

05. Banjo Heads Explained

The head of a banjo is the major component of the banjo that defines the tone. The second tone defining device is the bridge but the head must always be first properly mounted and tightened. The objective of this article is to provide the basic mechanical details of the banjo head. Before the introduction of mylar (plastic) banjo heads they were made of calf skin that was sensitive to humidity changes, wear and needed replacing often due to breakage. The mounting of a calf skin head is a skill not covered in this article. Modern mylar heads are easy to replace and do not have the problems of calf skin heads. They rarely if ever need attention or replacing unless damaged or worn by fingers on the surface.

Banjo heads dimensions:

The most obvious dimension is the diameter as measured across the top of the head. The most common size is 11 inch but there are other sizes so a measurement is needed. A replacement head must be the exact diameter of the original head and it should fit nicely on the top rim – not too tight or loose.

The other critical dimension is the “crown height” as measured from the edge of the top surface edge to the bottom of the tension ring around the head. There are three crown height sizes for banjo heads; low (3/8”), medium (7/16”) and high (1/2”). The correct crown height size head must be used to properly fit the neck and tension ring so be very careful with this measurement.

When ordering a banjo head you must specify the exact head diameter and the exact crown height - if either of these two measurements are inaccurate the head will not fit.

Banjo heads are available in various styles depending on a player's preference of appearance and tone.

- 1) Top Frosted – white with rough frosted top surface.
- 2) Bottom frosted – white with a smooth top surface for quiet strumming [most popular style].
- 3) Prism – shiny prism-look with bright sound.
- 4) Clear – viewable interior of the banjo body and resonator with bright sound.
- 5) Black – glossy black with mellow sound.
- 6) Fiberskyn – looks like calfskin, thick with a very rough surface and plunky sound.
- 7) Renaissance – smooth surface with bee's wax color and brighter than fiberskyn.
- 8) Kevlar – white thick head with orange-peel like surface.

Removing and mounting heads:

No tricks here except taking care to loosen or tighten the head evenly to avoid distortion. Before removing the head remove all hardware and parts that will interfere with removing the tension ring and head. Then using an imaginary “clock” pattern loosen a hook (12 o'clock) 2 turns then directly across (6 o'clock) loosen that nut 2 turns. Then loosen at (3 o'clock), (9 o'clock), (1 o'clock) and so on. Idea is to loosen brackets as evenly as possible. You can develop your own method just be careful to keep it gradual and even. To install a head use the same pattern procedure to tighten the head once you have set the head and tension ring in place and have all of the nuts started finger tight. Be careful to tighten the head only to the point where you can press on it around the edge and it indents slightly and feels taut. It should “ring” a bit if you lightly tap it and it resonates at “G or G#” using a tuner.

Ask for assistance by a club member that is familiar with mounting banjo heads.