

1.7 Lifetime of strings

How long do guitars strings last? Depends ... The collector may be most enthusiastic about that original No-Caster still carrying its original strings that after almost 70 years. The professional may change strings after every gig – or only as a string breaks because the sound of new strings may not be what is liked: “*James, the Paula sounds so piercing.*” “Which one, Milord?” “*The one with the E.C. carved into the headstock ... should be No. 8.*” “Pardon me, Sir, No. 8 is the one with the foot-long whisker pinched in the bridge; the one with E.C. is No. 38. I have just put on fresh strings, and they are not played-in yet”.

Strings almost always break at places where they are strongly bent. This is because here the mechanical load is even higher than along the free section of the string. Thus, it would be in the interest of longevity to round off all sharp-edged support points. At a sharp edge, the nickel coating (that in fact provides protection against corrosion) can mutate into an electro-chemical string murderer: if the nickel coating is damaged, humidity and sweat combine with the two metals (steel, nickel) to form a local electric cell. The resulting electrical current leads to subsurface corrosion and, in the end, to string breakage. Fender recommends to add a drop of machine oil or Vaseline to the support points of the string in order to keep humidity and sweat away from the string. That’s good advice – that needs to be supplemented with the following: on the Stratocaster, the treble strings experience a sharp bend on an edge on the vibrato block. It is worth the trouble to deburr that edge with a high-grade round file (similar problem areas can be found on other guitars). Why doesn’t Fender deburr that edge in the first place? Well ... Fender does sell strings, too ...

Nicely supported and guided, strings can last for months even when played frequently – but they do sound increasingly dull (Chapters 1.6.4, 7.7.6, and 7.12.2). They will therefore be changed before their final “snap”. Whether this happens after a few days or after a few months – that depends to such an extent on the individual approach and taste that it is impossible to give any guide values here. Frequent, heavy handed playing will shorten the lifetime, wiping the strings now and then, and using care products may extend it. In any case, when using the latter, care needs to be taken that such products are compatible with the material of the fretboard!