or who just don't take the care to pack an instrument properly.

So, here are some simple guidelines to guitar packing. [**My suggestion would be to bookmark this link and send it to anyone you are buying a guitar from**](#)

As hard as it is to walk away from an instrument you want, if they won't agree to these simple steps, you shouldn't do business with them. For eBay buyers, I suggest sending the seller a link to this article and asking about their willingness to follow these guidelines, BEFORE YOU BUY. If they are willing, have them post that publicly on the guitar listing. Then, if the guitar comes poorly packed and broken, you have some compelling evidence for recourse. Here are the five basic steps. I'll go into more detail later, but let's get them listed for those shippers who won't read the details.

1. De-tune, de-tune, de-tune
2. Pad the headstock and any other unsecured areas
3. Unscrew or pad the toggle switch cap
4. Pack all loose parts separately
5. Create a cushion between the box and the case

1. De-tune, de-tune, de-tune

My opinion is that the guitar should be completely de-tuned to take all stress off the headstock from the strings. This is as close to a religious argument as there seems to be in this industry. I've spent a ton of time trying to understand the argument for NOT de-tuning, but I just can't get my head around it. The headstock of a guitar is under constant stress. The strings are pulling the headstock forward while the truss rod is pulling it back. It doesn't take a physics degree to understand that wood is more likely to break under stress than it is to break when it's not under stress. If the strings are at tune and the headstock is at full stress, and the local shipper drops it on its head, it's more likely to snap. De-tuning completely means that only the truss rod is pulling on the headstock, which is SIGNIFICANTLY less pressure. I've talked to dozens of people on this, including esteemed physics professors and the answers have come back

consistently in agreement. Yet, there is a school of thought out there that believes a guitar should be shipped in-tune. I'm more than happy to be corrected and enlightened, so please let me know if I've been missing something all these years. I just know that after shipping hundreds of guitars without a single incident, my method seems to work.

For added protection, if you are comfortable making truss rod adjustments, ask the shipper to loosen the truss rod as well. Of course if you're buying from an individual, make sure that person knows the difference between loosening and tightening a truss rod before you ask them to do this.

2. Pad the headstock and any other unsecured areas.

This one requires a little thought. As a shipper, you absolutely need to minimize the guitar's ability to shift. ALWAYS WRAP THE HEADSTOCK IN BUBBLE WRAP, so that it is nice and padded. Picture in your mind the guitar being dropped on its head, and prepare it for that occurrence. Beyond that, it's case dependant. If you have a Strat-style case with a large open cavity, then you need to pad it between the neck brace and the body so that if it is dropped on it's head, the body padding will help to keep the headstock from banging against the top of the case. Your goal is to have no possible movement in any direction and to have soft landings if the case is dropped in any direction.

3. Unscrew or pad the toggle switch cap

This is actually one I learned recently, (see, I AM willing to learn). I bought a '59 Les Paul reissue and when I opened it (remember my "First Look" stage of new guitar analysis), I noticed that there was no toggle switch cap. "Hmmm, do the '59's come this way"? No, they don't. When I lifted the guitar out of its case, there were tiny bits of yellow plastic all over the place. The toggle cap literally exploded. I have to admit that I was really perplexed. The amount of energy that it took to blow the cap to bits must have been extraordinary. The shipper must have dropped the case on its top and the pressure blew the toggle cap into a thousand pieces. In speaking to Rick Hogue of Garrett Park Guitars (www.gpguitars.com), I learned that this happens all the time, particularly on Les Pauls. So, my third tip is to either unscrew the cap or pad it with a piece of Styrofoam or bubble wrap.

4. Pack all loose parts separately

Whatever you do, do not throw loose parts in a case with a guitar. I can't believe that people do this, but I'm fixing dings and dents all the time because someone had the sick sense of humor to throw a tremolo arm in the case unsecured or put it in a case compartment that isn't snapped down. Given what happens to a guitar during shipment, imagine your new baby in a dryer along with a six inch piece of steel. I'm all for relic'ed guitars, but this is NOT the way to do it.

All the loose parts should be wrapped in bubble wrap and secured in a compartment or shipped outside the case. It boggles my mind that I even have to say this.

5. Create a cushion between the box and the case

This is perhaps the most important point. There are only two ways to ship a guitar: 1) in a certified flight case that can tolerate anything, or 2) in a case that is floating inside a shipping box.

The goal here is to create a shock barrier so that when the shipper drops it on the pavement, there is something to absorb the energy before it splits the wood of your new baby. If the shipper merely puts a cardboard box around the case, the shock wave is going to flow right thru to the instrument and something very bad is going to happen. Instead, put the case in a larger box and pad it with "peanuts", bubble wrap, or some other shock absorbing material. You want the guitar case to "float" inside the shipping box.

It's important to note that it doesn't matter whether the guitar is coming in a hard case or gig bag. In fact, if it's shipping in a gig bag, as long as the gig bag is well cushioned in the shipping box, the number of neck breaks appears to be lower. Hard cases transfer energy more readily than gig bags, so theoretically this should not be a surprise.

I hope this information will save you from the pain and suffering that some guitar buyers have gone thru when they open their new purchase, only to find splinters of wood in the headstock compartment. Shipping damage only happens in a very small number of instances, but it could be significantly less common if all shippers adhered to a few simple standards.

So, as I said, [send a link to these instructions whenever you purchase a guitar on line](#). Make sure the seller is willing to abide by these minimal instructions. If the seller isn't willing to help protect the guitar up front, imagine how helpful they are going to be if something bad happens.

One last point - Don't open the box for at least three hours...

Maintaining the condition of the guitar relies on good shipping techniques, but also good receiving techniques. When a guitar arrives, let it sit in the box for at least three hours. This is especially important when the temperature differential between the outdoors and indoors is severe. If the guitar has been sitting in a UPS truck for 5 days in the cold, and you rip the box open in a 70 degree home, and then put your 98.6 degree mitts all over it, the chances of a finish crack go up by a thousand percent.

Let the guitar become accustomed to its new home gradually. I realize that it's difficult to receive a new axe and not rip into it like an X-Box at Christmas, but you must force yourself to wait. Otherwise, you might be disappointed a few days or weeks later, when finish cracks appear.

As always, feel free to send questions, comments, and topic requests to jim@guitaraffair.com

