

HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR PRACTICE SESSION

OR

GETTING RESULTS YOU'LL LOVE OUT OF SOMETHING YOU HATE

Practicing.....a word that can strike fear into the heart of even the most dedicated music student. World-renowned trumpeter Wynton Marsalis calls it "The Monster". Though we all love to play, many of us hate to practice. Still, in order to improve our playing over its current state, we **MUST** practice and practice regularly.

We must remember that practicing, like playing in a musical ensemble, throwing a football, or reading a book, is a learned skill. In order for it to be effective, we must learn to budget our time wisely and have the self-discipline to examine, critique and improve our own playing. This involves truly listening to what we play as well as knowing what and how to practice. Without this self-discipline, practice really will become a drudgery and noticeable results will be rare.

I have asked that each member of the band program contribute 20 minutes of their time to practicing their instrument each evening. Reaching goals is more important than hitting a time target during practice, but 20 minutes is a good start. Below is a breakdown of how to spend that 20 minutes of practice time so that results will be noticeable.

• WARMING-UP – THE FIRST 5 MINUTES

The most important part - this is the foundation of everything else you do.

DO THIS PART STANDING IN FRONT OF A MIRROR!!!!

Build from the center.

Start with the middle of your dynamic range with simple sticking patterns. The single-hand, single-sticking exercises we start with in class are a good beginning.

Focus on relaxation in all areas...natural and relaxed posture with smooth piston motion.

Check for proper grip and striking motion. Any excess stiffness or tightness will limit your technique in some way.

Eliminate **ALL** wasted motion in your stick technique.

Each motion should begin by moving downward to the head, not toward the ceiling.

LISTEN to what you produce

The sounds of each hand's tap should match exactly.

Aim to make each sound your best, each motion your cleanest and most precise.

Think about what you **WANT** to sound like and use your physical skills to help get you there.

It's sometimes good to relax for a minute or two after playing the warm-up. Shake it out!!

• TECHNIQUE – THE NEXT 5 MINUTES

Work various single- and double-stroke patterns or challenging technical exercises.

Isolate trouble spots.

Size doesn't matter - 2 notes or 20, pick out **ONLY** what needs work.

SPEED KILLS.

Practice a section only as quickly as you can perform is *correctly*.

One time through correctly, even very slowly, is far better than many times poorly.

Good players practice what they do poorly. Average players practice what they do well.

- **FIVE MINUTES IN THE MUSIC – WHERE IT ALL FITS TOGETHER**

LISTEN TO WHAT YOU PLAY.

Isolate larger trouble spots and put together larger chunks of music.

Don't ignore the TRUE music...dynamics, phrasing, articulations.

Make them happen just as surely as you would the correct stickings, rolls or rhythms.

Ask yourself frequently: "Does what I play reflect what's written on the page?"

A tape recorder is a great tool to answer this question honestly.

You must play AT LEAST what's written.

- **TAKE FIVE – ENJOY WHAT YOU DO**

Play through something you really like.

Maybe it's a pop tune or a section of the band music that you really enjoy.

Turn on the radio or put on a CD and improvise over the tunes.

DON'T DO THIS UNTIL ALL THE OTHER THINGS ARE DONE.

Enjoy your playing, but feel the sense of accomplishment that comes from having the self-discipline to practice properly and improve the best way each day.

- **OTHER THOUGHTS**

Though the framework of this practice schedule needs to stay in place, mix up what you do each day. This is particularly true if you do more than 20 minutes in a day.

Sticking patterns are always a good exercise.

They're even better if you use your imagination and experiment with how you play them.

Change articulations...add accents in "odd" places.

Challenge yourself by trying stickings and double-strokes in new patterns

Teach yourself a scale or rudiment.

Write in counting for difficult passages. This is a way of **diagnosing** a rhythm problem.

Look for connections between your technique exercises and your band music.

If you're clever, you will likely find ways to "teach" yourself some of the band music before you ever "work" it in your practice!

Listen to a pro.

CD recordings of professional artists are available in the FVHS Media Center. Check out a CD and put it on while you're doing homework one night. Absorb the sound quality and musicality.

Better yet, go hear a pro in person!

NOTHING replaces knowing what you SHOULD sound like.

PROBLEM-SOLVING 101

IDENTIFY

What is the problem?

DIAGNOSE

How do we solve the problem?

CORRECT

Fix the errors in small pieces.

ASSESSMENT

Is it better than it was before? Is it as good as I want it to be?

CONTEXT

How does this part fit into the bigger picture? (With the ensemble, rest of music)

Consider the BASIC elements of music performance:

PITCH	RHYTHM	ARTICULATION	DYNAMICS	TONE COLOR
AIR FLOW = ROLL/BOUNCES		EMBOUCHURE = GRIP		TECHNIQUE

Work ONE AT A TIME if necessary. What does this mean?

Rhythm - USE A METRONOME.

Write in counting.

Clap and count.

Tap on chest and "tah" the part.

Pitch - USE A TUNER OR PITCH PIPE. Don't forget about timpani...

Play one note at a time without rhythm.

Articulation

"Speak" the syllables off the instrument. "Dah-dah-dah".

"Tactile" exercises - Scrape the tip of your tongue. Tongue touch thumb.

Dynamics

Roll the first note of the phrase and hold it out. Play the dynamics as written while continuing to roll.

Technique

Finger the exercise slowly to "feel" the passage in your hands.

"Pillow talk" - Practice on a pillow. It takes away the "bounciness" of a pad or drum

and forces you to focus on your striking technique.

Air Flow

Tizzle. Is the hiss intense and supported by firm stomach muscles?

Breathing exercises = "In and outs". Lie on floor and place a book on your stomach. It will rise and fall if you breathe deeply. Roll a piece of paper, place it between your teeth and breathe deeply. Blow up a balloon.

The cold spot - Notice the cool spot on the top of your mouth when you breath deeply.

Paper pusher - Hold a piece of paper in one spot on the wall using your airstream.

Embouchure = Grip

Use a mirror. Sometimes what you can see is different than what you can feel.

Mentally "explain" the job of each part of the grip. What's firm and what's relaxed?