

KIDS' "CHAIN MAIL" COIF AND HAUBERK (MAIL SHIRT)

A knitting pattern

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Alex had her heart set on being a knight for Halloween when she was five. I had been curious about making costume "stage mail" for quite a while. I was familiar with the look and feel of real linked mail, having helped make some in my eclectic past. I tried out a couple of yarns of various fibers and weights, and decided that this heavy cotton cordage had the closest weight and drape to the real thing.

Materials

- T.W. Evans Cordage Company's Cable-Wound Seine Twine #18, 200-yard balls, about 4 oz. each (approx. \$4.29 US in 1996). I bought it in an Ace Hardware store. This is a worsted weight tightly wound 100% cotton twine. It's so dense that it's difficult to make a thumbnail-dent in the string when pinched between thumb and forefinger. The coif takes about 1.75 balls; the mail shirt, approximately 3 balls.
- US #11 (8mm) needles. I used a set of 5 10-inch long double pointed needles to start the coif and to do the sleeves; and a 26-inch long circular needle to finish the coif and do the body of the shirt.
- Leather thong or leather shoe laces as trim.
- Water-soluble black or charcoal grey acrylic paint

Gauge:

Stitch gauge: 3 stitches = 1 inch in garter stitch

Row gauge: 4 rows = 1 inch in garter stitch

Coif

Cast on 4 stitches and knit one round "I-cord" style. Transfer one stitch to each of 4 needles and knit in the round alternating knit and purl rounds to produce a garter stitch fabric. The end of the round where you change from knit to purl should be marked with a stitch marker. It will become the center of the front. Using one of the invisible increases rather than a YO, increase one stitch at the start of every other row until there are six stitches on each needle; then add a second point of increase in the middle of each needle. After the sixth round you should be increasing at the rate of 2 stitches per needle every other row.

When the piece is large enough to cover the top of the head stop increasing and continue alternating rows of knit and purl until you've made a beanie shape. Sometime during this point I switched to the circular needle from the DPNs. Continue to knit this beanie shape until it's large enough to cover the top of the specimen child's head like a cap, with the edge reaching down to about 1/4 inch above the eyebrows. On the next round bind off the last eight

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stitches before the marker, and the first eight of the next round (if the kid has a big face you might want to bind off one or two couple more). I made sure that the chain formed by my bind-off lay on the inside of the piece - it's more metal-looking that way.

Continue to knit around the back and sides of the coif alternating rows of knit and purl. As a nice touch I decreased another stitch on either side of the face opening by a K2tog (or P2tog), to make the transition from the top of the coif to the sides neater.

Keep knitting in garter stitch until the coif's sides hang down to the bottom of the target's ear lobes. Start increasing one stitch at each end of the row every other row until you've added approximately 5 stitches to each side. Try the coif on the kid again and make sure that the two ends almost meet together under the chin without straining. Ideally there should be a two-finger gap between the bottom of the chin and the point where the ends will join.

Join the ends back into a round, casting on six stitches at the center front (place your row marker at the center point of these six). Knit and purl three or four rounds. Try the coif on the target again. Make sure that there is enough room below the chin and that the kid can get his/her head into this narrowest spot of the neck. The "jog" where you switch from knit to purl will be in the center front. Don't worry about it. It will look fine when the mock closure is added later.

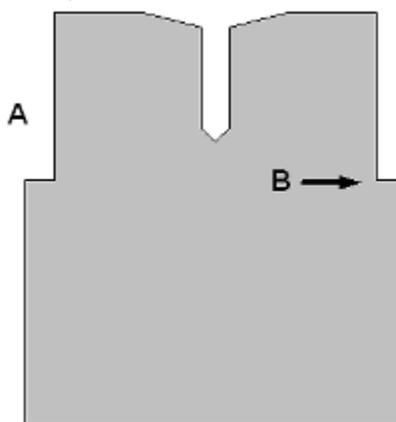
Now begin the increases that spread the collar out into a semicircular drape over the shoulders. My rate of increase isn't perfect, so some tinkering might be in order here. I counted up my stitches and divided them up into six equal parts, placing markers in between divisions. I increased once per division every other row for approximately 12 rows (6 stitches per division). Then I upped the rate of increase by adding another increase point in the center of each division. I continued to knit in garter stitch, increasing every other row until the coif was long enough to drape over the point of my daughter's shoulders by about 2 inches. I bound off making sure that the chain formed by the bind-off row was on the inside of the coif.

Hauberk (Mail Shirt)

I measured around my kid at her hips, multiplied out by my gauge, added 12 stitches for ease and cast on using the circular needle. Again, the "jog" between knit and purl rounds was marked as the center front. I continued knitting in garter stitch in the round until the piece reached from her hip bone to 3.5 inches below her armpit. When I got to that point, I counted out the stitches and bound off about 15 on each side to form the base of each arm hole.

I attached a second ball of twine to the back and continued to knit the front and back separately in garter stitch (preserving the jog in the center front) until the front was 2 inches below my daughter's collarbone. At the center front marker I formed the base of a neck slit by doing a SSK and K2tog. On the return row I knit up to the center, then joined another strand of twine and finished the row. I now had three strands going: one for the back; one for the right front; and one for the left front. I continued for another two inches, then bound off approximately 9 stitches at the neck edge on both sides of the front. I continued for another two or three rows. On the last row I bound off the centermost 18 stitches of the back.

I joined the back and fronts together at the shoulders using Kitchener stitch, but you could use any seaming method that doesn't leave a bulk underneath. I now had something that looked like the diagram below



In making the first sleeve I took the time to jot down the numbers of stitches in each of these steps and the overall sleeve length so that I could make sleeve #2 identical.

Using the double pointed needles, I picked up stitches along the vertical part of the armhole at "A" above. I don't recall how many - enough so that they flowed evenly over the arch of the shoulder. I knit out from the shoulder, continuing in garter stitch. At the end of each row I picked up a stitch in the horizontal part of the armhole and knitting it together with the last stitch in the row. This made a "barrel vault" sort of shape. I continued until there were only six stitches left in the center of the horizontal part of the armhole. These I picked up on the next row and joined the twine to make a full circle. I continued knitting the circle (the sleeve) out from the body using alternating rows of knit and purl to make garter stitch. The "jog" where the rows joined was in the center bottom of the sleeve. I kept knitting until the sleeve was long enough to reach to my daughter's wrist. Again I bound off with the bind-off chain on the inside.

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I made the second sleeve exactly like the first

Finishing Both Pieces

When the coif and mail shirt were done I used acrylic paint to make them dingy grey. I dissolved about 3 tablespoons of water-soluble acrylic hobby paint in a cup of water. I dumped that mix into a bucket containing about three gallons of slightly warm tap water. (If you don't pre-dissolve the paint in a small quantity of water you'll never get an even distribution of color).

I stuffed both pieces into the bucket and kneaded them until they achieved the dirty color I wanted. It took about a half hour of squeezing, kneading and soaking. Then I let the pieces drip dry for a couple days.

The next step is highly optional. I wanted to highlight the ridges with something a bit shinier so I laid the pieces flat in a big cardboard box and sprayed them with chrome/silver color rustproofing paint. I held the can obliquely so that only the ridges picked up the shine. Although it looked just a bit nicer, the extra effort and expense wasn't worth it. And the silver paint took a long time to dry, and even when dry rubbed off very easily. This final touch might be good for theatrical chain mail, but not for kids' costumes - especially if the kid insists on sleeping in her costume as mine did the first day. (Anyone know how to get specks of silver off polyester blend sheets?)

The finishing touch was running lengths of leather thong or lace criss-cross up the center front of both the shirt and the neck and bib part of the coif. This turns the knit "jog" into the semblance of a laced closure. Spiffy!