

Re-covering the Seats

The seats on my 88 si had the usual problems, seam tears on the upper bolsters, wear holes lower down, some rotten and torn foam. After poking around I rejected the idea of trying to find decent stock seats, replacing with other honda seats, or buying replacements. But I really wanted to get rid of the "slipcovers" I was using. So I decided to re-cover them myself. Coverking is the primary big company I found that makes replacement covers, but I also found some on ebay, specifically an STR cover in letherette (read: rubber that looks somewhat like leather). They were cheap enough that I wouldn't feel too badly if I screwed it up or I didn't like them. I think they look pretty good, but the rubber is going to take some getting used to, and I'm not sure quite if I like it or not--you don't slide on it much, which makes getting out a bit tougher, but it does hold you to the seat better in corners and stops. At this point, I'm so glad to have bolsters again, it doesn't matter.

This is a general guide based on what little I know and what little I learned--good luck if you follow me into this neck of the woods.

Fair warning: this took a lot more time than I would have thought, and was a lot of work. If you're really a wrench head at heart, you're likely better off spending your time elsewhere. Also, this is the kind of thing you should take slowly--it's pretty easy to split the seams (I did two, one large, and one small), so be gentle and take your time. Funny how that works in so many areas.

Some tools you'll need:

- wire clippers
- Hog ring pliers (or, if you're not planning on doing this again, you can get by as I did with a set of neednose pliers and channel locks).
- Wireties, at least 9" long
- Some kind of tape, I used gaffer's tape, but a high grade of duct tape would also probably work. Gaffer's tape has adhesive that doesn't turn to dust or goo over time, and you can peel it up without destroying much.
- Glue
- Spare bits of foam
- Swiss army knife
- Razor blade
- Plastic coated wire coat hangers (this isn't going to be mommie dearest)
- A flat piece of metal with a small 90 degree bend at one end
- Stout needle and thread to match the covers, and some bee's wax to wax the thread
- A copy of Michael Row the Boat Ashore, preferably the version by Peter, Paul and Mary
- A two pound hammer

Preparing the seats

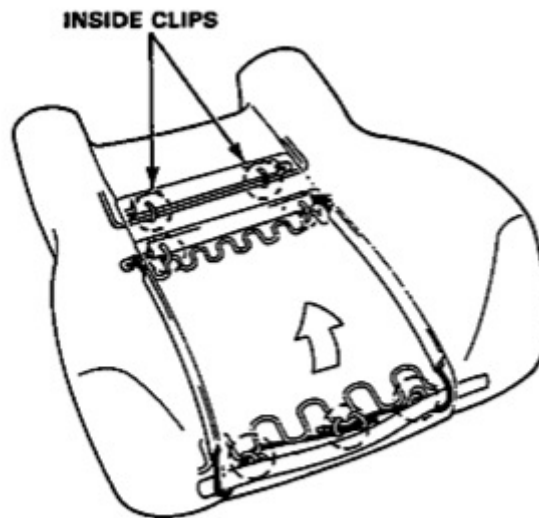
Follow the workshop manual to remove the seats, and take them apart. To get the headrest you need to remove a D shaped clip that slides in just under the top of the plastic insert into which the headrest's metal rods fit. I couldn't see it, but I fished it out using the flat metal tool described above--just hold the bend face up, and slide between the top of the seat back and that plastic mounting point, and see if you can't hook into it. My shop manual shows this coming out the back, but on mine, it came out the front, and there was only one clip per side.

You'll need to clip the hog rings holding the fabric to the seat frames. You can also unbend them, but clipping is easier I think. The ring locations are marked in the shop manual, and getting the fabric off is pretty easy, but make a careful note on how and where the hog rings attach. Pictures would be good to have later, so take them. Then you should check the frames for rust. If you find rust, you'll want to fix it, and to do that you need to take the foam off. The base is easy, it just comes out. The back is tougher--I had to reach up under the back and not so gently push the foam up and off the two loops at the very top. You can see the loops on the left in this pic:



Take your time, the foam may be fragile, and there are some places it can catch on the brackets on the frame. Also check the frames for bending--I didn't, since the seat felt straight, but it turns out I'd bent the frame a bit to the back on the driver's right side over the last 10 years (I wasn't surprised--after driving my civic wagon for a few years, it developed a permanent slant to the driver's side about 1/4"). Sand or wirebrush the rust and use a rust converting primer to control the rust.

Putting the foam back on is easy. You may want to swap the foam between the passenger and driver sides, since the passenger side is likely in better condition. Then you'll want to glue any breaks in the foam. In particular, look at the embedded wires used to hold the cover with the hog rings. For example, on the old driver's side, the upper piece (the one that is shaped like a "U") had pulled loose on one side, and thus wouldn't be able to hold the cover down. You can see that U shaped piece in the workshop manual, it's the one that the top inside clips attach to:



I glued that embedded wire back down into the foam of the seat with some foam added on top (you can see that filler foam on the pic below), and then later used a wiretie to hold the upper part on both sides back by threading the wiretie around the cross brace in the back of the frame. For glue, I used elmer's ultimate, and that worked well enough. It did dry hard, so after it dried at the surface I trimmed it back a bit with the swiss army knife, and put thin pieces of foam over that. You might also use some strips of cloth or belts to wrap around the foam to hold the edges of the foam you've glued together. Let the glue dry completely before proceeding--take your time, and make sure you clean up everything. The foam I used was soft memory foam from a mattress topper--that's good for filling small spaces, but you need something stiff if you want to replace structural foam like the bolsters.

After the glue's dry you probably want to tape up various areas that you've glued. I also elected to tape the bolster surfaces where the foam was showing wear and signs of dry rot to reduce friction and protect the foam from the cover. Try to keep the tape smooth, it's pretty easy to do if you use small pieces to wrap around the edges, and long strips on top on the flat areas. Any creases will show through. This picture isn't very good, but it gives the general idea:



Putting on the new covers

The headrest

If the cover fits well, it will be very tight to get completely over the headrest. It helps to roll it up about half way, so you can pull the top half most of the way down, and then unroll it the rest of the way. It also helps to squeeze the foam as you go to compress it. Be careful, if you pull too hard, you'll split the seam. In fact, pulling in general is something you want to avoid--rather, try to slide the cover down a little at a time by rubbing the surface the direction you want to go at first, then unroll it. If you hear some threads give way as you go, take the cover off and check the stitching--it is much easier to fix your mistakes with the cover off, and if you pop any of the stitches the seam will begin to unravel later. If you

get frustrated, play the recording of Micheal Row the Boat Ashore at least three times, singing along. The singing is very important. Once calm, proceed.

Once you get past the bottom of the headrest, you can adjust the fitting by rubbing the surface. Then take a break, the zipper can be a PITA.

The zipper is probably a fine plastic zipper. These are fragile, but you know the basics of how it works. I wound up making a tool out of a coat hanger to get a better angle, but before I fell to that, I torn the base of the zipper just enough that it wouldn't hold once I pulled the zipper around. What I did to fix that was to pull the zipper only 1/2", and then put a drop of glue at the base (so the zipper wouldn't come apart there). Then, when the glue was dry (don't work on any pieces with wet glue, you'll get some on the covers for sure), I put a half dozen stitches through the base to hold it. Also, very important, if the zipper does come apart behind the zipper head, don't try to force it backwards, the teeth will get damaged. Rather, trim the end off the side that the zipper head isn't permanently attached to, and take the zipper head all the around to the end. At that point, the head will be free of the other side, and you can pull the zipper apart, and then move the head back to the base, and try again. Here's a picture of the tools:



Once you get the zipper all the way around towards the base, flip the handle back under so it won't catch, and then you can use the swiss army knife's flat head screw driver at a 90 degree bend to push the zipper's head under and past the base of the zipper.

Once you'd done with the zipper, you'll need to close the bottom. To do this, you'll insert a wire into each of the pockets, one front and one back, then clamp them through the fabric with hog rings or wireties. If your set didn't come with the wires, or enough of them, you can make your own out of coat hangers, but make sure to bend the ends around so there's no sharp end. If you need to, cut some slits in the pockets at one end to make an opening for the wire. Just on the outside of the two metal posts, cut a small slit above the wire and feed a wiretie through each side, then tighten them gradually to make sure you get a good fit. Once you get the edges about an inch apart, set a hog ring at the center. If you're not using a set of hog ring pliers, pre-bend the hog rings a bit with the channel locks--that way they are easier to close with the needle nose pliers. It also helps to twist the ends just a bit as you pre-bend them so that the ends don't meet when you clamp them down. Once that's set, you can tighten the wireties the rest of the way.



The base

This part's pretty easy. "Dry fit" the cover to get an idea how it fits. Then take it off. You'll need to insert a couple of wires in the both directions, and you might need to cut openings for the wires in the pocket on the underside (on my set, in two or three places, they'd sewn over the end of one pocket when sewing down another). Make sure you can get all the wires in before you start, but then take out the longer pieces that run front to back (if you don't, you'll bend them pretty badly installing the cross pieces). You'll probably want to use wireties on a couple

of the interior connections, since they are pretty deeply recessed. Make sure the cover is centered side to side, and start with the shorter cross piece in the middle of the seat. Once that's locked down, feed the longer piece back into the pockets. Then lock down the back cross piece, followed by the longer pieces working back to front. Remember the recording and use as needed--don't forget to sing along.

Once that's done, you can [i]gently[/i] pull the fabric over the foam, starting at the front, then the back and sides. Take your time, compress the foam as you go, and don't pull (I split one side seam for about 6" on the front edge, and sewing that back together nicely was not easy!) Smooth out the fabric, and make sure the lines of the seams match. Then, starting at the front, set a wire in the pocket and connect the front edge to the frame, but don't tighten the hog rings down, just connect them. Check your alignment, and then do the same to the back edge. On my set, the back and sides didn't have pockets, so I made some by stitching the fabric into a 1/2" hem. If you need to do this, make sure you fold the fabric under, stretch to fit, and then adjust how much you're folding so the edge of the fold just meets where the hog rings attach when the fabric is stretched smoothly. Again, don't tighten them down, just hook them to the rings on the bottom of the seat--you want to get them all in place so you can check things out before you tighten them down. Then do the same to the sides, and when finished, check the seams on top for alignment and make sure the fabric is smooth. Then you can lock down the hog rings. To finish up, use a razor blade to cut out the openings for the bolts that hold the seat together, two on one side, one on the other.

The back

Make sure you reattach the brackets for the base of the seat if you took them off before you start--I put one cover on all the way before I realized that you can't put the bracket on unless the cover's off. The original seats covers had a rubber band on each side in the vertical pockets, where the bolster meets the flat of the back. Feed those pieces into the vertical pockets on the replacement seat.



Fold the seat cover back on itself, kind of like you'd do with a sock, then slide the top part down over the top. Make sure you get the top all the way down over the two "horns" at the top, centered, and smooth. Once you're satisfied with the fit, you can lock down the top of the rubber band and the upper most cross strip with hog rings. Before continuing down, find the two holes at the top for the plastic mounts for the headrest--cut holes there and reinsert those mounts (it's much easier if you do this before you do anything to block access to the inside of the upper part of the back of the seat--that way you can reach inside to guide the end and make sure the ends flare at the frame to lock in place correctly). When you've got them aligned, gently tap them home with the handle of the two pound hammer.

Back to the inside clips--the second horizontal stay wire attaches to the the spring in the frame. Here, wireties may be easier to use than hog rings. Then gently roll down the seat over the bolsters, compressing the foam as you go. Once you get the fabric over the bolsters and across the bottom, pull the rubber bands tight under and around to the back of the seat and set the hog rings. Check your alignment and seams. Then you can zip the back panels. Now make sure the whole cover is as smooth as possible--this is the biggest piece, so it will take some time. Also check the alignment on the back of the seat. Then insert a wire into the front and back pockets at the base, and set hog rings across the bottom.

Finishing up

Reassemble the seats, clean and lube the slides, and reinstall. I also adjusted the height of the front of the seat upwards with some washers for better leg support. Then, take the recording, and strike it repeatedly with the two pound hammer until you feel relaxed. Now you can put something on the stereo and go for a drive. You earned it.

Here's what I ended up with:

