



7
*Things
You
Should
Know Before
You Buy a
Flute*

by Andrew Scott

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7 Things You Should Know Before You Buy a Flute

1. Tone Quality - How Good Can It Sound?

The quality and value of a flute is determined by the potential it has for making a beautiful sound. The more capable it is of delivering music that can bring tears to the eyes and wonder to the hearts of listeners, the more valuable the flute is.

Several factors influence the quality of sound that a flute can make, and the most important of these are the materials from which the flute is constructed.

The Better the Metal, the Sweeter the Sound

The more expensive the materials, the better the sound.

The cheapest metal from which to make a flute is cupro-nickel, which is an alloy of copper and nickel. This is what many coins are made from. The cupro-nickel alloy is then coated with silver, nickel, or paint.

The next best substance is silver, which delivers a pure sweet tone, that can be light, fluid, and expressive.

The best substance to make a flute from is gold. The reason for this is that a gold flute, in the hands of a skilled player, can produce a tone that is more warm, mellow, sweet and rich than any other substance.

So to have a flute that will sound the best, we would all like a solid gold flute. Sadly, the price of a gold flute is about the same as that of a new family car, so it is usually necessary to compromise.

In my opinion, the following list grades the quality of sound from fine to magnificent:

1. colored flute, made of cupro-nickel, and painted in the color of your choice;
2. silver-plated head, middle and footjoints;
3. solid silver headjoint, silver-plated middle and footjoints;
4. solid silver head, middle and footjoints;
5. gold headjoint, solid silver middle and footjoints;
6. gold head, middle and footjoints:.

There are many variations of the above combinations, but I have listed the most common ones.

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Tone Quality (continued)

Engraving

If a flute has pieces that are made of solid silver, the manufacturer usually marks each piece with an engraving that specifies the composition of the materials used.



Sterling Silver Headjoint

The headjoint in the photo above is inscribed with the words “SILVER925.” This means that it is made of 92.5% pure silver, sometimes known as sterling silver, or solid silver.

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Tone Quality (continued)

Can You Hear the Difference?

I have recorded an F Major scale and the song Danny Boy on four different flutes. [Click here](#) to listen to the comparison, or visit andrewscottmusic.com/flutes/samples.html



Avoid Nickel

Sometimes flutes are nickel-plated, as a substitute for silver-plating. These instruments sound OK, in my opinion, but I don't recommend them because nickel plating feels slippery to hold. As well as that, I've never seen a well-made nickel-plated flute. They usually require frequent adjustment. You can recognise a Yamaha nickel-plated flute by the model number. There will be an "N" after the number, eg, YFL 221N.

My recommendation: A silver plated flute is a great instrument to start with, but colored flutes sound almost as good.

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2. Design, Features and Options

Some of the ways to enhance a flute's performance - without the player learning anything more - are to vary the design. These variations include open holes, pointed cup arms, high rise lip plates, a B footjoint, the split E mechanism, and the Altissimo C gizmo.

Covered Holes and Open Holes

Covered hole flutes are easier to play.

Nearly all beginner flutes are made with covered, or closed holes. This means that the player is not required to exercise any skill at covering the tone holes, beyond holding the key closed.



As the player's ability improves, a superior sound can be gained by creating an opening in five of the flute's keys, immediately beneath the player's fingers. The purpose of these holes is to allow the sound to project from the flute more fully than when the holes are covered.

My recommendation: They don't make a noticeable difference to the sound of a beginner flute, and are a waste of money unless you have at least a solid silver headjoint.

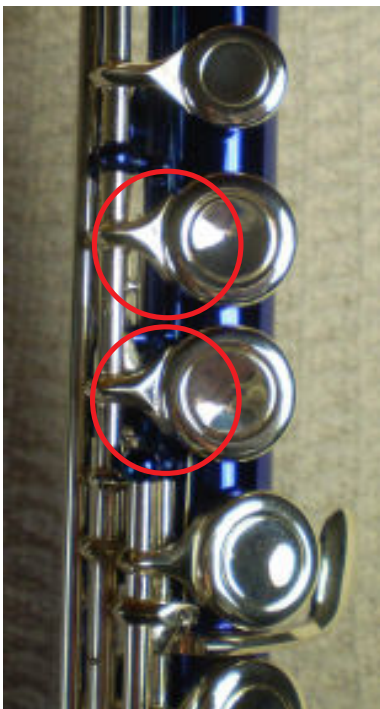
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Design, Features and Options (continued)

Pointed Cup Arms

On beginner flutes, the keys that cover holes, sometimes known as cups, are attached to a shaft by a length of metal called an arm. A variation of the normal, or Y arm is the pointed cup arm. Pointed cup arms don't have much effect on the sound, but are stronger and stay in position better.

Y Cup
Arms



Pointed
Cup Arms



My recommendation: Not necessary for beginners, but pointed cup arms are a superior form of engineering for high quality flutes.

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Design, Features and Options (continued)

B Footjoint

This is an extra note on the footjoint that allows you to play down to Low B, instead of Low C.



C Footjoint - 2 Keys



B Footjoint - 3 Keys

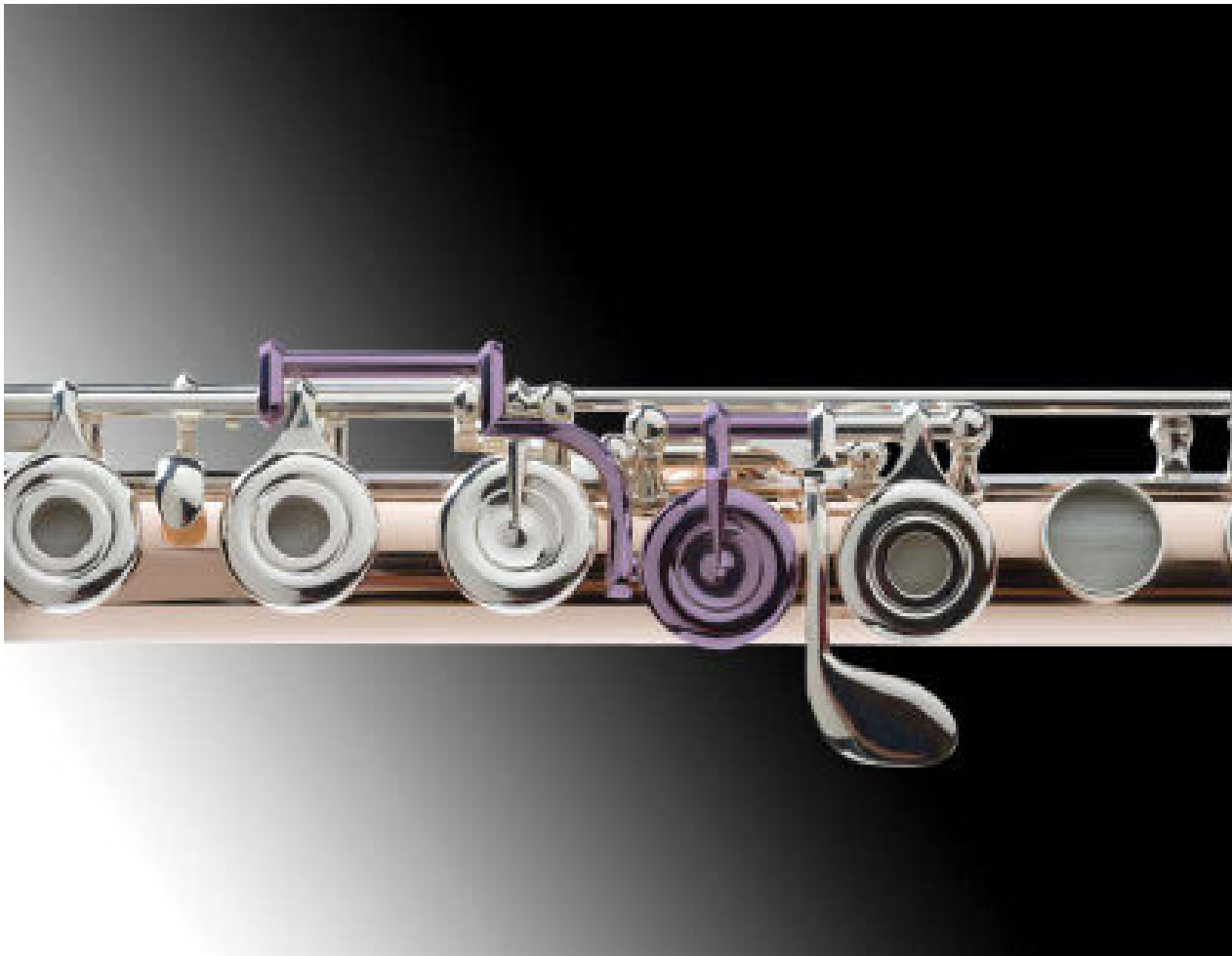
My recommendation: Considering that most beginners have a lot of trouble playing even Low C, adding an extra note below that just gives them an unrealistic target and makes their job even harder. Also, the fact that there is hardly any sheet music, even in the professional repertoire, containing Low B, makes this feature very low on the list of priorities. Your money would be better spent on a silver-plated or solid silver headjoint.

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Design, Features and Options (continued)

Split E Mechanism

This device is a lever that closes one of the G keys when the note high E is fingered. High E is notorious for its resistance to sounding in tune - it tends to come out sharp. The split E mechanism lowers the pitch a little, making it easier to blow high where it should be.



Split E Mechanism Highlighted in Purple

My recommendation Definitely worth having, although few students get up to high E for at least three years. It is difficult enough at the best of time to play the flute in tune, and any feature that makes this task easier is a big asset.

Yamaha didn't think this was a worthwhile feature until after they started producing their YFL 211 series. The previous model, the F100, doesn't have the split E, nor does the YFL 221, but the high E is manageable with a little extra attention to embouchure (mouth position). The only difference between the 221 and the 211 is the split E, but it will cost you \$150 extra. If you're on a tight budget, don't fret about it - just listen to that note and adjust.

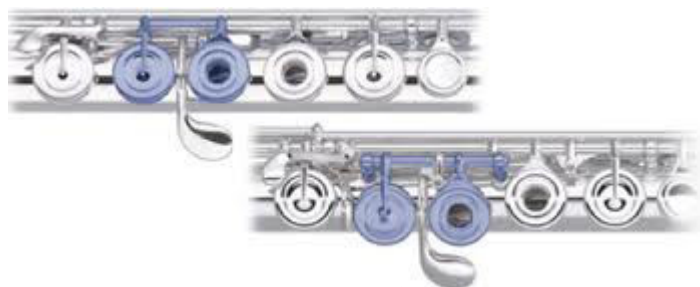
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Design, Features and Options (continued)

Offset G Keys

If the G keys aren't offset, it is a big stretch for young fingers to reach them. This feature is as common as cars with four wheels.

Inline G Keys



Offset G Keys

My recommendation:

Since 1975, I've never seen a beginner flute that doesn't have offset G keys, so I don't know why every manufacturer feels the need to boast about it as though it were unique to their brand. Inline G keys are available on higher level flutes, but the consensus of opinion amongst flute players on the internet seems to be that the difference is only one of comfort, and nothing to do with the sound.

7 Things You Should Know Before You Buy a Flute

3. Reliability - How Long Will the Flute Last?

Usually, the better brands last longer.

The more care and precision that your flute makers used when they were building your flute, the less trouble it will give you. craftspeople who turn out only one flute every two weeks, tend to take more care with their flutes than workers who are under pressure to meet a production schedule of 50 flutes a day.

I would expect that a well made flute such as a Yamaha YFL 221 would give you at least 10 years of reliable playing, with only two or three services during that time. I've also seen much cheaper colored instruments still playing well after 4 years of regular, moderate use, with only one or two minor adjustments.

At the other extreme it's not uncommon to open the case of a brand new discount instrument, fresh from the store, and find that it is unplayable. This is more likely to happen if you buy direct from a factory in China, or from a Bargain Basement style store.

The problem is that if you are a beginner, you won't know if it's you or the instrument that is responsible for your lack of beautiful music. Some dealers claim to play-test each instrument before it leaves their showroom, which is reassuring to a certain degree.

Consistency

The difference in quality between the famous brands like Yamaha, Pearl, Armstrong and the cheaper brands like Cibaili, Hawk and Mendini is a matter of consistency. The famous brands are always good. It is extremely rare to open the case of a Yamaha, fresh from the shop and find that it is unplayable, or that the cleaning rod is missing, or that the case reeks with the smell of glue. The disappointment rate would be way less than one percent. Whereas, with the cheaper brands, the disappointment rate varies from 5% to 100%.

Servicing

How often does a flute need to be serviced?

Every 50,000 notes?

It's difficult to put an exact figure on the time between services, but certainly no more that once a year. The more you play, the more often your flute will need a service. If you learn how to make adjustments yourself you can stretch out that time even further.

One point worth considering is that sometimes flute repairers don't like servicing the cheaper brands of flutes, because they believe that even after the flute is fixed, it might not stay fixed. Naturally the player will blame the repairer, so the repairer may choose to only perform very minor adjustments. If you bought your flute cheaply enough in the first place, this might not even be an issue, because, even if the cost of repair is going to be high, you can just trash the flute and buy a new one!

My recommendation: The famous brands, see page 20 of this report, are usually the most reliable.

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4. New vs Second-hand

New Instruments

Nothing beats the joy and thrill of opening the case of a brand new, shiny musical instrument that no one has ever played before. It's all yours and the anticipation



of its potential is priceless. There are no specks of dust marring the plush, velvet lining of the case. No foreign fingerprints clutter the shiny surface of the keys, and no mouth prior to yours will have touched the glossy metal of the lip-plate. However, just because an instrument is brand new and shiny doesn't mean that it will be playable. At the cheap end of the market there are many flutes available that have been put together quickly with minimal care and shipped across the world by the

container load. The seller will typically not even open the case to check the instrument before it goes to you. A good way to avoid ending up with such a risky buy is to look at the other types of merchandise the seller has in her store. If your store also sells items such as ladies' shoes, hand tools, gym equipment, discount ipads and bling for mobile phones, it's a pretty sure sign that the people who work there wouldn't know a good flute from a bad one. However, anyone who specializes in wind instruments is usually a safe bet, especially if they have a repair and servicing shop in the back room.

Pro

1. It will be clean, bright and shiny.
2. You will be the first person to ever play it.
3. A warranty of up to five years will cover you in the event of anything going wrong with the flute.

Con

The most expensive way to buy a flute.

My recommendation: Who you buy from is almost as important as what you buy. Favor a specialist instrument dealer over a general discount store.

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New vs Second-hand (continued)

Used Instruments

Second hand instruments are nearly always much cheaper than new ones. As soon as someone takes a new instrument out of the showroom, it's worth less than when they walked in. And if that person only has lessons for a short time, having discovered perhaps that playing the flute is harder than it looks or that their curiosity is satisfied after only a few lessons, chances are that the instrument is still as good as new. And because the first person to own it has already paid for the shop's profit margin, it can be a great opportunity for you to get into the game at a discount.

This quality at a discount factor also works in your favor if you are wanting to upgrade your flute. For example, if you have been playing a silver-plated flute for some time and wish to move up to the next level by owning a flute with a silver head-joint, you can often pick



up such an instrument from someone who is upgrading even higher, say someone who is moving from a silver head-joint up to a solid silver flute.

It's more likely that better quality flutes have been played more than beginner flutes, as people don't tend to invest that much money in them unless they are fairly committed to practising. So the next-to-new opportunities are more plentiful at the entry level, or for beginner flutes.

The heavier use endured by an intermediate flute is offset by its increased ability to withstand extra playing due to the fact that intermediate flutes are built with greater care, precision and durability. They last longer than student flutes. So, for the same price as a new silver-plated flute you could be playing on a really good, used silver-headjoint flute.

All of the above only applies if the previous owner has taken good care of it.

A Cautionary Tale

My first flute was a birthday gift from my parents, when I turned 21. Not knowing anything about flutes they were swindled by a dealer into buying me a second-hand Couesnon, a brand I have never heard of since. I can't blame that flute for the fact that it took me three days to get a sound out of it, and even then it wasn't much of a sound. But I can blame it for the frustration I endured at repeatedly failing to play any note below F that wasn't breathy and full of fluff. The flute needed some adjustment or repair that I didn't know about and couldn't do, and even after I'd shlepped it across town back to the bozo that sold it to my parents, for repair, it never responded as willingly as the brand new Armstrong 104 that I bought a few months later.

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New vs Second-hand (continued)

Then there was the time in November, 2011 where I bid at Ebay on a Yamaha flute, model YFL-221 with the following description:

My first thoughts were: “Great, a current model flute that must be in good condition, because, a), it’s a Yamaha, my favorite, most reliable brand, and b) hardly



“Originally purchased for child to use at school and it was hardly used”

used by a child who would have lost interest.” Many a child have I taught at various schools who has shown high enthusiasm for learning initially, but soon becomes bored when she finds out that playing the flute is harder than it looks, or just has her curiosity satisfied. That child’s instrument is usually in top condition at the end of the his/her brief experiment with it, so this listing seemed like an ideal opportunity to add to my stock.

The only problem was that it was the girl’s Dad who was in charge of selling the flute not the daughter.

Dad put one of the flute pieces in to the case back to front, then closed the lid down firmly, wrapped the case in bubble wrap and posted it to me. When the flute arrived at my studio from interstate, it was unplayable because some of the keys were bent. Only an inconvenient trip to the repair shop at my expense saved the flute. Worst of all, the ignorant knucklehead who sold it to me ignored my complaint.

But don’t let me put you off buying a used flute. I’ve bought many a fine used instrument over the years, usually with descriptions such as the one above. There is an element of luck involved.

Pro

1. The cheapest way to buy a flute.
2. You can buy a better quality used instrument for the same price as a lesser quality new one.
3. You can often get an instrument that has hardly been played.

Con

1. It’s very easy to buy a dud without knowing it, particularly on Ebay
2. There is usually no warranty on defects, so if anything goes wrong, you’re on your own.

7 Things You Should Know Before You Buy a Flute

New vs Second-hand (continued)

My recommendation:

Choosing who you buy from will help you pick up a bargain

When you buy, tick one of the following boxes, and you should be alright.

1. A dealer who trades in flutes all the time will likely inspect and service a flute before it's offered to you;
2. If buying on Ebay, make sure the seller has a substantial number of positive feedbacks;
3. Paying with Paypal usually covers you against items not being as they are described.

Avoid buying an instrument from a pawn shop, unless you really know your way around a flute. It's unlikely that a pawn shop would have a flute specialist on staff who can expertly assess the condition of a flute.



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5. Extras

Adjusting Screwdriver

Some flutes come with a tiny screwdriver in the case. This is for you to use should you need to make an adjustment of your flute. Although you will need one of these eventually in your career as a flute player, it's often a sign that the flute is likely to need adjusting very soon. If something rattles loose on your child's flute, will you or they know where to apply the screwdriver?

Yamaha flutes, for example, don't supply you with a screwdriver. The possible reasons for this are that

- a) their flutes don't require adjusting very often;
- b) when it does require an adjustment, they want you to take it to a qualified Yamaha technician.

Driving across town for half an hour to a specialist flute repairer who makes a 30 second twist on one screw seems like a waste of time to me, so I've learned how to perform a few minor tasks myself. But tweaking flutes is an art in itself, and it's good if you can watch over the shoulder of an expert as the job is being done in order to learn the basics.

My recommendation:

Owning one won't show you how to use it, but it's better to have than not.

Pot of Grease

Some flutes come with a tiny pot of grease that is intended for the joints where the flutepieces join together. This seems like a good idea, but in practise it's not, because the grease attracts dirt and lint which make it harder to fit the flute together. Flutes don't need it. Clarinets and saxophones, yes, but not flutes.

If the pot of grease is offered with a new Yamaha flute, it's a good sign that the flute is a fake. Genuine Yamahas never ship with grease.

My recommendation:

Will cause damage to your flute.

7 Things You Should Know Before You Buy a Flute

6. How to Spot a Forgery

If someone paints a copy of Vincent van Gogh's Sunflowers and offers it sell it to me for a fraction of the price of the original, having made it clear that the painting is a copy, I don't have a problem with that.

What I don't like is people who copy the instruments of famous manufacturers, then try to sell them as if they were genuinely produced by that manufacturer.

This practice is quite common on Ebay, particularly with Yamaha flutes.

You can protect yourself from forgers by watching out for the following tell-tale signs:

1. The asking price is way cheaper than you can find from any authorised Yamaha dealer.

2. The seller says that he has acquired it "at a store closing sale," or "a liquidation warehouse," or "NEW IN BOX - Never played - Inventory Clearance." Translation: they got it from a pirate manufacturer in Taiwan or China.

3. The seller refuses to supply you with a serial number, "because they have so many instruments going out all the time." Translation: the serial numbers are bogus, and we don't want you to contact Yamaha to confirm this;

4. The seller says that they dropship from their supplier in Taiwan. Comment: Yet the inscription on the barrel of the flute clearly says "Made in Japan!"

Here are some photos of what I believe to be counterfeit Yamaha flutes.



Fake #1

Can you spot the mistakes?

1. Yamaha flutes do not come with an adjusting screwdriver, nor with grease.
2. The case is wrong. Genuine Yamaha cases have concealed latches. (Ironically, the cases seem to be better quality than the original!)
3. Yamaha never supplies grease for their flutes - see page 17.

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How to Spot a Forgery (cont.)



Genuine Yamaha Flute Showing Concealed Latches on Case

- 4. Real Yamaha flutes are not shipped in cellophane wrappers
- 5. The lining of the fake cases is usually black, whereas the real lining is maroon.



Fake #2

7 Things You Should Know Before You Buy a Flute

How to Spot a Forgery (cont.)

The Genuine Article



Genuine Yamaha Flute

In the photo of the genuine flute, notice that the latches are concealed, there is no carry handle, and the lining is maroon, not black.

I'm sure other brands of flute get imitated as well. I specialise in watching Yamahas, so I know them quite well. A fake Yamaha might serve you quite well, but don't expect the same level of reliability or precision as you would get with a genuine one.

My recommendation:

Don't deal with crooks. If they are happy to risk ripping off a huge corporation like Yamaha, they'll have no trouble ripping off a single person like you. The quality won't be up to the legendary Yamaha standard and any guarantee you are promised will be worthless.

Get a real one.

7 Things You Should Know Before You Buy a Flute

7. The Best Brand

To ask which is the best brand of flute to buy is a little like asking which is the best flower to plant in your garden.

To choose a flower for your garden you need to consider what type of soil you have, how much sunshine the flower will get and what kind of climate you live in, among other things.

In deciding which flute to buy, a lot depends on how old you are, the size of your budget and what your favorite color is.

As a guide, I've prepared the following list, which provides my view of the best flutes on the market for the beginning to intermediate player.

Just because any particular brand isn't in the list doesn't mean I think it's bad; it's just that I haven't lived long enough to meet them all.

My recommendation:

The Yamaha flute (silver-plated and up, not nickel-plated) gives a lovely tone and is very reliable in the long term.

You're unlikely to go wrong with any of these brands:
Armstrong, Azumi, Jupiter, Pearl, Sankyo, Trevor James,

Also good are Emerson, Gemeinhardt, Miyazawa.

Amongst the innumerable makes and models at the cheaper end of the market I can only recommend the brand that I import, and whose quality I can control. that brand is Funky Monkey. As the name implies, it's an instrument of fun, rather than precision. It's ideal for beginning students.

I hope you've enjoyed reading my report on how to choose a flute.

Please email me at andrew@andrewscottmusic if there's anything more I can help you with.

Happy playing,

