

# Cross-Training

## A System For Improving Your Practice And Your Playing

by Marc Dicciani

**M**any drummers practice regularly and put in enough time to see gradual improvement. Often, however, progress comes very slowly. Why is this? The cause is most often one of two factors: You're not practicing enough, or you're not practicing correctly. No one can help you find more time to practice, but you can learn ways to improve your woodshed sessions, regardless of how long they are, so that you can achieve the desired results. There are also ways to find hidden time to work on your drumming without having the sticks in your hands.

What follows is a practice method I've developed from working with hundreds of students over the years. It's built on a few simple concepts, the most important of which I call cross-training. This means developing your overall musicianship by rotating your practice topics through several general categories, with each section reinforcing and helping to improve the others.

### Set Some Goals

Whether you're practicing two hours a week or eight hours a day, it's important to set goals and stick to a regular routine so that you can practice as smartly, efficiently, and productively as possible.

I ask my students to consider the two major objectives of practice: maintenance and development. Maintenance practice allows you to stay in good playing condition and sustains your current level of play by keeping your muscles, tendons, ligaments, strength, endurance, tone, and touch in performance shape. Developmental practice is what you do to improve on your existing skills and to add new ones.

On days when I can practice for only thirty minutes or less, I work on maintaining and maybe slightly improving my current skill level. But it's during longer practice sessions—ninety minutes or more—that you really grow as a player. To develop rapid growth, you should practice for

at least three to four hours a day, six days a week, with the minimum being two hours a day, five days a week.

### The Cross-Training Method

To get the most out of your practice time, you should work on each of the following five categories every day: technique, styles, improvisation and musicality, reading, and "other."

**Technique** refers to the physical and musical ability to execute the ideas that you hear, imagine, or would like to imitate, synthesize, or create. Specific things to work on in this category include control, accuracy, sticking patterns, accents, hand/foot coordination, and brush technique.

**The styles category** involves studying, learning, listening to, and practicing all styles and genres of drumming and music—rock, funk, jazz, metal, Afro-Cuban, Brazilian, drum 'n' bass, etc. Don't limit your potential by referring to yourself

## ESSENTIAL PRACTICE TIPS

- 1. Be sure to listen. It's one of the most important ways of learning the drums and developing your own voice.** Listen to recordings of the greats to understand the drums' role and rich tradition. Listen to the musicians you're playing with, to ensure you're communicating effectively, and to the music you're playing, so you know its form and structure. And record and listen to yourself playing so you can hear what sounds good—and what doesn't—as you develop your personal style.
- 2. The drum pad can be a valuable tool for improving certain aspects of your playing,** but you should try to spend most of your time on the drums, especially when you're working on skills where musicality, touch, tone, timbre, feel, balance, and dynamics are essential. When you do practice on the pad, keep your feet moving. Those muscles need maintenance and development too.
- 3. Contextualize.** You need to practice and study in a musical setting whenever possible. For example, when you're working on a funk groove, you should try to do so with a band or a bass player, or at least with high-quality play-along recordings or CDs by your favorite bands. If you have no option but to practice alone, sing or hum a melody or bass line while you practice.
- 4. Practice at many different tempos, to stretch your comfort zone and to recognize that different tempos require different playing approaches.**
- 5. Wear ear protection, and take breaks frequently to give your hearing a rest.** Your ears will become fatigued long before your hands.
- 6. Plan your practice routine carefully and change it up every couple of weeks to avoid working on the same thing for too long, which may slow your development.** And remember to take breaks when you're trying to achieve a particularly difficult goal. When you get back to work, you may be surprised to see that you've made real progress.
- 7. Good practice sessions should be both fun and frustrating.** Fun because you're playing the drums, and frustrating because you're working on things you don't do well—yet. Always practice with purpose and a goal, and seek out the advice of a good teacher when necessary.
- 8. Practice every day, even if it's just for a short while.**
- 9. Concentrate and focus while you practice, and eliminate distractions (television, cell phones, etc.).** You'll develop much faster, and improved concentration and focus will come in handy when you perform as well.
- 10. Be patient.** Becoming the drummer you want to be requires hard work, and drumming skills develop over many years—a lifetime, in fact.

only as a rock drummer or a jazz drummer: You're a *drummer*. Studying rock styles will inform and influence your jazz playing, learning jazz will expand your Afro-Cuban vocabulary, and so on. You can develop a unique voice by exploring and fusing many styles, regardless of what your primary type of playing may be.

**Improvisation and musicality: Every time you play the drums, you're improvising.**

It may not be in an extended solo, but whenever you're at the kit you're making countless spontaneous decisions

about how and what to play, and those decisions are made with more conviction when you practice improvisation and interpretation. There isn't a single way to play something; there are many. So be creative and trust your imagination. Other musical concepts that fall into this category include improving feel, touch, tone, and balance between sounds. Be sure to pay as much attention to *how* you're playing as you do to *what* you're playing.

**Reading includes sight-reading charts as well as poring over snare drum/drumset literature.** Good reading skills are cultivated by recognizing basic rhythmic patterns—quarters, 8ths, 16ths, and triplets. Depending on your career goals, your ability to read a drum chart accurately—and to play it musically the first time you see it—may be critical to your future success. It's certainly a good skill for all of us to have, as it enables us to think and express our ideas visually. There are many ways to dramatically improve this skill. Practice reading pieces written for solo drumset, complex single-line rhythms, snare drum etudes (not exercises), transcriptions of grooves and solos, and longer excerpts from various method books.

**The "other" category focuses on ways to gain skills and knowledge without having the sticks in your hands.** Examples include reading *MD*, practicing and experimenting with various tuning methods, transcribing recorded performances of grooves and solos, watching drum DVDs, writing music for snare drum or drumset, reading biographies of famous drummers and musicians, listening to CDs, and even checking out drum manufacturers' Web sites.

**The Practice Chart**

During your practice sessions, you should move between each of the five categories above, spending about the same amount of time on each one. To organize your time, create a master list of things you want to learn or improve. Write the categories across the top of the page so that you have five columns. In each column, include everything you want to work on in that category. The lists should be

**PRACTICE CHART**

TECHNIQUE	STYLES	MUSICALITY/IMPROV	READING/LITERATURE	OTHER

fairly long. And be sure to prioritize—at the top, include topics that need the most work or that you'd like to develop quickly. Your list will change frequently as you discover new concepts to work on.

Once you have a complete list, create a table that looks like the chart above. Write our five categories across the top of the page, with four blocks underneath each one. Fill in each block with an item from your master list that fits in that category.

**Put It Into Practice**

Now you're ready to start your session. Each topic, or block, should be practiced for at least twenty but no more than thirty minutes. When you've finished practicing one concept, move directly to the block in the next category. In other words, after practicing technique block #1, move directly to styles block #1. Continue across the page until you've finished the reading/literature category. Then go down to technique block #2. Note: I usually skip over the "other" category until I've put down the sticks, whether I'm taking a break, riding the train to work, or relaxing late at night.

Each day's practice session should start where you left off the day before. When you get to the bottom of the page, return to the top. Keep practicing the items in these blocks until you notice some improvement. Then create another blank practice chart and fill in the blocks either with items from the last sheet to continue working on or with some new items. Depending on how much time you spend practicing, each chart should last between two and four weeks. Make sure you date and save each routine so that you can track your progress.



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