

Fair Isle Knitting in the Northland by Alice Adams

Fair Isle, or stranded knitting, is a technique used to create intricate, often multicolored designs, by working only two colors (background and a pattern color) together in a single row. Hand knitters usually carry one color yarn in each hand and knit using both the Continental and English methods “throwing” with their right hand and “picking” with their left). Yarn not being used to form a knit stitch is carried or “stranded” on the back side of the work. While the first row of pattern can be easily and rapidly knit, the next row would require most hand knitters to turn their work and purl back. To purl while stranding is at best a very slow cumbersome process. Fair Isle garments are, therefore, usually knit in the round on circular needles to avoid purling.

A sweater essentially consists of a single large knitted cylinder for the body and two smaller diameter cylinders or cones for the arms. The large cylinder must be cut open if a cardigan is desired and a partial, top down, cut on each side is needed to attach the sleeves. Because completion of a Fair Isle garment requires cutting the knitted fabric, special sequences called steeks are often incorporated at those sites where cuts will eventually be made. Steeks typically consist of a few additional stitches being inserted between two pattern stitches while knitting. Steeks not only help identify where to cut but create a selvage to protect the adjacent pattern stitches from unraveling when seams are sewn or button bands added to finish a garment.

Several years ago, slow changing variegated yarns (those with many yards of yarn between centers of color change) became available. Members of the Northern Lights Affiliate of MKG and others began using yarns like Kauni for one or both strands of yarn with Fair Isle patterns. The progression of colors was, of course the same on the front and back of the sweater as they were knit together. But how could two identical sleeves be made? Our solution was to also knit both sleeves at same time by joining them together with steeks at what would be the under arm, row change, site. This not only achieved the desired result of identical sleeves but the progression of color changes was more similar to that of the body because each round had twice as many stitches.

Our initial experience with knitting both sleeves together was so positive that we are convinced that all Fair Isle sleeves should be knit this way. Some of the many advantages of knitting both sleeves together are:

- 1). When you have completed all rows of the sleeve chart once, you have made two sleeves.

- 2). For most rows, the pattern repeat is quickly memorized and twice as many repeats can efficiently be made without referring back to the chart.
- 3). If you twisted the cast on row when the stitches were joined to form a circle, you do not have to rip back and start over. Just cut the möbius in the middle of one of the two steeks, untwist, cast on a few new stitches to bridge the gap and continue knitting.
- 4). With twice as many stitches, longer circular needles can be employed. The cuff region of adult sweaters can be easily worked with a sixteen inch rather than nine inch circular needle which helps to maintain a constant tension over the length of the sleeve.
- 5). If you made the color changes between rows at the center of a steek, there will be no ends to weave in when you are finished. Gently tug the yarn ends to tighten the adjacent steek stitches and cut them off when you cut down the middle of the steek.
- 6). The jog which occurs in the pattern between rows can be eliminated when the steek is cut and the under arm seam is sewn.
- 7). The steek acts as a barrier that stabilizes the pattern stitches at the beginning and end of each row. In the absence of a steek these stitches, particularly those near a yarn tail, tend to loosen as subsequent rows are knit.
- 8). The selvage of the cut steek does add a little extra bulk on the inside of the sleeve, but so do the ends that must be woven in on sleeves knit in the round without steeks.
- 9). The woven in ends of unsteeked sleeves add stiffness which can negatively effect the surface structure of the sleeve.
- 10). The selvage of the cut steek stabilizes the edge stitches and the seam adds structure and together this results in a very finished underarm look. Sleeves knit singly, without a seam, often have a disheveled underarm appearance because of reasons mentioned above.

The single disadvantage we experienced is that there is apparently a law, used by MN State Fair judges, that states that Fair Isle sleeves shall be knit individually, in the round, without steeks. Oh well, we will continue to knit our sweaters the way we like and just not enter them in the Fair.