

TAKING ON THE PRACTICE MONSTER by Ron Kaye

The more you practice, with proper techniques and habits, the better you will get at playing the drums. If you understand some foundational concepts of practice, you can improve your playing ability exponentially. However, many people view practice as a necessary evil or “Monster” to whom you have to pay homage to get what you want. The fact is practice does not have to be a task which is avoided or neglected and it can, in fact, be mastered.

The first step in taking on the “Monster” has to do with facing some facts, head on, and making a commitment to be the “Master” and not the “Slave” in the relationship with your instrument. So let’s take a moment and face some facts.

· Fact #1 : MUSIC IS MATH AND LEARNING AN INSTRUMENT IS A NUMBERS GAME.

Music is mathematically based and contains all the order and structure found in the world of math. I believe this is the reason that studying music helps improve math skills and the analytical and critical thinking skills which it is known for producing. Therefore, the process of learning to play a musical instrument involves rules, structure, order, fine motor skills, and muscle memory. To put it another way, controlling your hands, feet, fingers, legs, etc. (according to some governing rules) by using your mind in a manner that makes the response more of instinct than intellectual gymnastics. The result is being able to play the drums from your heart and soul and not your head.

I like to describe the process of learning an instrument from an anatomic point of view. The human mind often carries out calculation based on input from information received from the nerve endings in our body, often without our being aware. When we walk, for example, our minds predetermine the distance between each step (our stride) and we step that distance on a regular basis without having to measure and calculate that distance every time we step - it’s automatic. It’s this type of automatic calculation that takes place during practice; our hands and feet provide information, via repetitions, which helps form the basis for muscle memory. This muscle memory governs the use of a drummer’s hands, feet, legs, etc. enabling him/her to focus on playing emotively.

Now, for a practical application: Let’s say, hypothetically, that it takes 1500 repetitions to execute a clean 5 stroke roll. As you perform repetitions, your body provides your brain with enough information to calculate exactly what it takes to perform that 5 stroke cleanly (i.e. what muscle fibers to use, for how long, in what order, exerting a determined amount of pressure at a precise time, etc.). After your mind receives the correct amount of information, the skill can be performed repeatedly with precision. Therefore, if you perform five “5 stroke rolls” per day, and it takes 1500 repetitions to gain that skill,

how long will it take you to develop that particular rudiment? Now, what if you performed **three hundred** 5 stroke rolls per day, how long would it take? You see, the more information you provide your mind, via repetitions, the sooner you get the skill. Therefore, practice can be directly proportionate to skills; so be patient and “Do the Numbers.” Instead of focusing on gaining the skill with the fewest repetitions and frustrating yourself, be patient and persistent and you will be rewarded with excellent results.

FACT #2: PROFESSIONAL DRUMMERS MAKE GREAT PLAYING LOOK EASY, AND THEY STILL PRACTICE.

Think of one of the best drummers you have ever seen/heard; isn't it amazing how effortlessly they make great playing look? The fact is you are seeing the fruit of years of persistent hard work and thousands of hours of practice. Yeah, believe it or not those drummers on MTV didn't just pick the instrument up a few weeks ago; many of them have spent a lifetime perfecting their craft.

Should you expect to play like Neil Peart in a matter of weeks? Let's take a look at this example of arguably one of the best drummers in the world today. After 30yrs. of extremely successful drumming, setting all kinds of historic benchmarks in drumming, what did Neal Peart decide to do? Take drum lessons! That's right, after one of the most successful careers in music, he decided he might be able to improve even more by taking drum lessons. The example speaks for itself, but let me say that one of Mr. Peart's strengths is the ability to humbly recognize he could still improve his playing.

FACT #3: EVERYONE HAS A MEASURE OF NATURAL ABILITY, PRACTICE REFINES AND PERFECTS IT.

Some folks are just born “rhythm machines;” they make full use of the abundance of natural ability with which they were born. Drummers such as Dennis Chambers, it seems, were created to excel on the drums. In fact, when I think of natural born drummers, Dennis Chambers is the first on my list. However, it is important to remember that those born with this incredible natural ability are few and far between, and secondly, even Dennis Chambers spends (and has spent) thousands of hours perfecting his skills through practice. The majority of drummers in the world are more likely to have less natural ability (myself included) and as a result have to practice very diligently to perfect their skills. Everyone can benefit from practice!

Now that we have looked briefly at some of the foundational facts of practicing, allow me to provide you with some time-tested weapons to decimate the practice monster.

WEAPON #1: PRACTICE EVERY DAY, NOT FOR HOURS ONE DAY PER WEEK

It has often been thought that if you practice, let's say for, three hours one day per week that you will really do better than, maybe, fifteen minutes every day; in reality the opposite is true. Scientific studies and perhaps your own experience have proved that the knowledge and skill gained in last minute "marathon" studying tends to yield short term memory. Whereas, studying (practicing) everyday for brief periods of time tends to yield long term memory. A really good example of this is studying for a test in school; if you study over a period of days and weeks, you tend to do well on the test and even weeks later can recall the correct answers. However, if you "cram for the test" or pull an "all-nighter" you may score decent on the test, but a week later you can't recall half of what you studied. Our minds require regular, periodic, reinforcement of knowledge to gain long term. When it comes to practice, reinforcement every day is the very best method, even if you can only practice for 15 minutes a day.

WEAPON #2: A WORKABLE GUIDELINE FOR YOUR PRACTICE SESSIONS

As a general rule your daily practice time is determined by several factors. First, how much natural ability do you possess? If you are truly gifted, you may require slightly less practice per session than an average individual. You might gain skill easier and quicker than most folks, however, don't be fooled into thinking you can just breeze through and not challenge yourself. If you are not challenged in your practice session, you are missing the point. If you are slightly below average in coordination or focus, you may require longer practice sessions.

Secondly, what are your playing goals? Are you striving to get the absolute best you can get out of your drumming? Or do you just desire to be able to get by on the drums? Do you want to be a professional drummer or gain a certain position in a particular group? Then you need to be willing to spend some extra time in each daily session. It is my hope that if you are pursuing drumming skills, you would not settle for anything less than the very best you can get, otherwise this article will be a little value to you.

Thirdly, what level of playing ability do you have right now. You may be just beginning or a seasoned pro looking for a way to keep growing as a musician. Some advanced concepts and skills in drumming require more time and effort than others, so your current playing ability is an important factor.

If you are an average person just beginning to play the drums a good rule of thumb concerning practice is to work a minimum of 1/2 hour per day, six days per week. If you happen to miss a practice session, you can double up and do an hour the next day. The objective here is to get in about 2 1/2 hours of practice, evenly distributed throughout the week. If you are an intermediate or advanced drummer, than your daily practice session should be a minimum of 1 to 2 hours per day. After many years of teaching and playing the drums, I have found that this standard of minimum practice is a fantastic barometer as to which students will succeed and which ones will either require more time to figure it out or maybe even give up.

WEAPON #3: UTILIZE SUPPLEMENTAL PRACTICE METHODS

Supplemental practice is not a substitute for your regular daily practice, rather it is practicing at times when you are doing something else such as watching TV or sitting idle while you wait for something. This approach to practice is extremely effective for learning the rudiments or double drumming techniques. You see, while you are wasting time watching TV, you could be working your drumming skills. I recommend taking a practice pad with you to the couch or your favorite chair so you can work those drumming skills while you are relaxing. Remember “Practice is a numbers game - the more reps you do the faster you get the results.” If you don’t have a practice pad use a book or a magazine to drum on. And for those of you with people in the room who are sensitive to noise, use a pillow. The bottom line is that you can gain extremely valuable practice and reps while you are just “vegging out.” If you work at a desk all day or are in school on a break, try quietly working your feet. The bottom line is if you utilize supplemental practice times, you will in all actuality be adding more practice and more skills at a quicker pace than you would if you just practiced at your regular practice time.

WEAPON #4: MAKE A COMMITMENT AND STICK WITH IT

In order for any practice routine to pay off, you must make a commitment to yourself and then see it through. When you are learning an instrument, you will inevitably go through the “Cycle of Hills and Valleys.” In other words, you will find times where you are really motivated and there will be times of discouragement. Without striving to keep your commitment alive, you will be vulnerable to giving up when things get tough. I always advise people to make at least a 6 month to 1 year commitment to their drumming, because in that period of time you will have experienced that cycle several times and then you can make an informed decision as to your ability/desire to play the drums. It usually works like this; in the beginning the student is really psyched about learning to play the drums and practice isn’t too much of a problem. Then after a few weeks they realize that there is some actual “work” involved in learning the drums. *[This is also the point where some of their less knowledgeable peers inform them that they never took lessons or practiced and they turned out all right. At this point it is advisable to take a good look at all the “Drummer Jokes” on the internet. By and large, the majority of musician jokes in the world are about drummers and their lack of musicianship, intelligence, or timing. Why do you suppose that is? Could it be there are plenty of examples to support the basis for those jokes?]* The pressure here to give up can be intense, but if you are committed to reach your goals, you will persevere. After a short period of consistent practice in the wake of this episode, you will start to realize some of the rewards of your hard work and you will start improving dramatically. And after a period of time you hit another “valley” and you get discouraged and lack motivation. A bit more work and you are right back out of the valley and on your way to the mountaintop once again. And so goes the cycle of work and rewards in the life of a music student, but each time you make it through the cycle, the rewards get richer and more rewarding. Remember it is well worth the journey, not everyone is a good drummer - some folks give up!

WEAPON #5: TIE YOUR PRACTICE TIME TO SOMETHING YOU ALREADY DO ON A DAILY BASIS

Regular practice is best when it is daily and at the same times each day. The object here is to establish a daily practice routine. By linking your practice time to a daily event that is already in place, you make it easier to remember to practice. For example, let's say you eat dinner at 5 p.m. every day. If you make 5:30p.m. your practice time then your routine soon becomes dinner, then practice. On the other hand if you wait until you get around to practice, chances are you won't get to practice very often; something will always come up. The new thing in your routine is practice; it has to replace something else that you did during that time. When people tell me they didn't practice, I ask them, "Did you watch any TV, spend time on the phone, play video games, etc.? Where did you think that practice time was going to come from?" It comes down to time management and commitment.

WEAPON #6: BECOME MENTALLY INVOLVED WITH YOUR PRACTICE

Recognize, if you will, that it is possible to practice every day for hours and get very little in the way of benefits. The reason for this tragedy is due to not being mentally active and involved with your practice. To get the most out of your practice time, you must remain focused and motivated to strive for improvement. What I mean by being mentally active in your practice is to not just go through the motions, but actively think about what you are doing and understanding what it is you are trying to accomplish (i.e. where you are in regards to your goal, and what you need to do to reach your objective). The key is to challenge yourself with the task at hand and make the journey enjoyable. Once you really start working in your practice session, you will begin to enjoy the challenge and the progress.

WEAPON #7: USE A METRONOME

The number one job of any drummer is keeping steady time; if you don't keep time well, you won't be much of a drummer. With this fact in mind, no other tool around can benefit a drummer than a metronome. The metronome clicks at a near perfect rate of speed, if you learn to work with the metronome, you can develop a sense of what is steady time. In addition, you can develop critical listening skills that will let you know if you are playing too fast or too slow. Once you recognize your problem, you can correct it. Now, the purpose of the metronome is to "set your inner clock" so to speak. Once you are able to play steady time with a metronome, you can begin to develop your skill in playing in time without the metronome. In essence, the idea is not to be metronome dependent, but rather to develop that keen sense of timing you need to play time accurately. Once you can play in time accurately, then you can tweak your skills to perform timing adjustments that will "fatten the pocket." To fatten the pocket is playing a voice or voices of the drum kit ever so slightly behind the time to give the music more of a soulful feel. In the same manner you can speed up a particular voice of the drum kit,

while keeping the other voices on time, and give the music a driving feel without losing the time. These slight adjustments of time really add power to the groove, but can only be accomplished if you are able to play steady time and control your feet and hands.

WEAPON #8: SET GOALS

Let's face it, without setting goals there is nothing to measure your progress. The process is one of setting realistic short-term and long-term goals. If you are working on a certain technique, break it down into steps - analyze the task and gradually gain the skills you need. If you are learning a piece of written music and you can't play it all the way through, break it down. Start with the measure that is tripping you up. Play that particular measure over and over until you get it smooth and natural. Once you get the measure down start from the beginning and play through the trouble spot. If you get tripped up again break it down to each measure then hook the measures together in succession and play them until they are smooth and natural. Once you get a complete line of music down, start again from the beginning. The concept is to divide and conquer, then put it together and conquer it again.

WEAPON #9: PLAY IN FRONT OF OTHER PEOPLE

All this hard work shouldn't go unrewarded. If you are meeting your short-term goals, it's time to seek a little appreciation from someone who can give you an objective opinion on your progress. Sometimes it is very helpful to have benchmarks to measure your progress; performance can provide just such a benchmark. One of the great things about lessons is that you might be able to "show what you know" in a recital. After all, one of the greatest satisfactions you can get from studying music is sharing it with others. Go for it!

WEAPON #10: SEE ONE, DO ONE, TEACH ONE

There is an old military belief that the best way to learn something is to study it, work it, and then teach someone what you've learned. It works really well! In order to teach someone something, you have to know your subject matter, so when you are in the "see one" or "do one" phase you will really concentrate. In turn, when you are teaching a skill, you have the opportunity to look at it from another perspective and, perhaps, gain some additional insight. Therefore, I recommend that when you learn a

particular skill or concept that you seek out a friend and share with them what you've learned. This practice will benefit you and your audience - it's a win win situation! An added benefit of "see one, do one, teach one" is that the art of drumming is advanced as a whole.

So there you have it; practice can be fun, challenging, and rewarding. If you understand the fundamental concepts involved in practicing the "right way" and you utilize the weapons I have provided you, you can master the practice monster and enjoy your relationship with the drums. Remember there is nothing better than being able to play from your heart and soul on the coolest instrument in the world. So, be committed, work hard, enjoy the journey, and at the end of each practice session put on some good music and jam your heart out!

Ron Kaye is a professional music educator with over forty years of drumming experience that includes both private and public education. He is the owner and founder of Ron Kaye's Music Instruction in Pensacola, Florida which offers instruction in drums/percussion, piano, mandolin, guitar, bass, and voice. Ron is an educational endorser for ProMark Drumsticks, Meinl Cymbals, and Sunlite Drums. He is currently ranked as the ninth "Fastest Drummer in the World" and holds the record as the second man in history to play over 1000 single strokes in sixty seconds. A fierce advocate for music education, Ron is an active clinician providing music advocacy materials and ideas to area schoolteachers and students as well as the growing home school community and the World Wide Web. Ron regularly provides community service performances that benefit local charities. Ron has also released his solo CD, "Pursuing Excellence" in 2003, which has received rave reviews from musicians all over the world. For more information check out Ron's website at www.rkmusicinstruction.com.