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Knitting for Profit

Three Stages of Steam

By Sharon Nani

Steaming your knitwear and blocking your knits are two phrases that are used synonymously in the domestic knitting world. I remember laying my shaped knit pieces out on a blocking board and pinning it with "t" pins every one-half inch apart, making sure that I pinned it to my specific, required measurements. In those days, my steam iron did not have a lot of gusto, so I would cover my knits with a damp cloth, then pass the iron over the knitting. Finally, I'd let the knit pieces sit for a day or two, making sure that the pieces were totally dry before I moved them. I was happy with this method. After all, time was not that important and the quality of my garment was just fine. Any recipient of this gift was happy.

Improvement of equipment, more variety and availability of yarns, and the growing demand for knitwear on the commercial market are just a few of the factors that contributed to the evolving methods of finishing our knit products. Steaming or the "setting of the stitches" of knit products in the professional arena involves three stages: first steam, hard press, and final steam. I will discuss the relationship between yarn fibers, fabrics and steam in this issue of *Machine Knit America*.

Yarn fibers are twisted and combined in a large variety of ways. The stand alone yarns of wool, cotton, rayon, and other natural fibers each have their specific properties and react to steam in a different manner. Yarn manufacturers of today combine these basic yarns in ratios that give us exciting yarns with new characteristics. Numerous synthetic yarns are produced to give desired results. This in turn makes the way we block our knit products more complicated.

Each type of yarn and texture is "first steamed" according to its characteristics. Therefore, the first step is to have a basic understanding of how the individual yarns react to steam or heat. In order to keep this article within the pages allotted, I will briefly discuss the materials mentioned above.

Yarn	Reaction to Steam or heat
Wool	Constricts or Shrinks
Cotton	Constricts or Shrinks
Rayon	Expands or Stretches
Acrylic	Expands or Stretches

Now, let's take a common sense approach to expand the basic chart. If you take a close look at the natural yarns on today's market, you will notice that many are combinations of one yarn that shrinks (which will result in giving body or substance to a fiber) with a yarn that expands. This can result in a nice drape or flow of your fabric. Examples of these yarns are wool/ray and cotton/ray. Both of these yarns are used in fine dresswear. I like to make similar combinations of yarn in jacquard fabric. For example, I will use cotton for the background and rayon for the contrast colors. When it is time to steam the knitted fabric, knowledge of the properties and its expected reaction to steam is helpful. A book in your library on yarns and their properties is always useful.

First Steam is safe for all fibers and fabrics. First Steam is the process of passing steam over the knitted piece before assembly. Knowing this first: **Knit to Fit, Steam to Polish.** First Steam is not meant to make your knitted piece be the desired size. This should have been accomplished in a correct knitting pattern, which was calculated from swatches that had been

appropriately knitted and steamed. Although, steaming the knit will shrink or expand it into the correct size according to the characteristics of the yarn.

I use a garment steamer for the first steam. This does not have an iron head. It has a nozzle that looks like the upholstery accessory for a vacuum cleaner. You should always practice on scrap material if you are inexperienced at steaming, as you can ruin a garment in a hurry by spreading the stitches out too far. In today's market, there are several steam irons that could be used for this process. Just make sure that it puts out a good supply of steam, and do not rest the weight of the iron on the fabric.

If you do not have a garment steamer and must use a steam iron, put a damp cloth between your garment and the iron. Do not put the pressure of the iron on the knit. Instead, work in a small area at a time. Hold the iron about 1" above the cloth, get the knit warm and damp, remove the cloth, then shape it with your hand. This method will be much more time-consuming. If you are a domestic knitter (I use the term 'domestic' to mean one who knits for pleasure or practicality. Time isn't an issue for a domestic knitter), this process will suffice. Otherwise, I highly recommend a garment steamer for anyone knitting for profit.

One of the objectives of the first steam is to unroll the edges of the knitting in order to make it easier to assemble, to do minor re-shaping due to the weights distorting your edges or your neckline, and to make the second quality check (the first quality check is correcting all problems as you knit). I will continue with this topic in the next issue of *Machine Knit America*, giving you a detailed description of first steaming a garment. ■