

# Cross-training

## A System for Improving Your Practice and Playing

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Most drummers practice regularly and put in enough time to be able to realize measurable results. Often these results are slow in coming, however. Why is this? Most often, the answer either is they are not practicing enough or they are not practicing correctly. I really cannot help you find more time to practice. I can, however, help you improve your practice sessions, regardless of how long they are, so that you can achieve desired results.

To help you get the most out of your practice, I would like to share a practice method, called *cross-training*, which I have developed from working with hundreds of students through the years. Cross-training, as applied to drumming, entails rotating your practice topics through several general categories, which reinforce each other to develop your overall ability. Actually, some of what I outline here may also help you find some “hidden time” by showing you ways you can “practice” and improve your drumming without having sticks in your hands.

First, let’s talk a little about practice in general. Whether you are practicing two hours a week or eight hours a day, it is important to set goals and stick to a regular routine so that you can practice as smart, as efficient, and as productive as possible.

I ask my students to consider the two main types of practice, *maintenance* and *development*. Maintenance practice sustains your current level of play by keeping your muscles, tendons, ligaments, strength, endurance, tone, and touch in performance shape. Developmental practice involves increasing and honing your existing skills, while adding new ones in all areas.

There are some days when I can only practice at most 30 minutes; on those days I focus on maintaining and slightly improving my current skill level. Longer practice sessions (i.e., at least 90 minutes), however, really enable you to grow as a player. I advise my university students majoring in drum set to practice at least three to four hours per day, six days per week in order to develop rapid growth (two hours per day, five days a week being the minimum). Of course, their lives are filled with many academic and extracurricular demands, so even this minimum can be pretty difficult at times.

Time, however, is not the most important element in a practice routine; having a clear set of goals and the discipline to follow a carefully laid out

plan is. Regardless of how little or much time you put in, cross-training should work for you. Here is the *what* and the *how* of the cross-training drumming practice system.

First, the *what*: I ask my students to practice each of the following five different areas or categories of drumming, everyday: Technique, Styles, Improvisation/Musicality, Reading, and "Other." These five categories of things to practice are essential, meaning they're all necessary in order to develop your drumming abilities. Let's define them:

**Technique** – Technique represents the physical and musical ability to accurately execute the ideas that you hear, imagine, imitate, synthesize, and create. Specific things to work on in the Technique category include control, accuracy, fluency with stickings, accents, execution, hand/feet coordination, and brush technique.

**Styles** – This involves studying, learning, listening to, and practicing all styles and genres of drumming and music (e.g., rock, funk, jazz, metal, Afro-Cuban, Brazilian, Drum and Bass, etc.). Do not limit yourself by defining yourself as a rock drummer or jazz drummer; you are a *drummer*. Practicing various styles is a perfect example of cross-training; your rock playing informs and influences your jazz playing, which does the same for your Afro-Cuban playing, and so on. You develop a unique voice by studying and fusing many styles, regardless of what your primary style of playing may be.

**Improvisation and Musicality** – Every time you play the drums, you are improvising. You are making countless spontaneous decisions about how to play and what to play, and those decisions are made better by practicing improvisation and interpretation. There is not just one way to play anything; there are many. Be creative and trust your imagination. Some other musical things to work on and experiment with here include feel, touch, tone, and balance between sounds. Pay as much attention to *how* you are playing as to *what* you are playing.

**Reading** – There are two main types of reading, sight reading and literature. Sight reading skills are all about recognition and repetition, or seeing and repeating (playing and singing) those basic rhythms that tend to show up most often in parts that we are asked to read, namely, quarters, 8<sup>ths</sup>, 16<sup>ths</sup>, and some triplets. Depending on your career goals, your ability to read a drum part or chart accurately and to play it musically the first time you see it, may be critical to your future success. At least, sight reading is a good skill for all to have, as it enables us to think and express our ideas in a visual way, similar to how we speak and read language. There are many

ways to improve this skill dramatically. Practicing and reading *drum literature* includes working on various things, such as pieces written for drum set, complex single-line rhythms, music for snare drum (not exercises), transcriptions of grooves and solos, and some drum method books. Reading music opens a window to a deeper understanding of music and rhythm, giving us the knowledge to see, to know, and to think about traditional and historic drumming, as well as the next rhythmic frontier you'll explore.

**"Other"** comprises all of the things you do to gain additional skills and knowledge *without* the sticks in your hands. For example, you can read *MD*, practice and experiment with various tuning methods, transcribe recorded performances of grooves and solos, watch drum DVDs, write a piece of music for snare drum or drum set, read biographies of famous drummers and musicians, listen, listen, and listen some more, and even read equipment brochures and Web sites. It is amazing how much you can learn about sound and materials in this manner and how important those elements are to your own drumming and musical voice.

And now, the *how* of cross-training: The cross-training practice system requires that you move between each of these five categories during every practice session, and that you spend about the same amount of time in each one. Let's chart out a practice routine or schedule and you will see what I mean.

First, take a piece of paper, or create a digital document on your computer. This will be your Master List of things you want learn to do or do better through practice. List the five categories next to each other across the top of the page, drawing lines down the length of the page to separate each category and to create five columns. Place in each column all of the things in that category that you need or want to work on; each list should be fairly long. Try to prioritize your list by putting at the top those things that need the most work or those that you need to develop quickly due to some kind of approaching deadline (e.g., an upcoming concert or recording). Know that this list will constantly have items moving on and off; for me, things that I need to work on almost never come off!

Next, take a look at the example form below and try to make one like it, or go to the *MD* Web site and download the one available there.

Drum Practice Schedule		Date:		
Technique	Styles	Musicality/Improv	Reading/Literature	Other

Place in each box the item in that category you want to practice. Practice that for a minimum of 20 minutes, and a maximum of 30 minutes, then move to the next box in that row, before moving to the next row. The 'Other' category is intended for items that you don't need the sticks in your hands to work on (transcribing, research, tuning, etc.), so skip that category until a later time. Start the next day's practice where you left off. When you've gotten to the bottom of the page, go back and start again. After a few weeks, build a new practice program made up of things from your last routine that you want to continue to work on, along with some new items.

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You will see our five categories listed across the top of the page with four blocks underneath each one. Simply fill in each block with a master list item that you want to develop or maintain in that category.

Now you are ready to start your session! Each item, or block, should be practiced at least 20 but no more than 30 minutes at a time, according to the cross-training system. When you have finished practicing that item, move directly to the block in the same row in the next category and practice that item. In other words, after practicing for 20 minutes in Technique block #1, move directly to Styles block #1. Continue across the page until you have finished practicing in the Reading/Literature category and then go to Technique block #2.

You are probably asking, "What about the 'Other' category?" I usually skip over the Other category until I have finished the physical parts of my practice session and have put down the sticks, perhaps to take a break or to do these things late at night or while riding the train to work.

When you have finished practicing for that day, start the next day where you left off. When you get to the bottom of the page, return back to the top. Keep practicing the items in the blocks, in order, until you start to notice some satisfactory improvement. Then get out another blank practice form and fill in the blocks with some items from the last sheet that you want to continue working on or with some new items from your Master List. Depending on how much time you practice, each form (illustrating your practice routine) should last between two and four weeks. Make sure you

date and save each routine so that you can track your progress and maintain a record of what you have practiced.

Cross-training for drums is a flexible method that you can tailor to fit your needs. Feel free to use this system exactly as I have described it here or adapt it to your personal needs. Just remember, the key concepts are rotation of skills and devoting equal time to each item in each category.

### **Revisiting Practice**

Here are a few other assorted, but important, things I'd like to say on the subject of practice and learning:

**Make sure you listen.** Listen in three ways—to recordings of other drummers and musicians, to the musicians you are playing with, *and* to yourself. Drumming is an aural (sound and listening) language and tradition that requires some imitating and parodying of other drummers and musicians who have passed this way before and others who are doing different things now. In fact, listening is one of the most important ways of knowing the role of drums and in learning how to play. Also, listening to the musicians with whom you are playing is crucial to playing accurately and musically, to making music together, and to communicating with each other. Lastly, make sure you do not forget to listen to yourself. Every drummer who has been recorded knows what a humbling experience it is to listen to recordings of your own playing. Often, you find that something you have played does not at all sound how you thought it would. It is through the process of recording and listening to yourself play that you develop your own sense of what sounds good and how you want to play. This is referred to as developing numerous "listening perspectives." Record yourself by whatever means you can, and as often as you can; record yourself when practicing alone and especially when playing with others.

### **There are no professional "padders," only professional drummers.**

The drum pad can be an extremely valuable tool for use in developing certain aspects of your playing. I never have seen a saxophonist practicing all day on some plastic model of a sax, or a pianist practicing on a drawing of a piano! Use the pad as a tool; it is not a drum nor is it a musical instrument. Spend most of your time on the drums, especially when working on Styles and Improvisation, where musicality, touch, tone, timbre, balance, and dynamics are essential. But, when you do practice on the pad, especially when practicing Technique, make sure you keep your feet moving; those muscles need maintenance and development, too.

**Contextualize.** Contextualize is a big word that just means to practice and study in a musical context whenever possible. When practicing your jazz

time, a funk groove, or a Songo, you should try to do so with a band, with a bass player (or chordal instrument), with high-quality, play-along recordings, or with full CD recordings of groups. Not all of these options are ideal, but they are preferable to playing by yourself and out of a musical context. At very least, sing or hum a melody or bass line as you work on relevant items in your practice routine. The same holds true with practicing improvisation, independence, and comping (accompaniment). You also may use the metronome as a tool when necessary but not all of the time.

Although a metronome may help with certain things, it may not be your best tool in developing musicality or feel. Practice whenever possible with other musicians or recordings; this is what I mean by contextualization. The goal is to play drums to music and with musicians whenever possible. This will also help you to hear and to intuit (i.e., to understand and know by hearing) song form and musical structure. The more music you listen to and play to, the more you can hear and understand your role in that context. Always try to remember, the goal is to play drums to music and with musicians, so try to practice that way as much as possible and wherever appropriate.

**Practice at many different tempos (tempi).** The things that sound and feel good to play at 90 beats per minute will probably not sound as good at 200 beats per minute. The opposite also is true. Fast tempos are not medium tempos played faster; they are *different* tempos with different use of notes and space. It is important that you practice everything through a range of tempos that are appropriate to that style.

**Practice with purpose, and take lessons.** If you want to become a better drummer, make sure you are practicing things that will develop new skills and abilities (development practice). You must stretch to develop new skills constantly throughout your drumming life, and spend a lot of time repeating and practicing those new things. And always seek out the advice of a great teacher - especially whether you're a beginner, or a professional, commit to being a lifelong learner.

Now let me leave you with the **ten practice tips** I give my students:

- 1) Wear ear protection when possible and appropriate to what you are practicing, and try to practice at volumes that are tolerable, taking breaks frequently to give your ears a rest. Your ears will become fatigued long before your hands.
- 2) Plan your practice routine carefully and change it up every couple weeks to avoid practice ruts. Give some items a break. Avoid practicing them for a couple weeks; then come back to them. You may be surprised to see that these skills actually have improved (incidentally, this is one of the benefits of cross-training).

- 3) Good practice sessions should be both fun and frustrating--fun because you are playing the drums and frustrating because you are working on things you do not do well. Practicing correctly is a humbling experience.
- 4) Try to practice every day, even if it's just for a short while.
- 5) Concentrate and focus while you practice, and eliminate distractions (television, cell phones, etc.). You'll learn and develop much faster. Eliminating distractions while practicing will help to increase your focus and concentration while performing.
- 6) Balance your longer practice sessions with both maintenance and developmental activities.
- 7) Be realistic and honest. Make sure that most of the things you practice will have measurable results *on the drum set*. In other words, if you really want to develop your feel and sensitivity, then only practicing singles and doubles fast and loud may not yield the results you want.
- 8) PRACTICE MAKES PERMANENT. Whatever you practice is where you will improve; if you want to improve at something, then practice it. Something you have never practiced is unlikely to appear magically in your playing during a major concert. Practice smart to play better.
- 9) Remember that the goal is not to become a better "practicer". The goal is the drum set, and to become a better drummer. This practice system is designed to achieve that result. As a good friend of mine once told me, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing"...it may sound funny, but I believe there's wisdom there.
- 10) BE PATIENT. Practice is hard and becoming the drummer you want to be is very difficult. Drumming skills develop over many years—a lifetime, in fact. And remember to try to have fun doing it; it is probably why we all started playing drums in the first place. ☺

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