

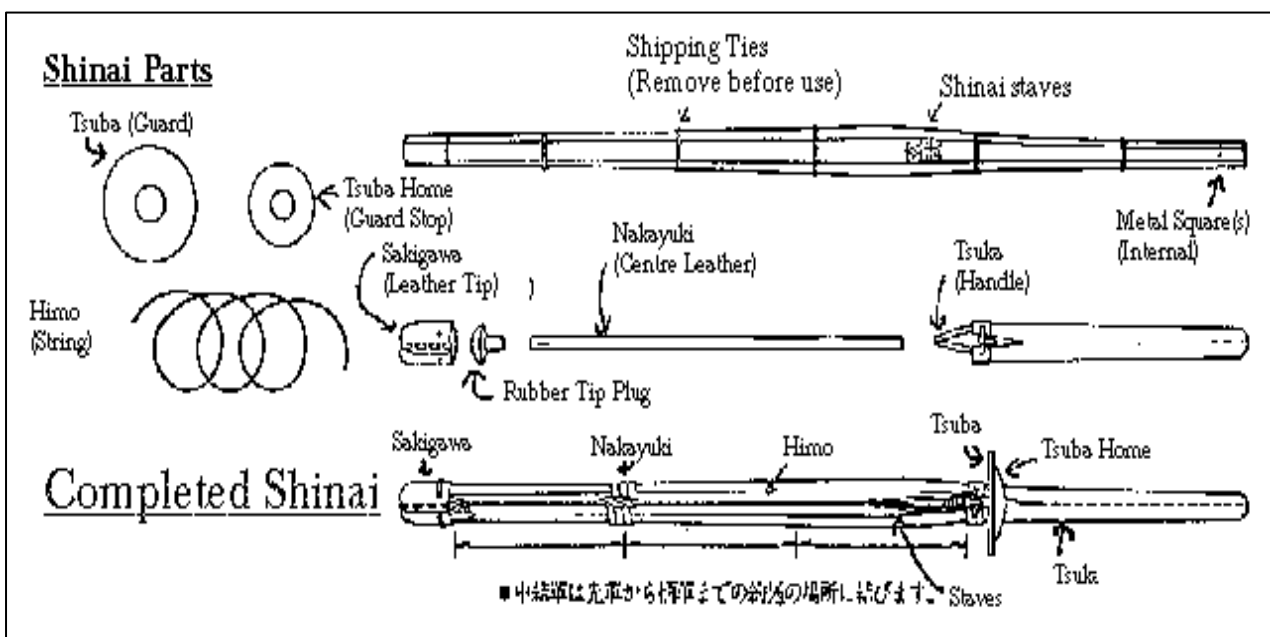
How To Care For Your Shinai

Your new shinai is not ready to use right away. The bamboo is usually very dry and needs a bit of TLC (tender, loving care) before you use it in practise, or it will crack very soon after you start using it. If you want your spiffy new shinai to last, then you must prepare it before use. You should also clean and maintain your shinai every few weeks.

Your fellow kendoka will also appreciate you taking care of your shinai because it is a big safety issue. The worst kendo accidents are caused by broken shinais, so you should check your shinai every practice! You should also take your shinai apart every couple of months to sand out any dings and dents, reapply some oil and check the string tension. That's also a good time to rotate the handle and spread the wear and tear out over all four staves.

A good shinai can last as long as a year, even with heavy practice.

OK, first, lets learn the basic parts and the terminology:



The shinai is made from 4 staves of bamboo, held at both ends with a leather cover, and tensioned by a string. There are a couple of hidden parts: inside the handle end, a thin metal square keeps the staves aligned, and inside the tip, a rubber grommet kept the staves from collapsing against each other. Most folks use the Japanese terminology so they will look more knowledgeable to beginners when explaining this stuff. I bow to tradition in this regard, but I'll slip in a translation where I can.

English Name	Japanese Name	English Name	Japanese Name
Bamboo	take	Hand guard	tsuba
Handle	tsuka	Guard retainer	tsuba dome
String	Tsuru or himo	Tip insert	saki-gomu
Leather tip	sakigawa	Leather strap	nakayue

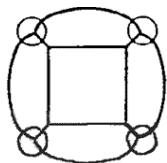
Taking Apart a new Shinai:

Yes, you do have to do this. Relax, it's very easy and takes about 20 minutes from start to finish, once you have some practice.

1. Remove the hand guard (tsuba and tsuba dome).
2. Untie the (tsuru) string from the handle. Do NOT undo any other knots!
3. Pull off the sakigawa (shinai tip) and nakayui (leather strap) with the string all in one piece. It is not necessary to untie any of these knots, unless you are replacing one of these parts.
4. Pull off the tsuka (handle).
5. Mark the ends of each bamboo stave so you remember the assembly order (Which one is top, bottom, left and right).
6. Separate the staves. Be careful to keep the small metal square that holds the handle ends together.

Getting a New Shinai Ready to Use:

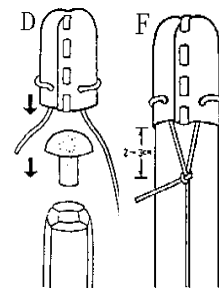
1. Use a foam sanding block, or a piece of fine-grit sand paper. Gently sand the edges of the shinai down so they are round, not sharp see below and right for an end-view of the staves to see the difference. Be careful not to get splinters in your fingers !!



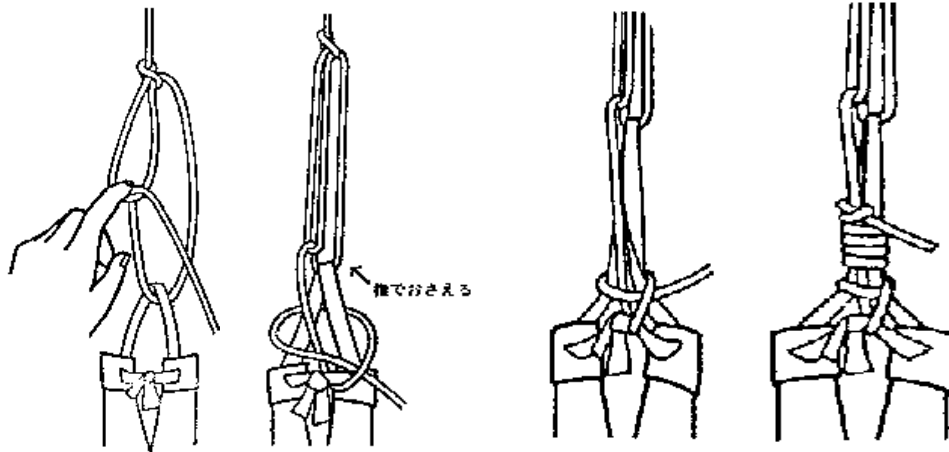
Sand these edges down.



2. After sanding, lightly oil the staves with furniture oil, vegetable oil, or even light machine oil. For new shinai, it is best to let the oil soak in for a few days. Be careful with vegetable oil, as it soaks in fast, and you can make the shinai too heavy by over-oiling.
3. After sanding and oiling, wipe the shinai with a clean rag to remove the excess oil, and begin to re-assemble. Put the staves back in their original order, and slide the handle partway on, just to hold the handle ends together.
4. Slide the nakayue (leather strap) down over the shinai, then insert the saki-gomu (rubber grommet) and cover it with the sakigawa (leather tip). If you untied all this stuff, then you'll have to read the maintenance section below to figure out how to re-tie all those knots and align everything again.



5. Push the tsuka (handle) the rest of the way on (it is supposed to be a bit tight). Make sure, the bamboo goes all the way into the bottom of the leather.
6. Finally, tie the knot as shown below. Keep the tsuru (string) tight as you tie. If it is loose, the shinai will have no spring, and can actually be more prone to breaking. Loop the excess string around and around the base until you can tuck in the end to keep it from un-raveling.

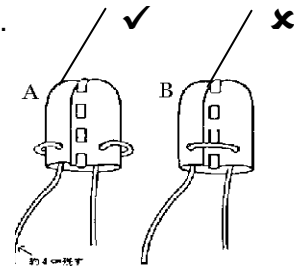


General Repairs and Maintenance

Sometimes, you will need to overhaul a shinai for preventive maintenance: the nakayue can loosen up, or the sakigawa (leather tip) can get worn, or you might buy a funky purple tsuru from one of the bogu stores, to replace your boring old white one. The steps below show you how to work on the rest of the shinai.

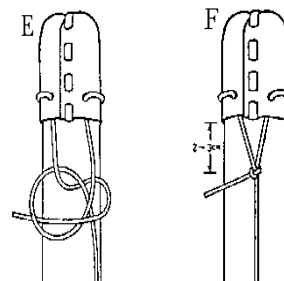
Thread the tsuru (string) through the sakigawa as shown in method A. Method B is not as good as method A for a couple of reasons.

In method A, the tsuru tightly holds the sakigawa all the way around the tip. In method B, the tension of the tsuru stretches the leather, and pulls the sakigawa unevenly - only from the top. This can make the sakigawa have a loose fit.



Tie the tsuru knot as shown at right. The knot should be about 2 cm below the sagigawa, and have only a little left over at the loose end. Don't cut a lot off the end or you will have a short string with not enough at the handle (especially size 39 shinais). Instead, undo the knot and tie it again.

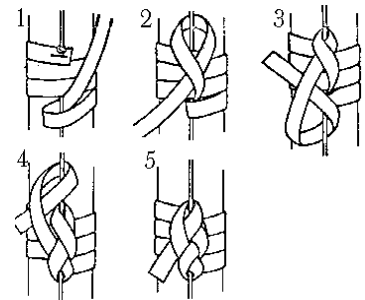
The knot below the sakigawa will not slip if it is tied properly. It will also be easy to undo when you need to replace parts.



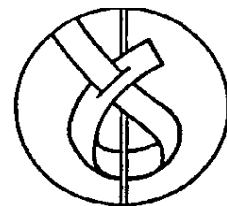
The nakayue (leather strap) is held in place by a knot in the tsuru, about 1/3 of the way along the shinai. This knot keeps the nakayue from sliding up the shinai towards the tip. Thread the tsuru through the slit in the end of the nakayue, then tie the knot at the point where you need to anchor the staves. This point is usually a little bit below the first bamboo joint of the staves. See the picture on page one for a general idea.



The nakayue knot looks hard, but it is actually very easy. You should undo this and re-tighten it every so often, as the leather does stretch over time. You should also apply a bit of mink oil or another leather conditioner to keep the nakayue from drying out and getting weak. Just loop the nakayue under the tsuru, and then fold it back under itself. Be sure to keep the leather flat, not twisted when you do this. Repeat the looping as shown in the drawing, until you run out of leather. If you are superstitious, they say that three or five wraps are lucky, and four wraps are bad luck.

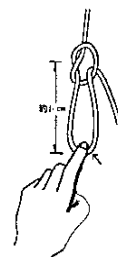


Sometimes you may need to replace a nakayue that has broken without wanting to undo the tsuru and take the whole shinai apart; here's a short-cut method. Basically, just use the slit at the end of the nakayue, and make the first loop through itself, instead of sliding the tsuru through the slit.



I actually prefer the long way, because it's a chance to inspect the rest of the shinai, but if you are in a hurry, this is an acceptable quick-fix.

There is a tension loop in the tsuru near the handle. This is what you use to tighten the tsuru and give the shinai a lively feel. I do not like the usual method of tying this knot (shown at right), because the loop can move or change size on you. I prefer to use a bowline, like the one at the sakigawa. It takes a bit of fiddling to get the length right, but the loop will never move on you. That's worth something when you are trying to tension a shinai with sweaty fingers, 5 minutes before practice starts.



That's all folks, just a few simple tips to keep your shinai working well, and your fellow kendoka safe. It only takes a few seconds to check your shinai every practice, and a few minutes once a month to tune it up. Look after your gear, and you'll have a much better time.