

The Practice of Practice

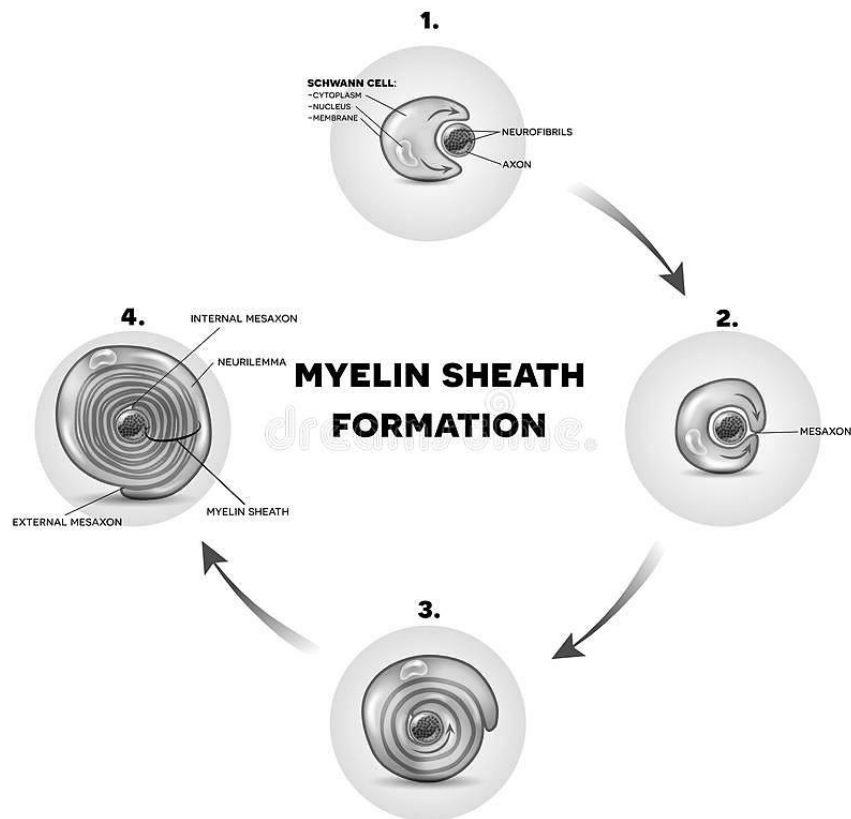
(Title inspired by Jonathan Harnum's book, "The Practice of Practice")

The Three Zones

- Playing zone: Use this zone in jam sessions, performances, and contests. No thinking, no judging, and no trying allowed.
- Practice zone: This zone is for focused practice only. In the practice zone, time is spent analyzing your skills, targeting problems areas, and using practice techniques to overcome difficult passages.
- Doodling: Doodling lives halfway between practice and playing. Doodling usually starts with playing, but morphs into practice, and back to playing frequently.

Myelin-The Key to Skill

- Every skill we perform has a chain of neurons devoted to it. When we practice, our brain pays attention and reinforces the neurons associated with our repeated movement by coating them with a substance called myelin.
- Repeated motion = more layers of myelin = better, faster, more efficient, more awesome.
- Myelin doesn't pay attention to what we meant to do, it only pays attention to what we do.
- Remember, every time you pick up your instrument you are building layers of myelin.



How Much to Practice and How Often

- A shorter, regular practice is more effective than marathon practice session once in a while. Tunes and techniques are learned through repetition, but your brains need time to process what we are doing.
- Learning comes from repetition, forgetting, and re-learning.
- Avoid “reverse practice”. This is where you play a tune or technique incorrectly, without pausing to correct mistakes. While it will be ok if you do this once in a while, habitual reverse practice should be avoided. Repeated reverse practice results in strong neural circuits, coated in many layers of myelin, ready to help you mess up that song quickly and efficiently.
- Five minutes of correct, focused practice is better than hours of incorrect practice. Focused practice brings us closer to our goal, and reverse practice take us in the opposite direction.

What to Practice

- The short answer? Anything! Stop procrastinating and practice anything at all.
- Make a list of your goals as a mandolin player. These goals may be things like:
 - Have a killer chop
 - Learn the tune “Brilliancy”
 - Learn how to solo on songs you don’t know
 - Play the chords to “Blackberry Blossom” better
- Make a short list of the most important goals. This should include short term and long term goals.
- Choose a short term goal, and break it down into individual skills. Practice each of the elements that make up the whole.
- Example: You are working on the first lick of “Brilliancy” and you find yourself missing strings with your pick, and are getting muted sound when you play the second fret of the A string.
 - First make a list of the skills involved:
 - Right hand picking pattern, left hand position shift, left hand fretting.
 - Step 1: Start with the right hand, and play open strings in the pattern used to play the lick. Don’t get in a hurry; slow motion practice is more effective than fast practice.
 - Step 2: Once you have mastered the right hand pattern at a slow tempo, practice fretting the second position notes.
 - Step 3: Practice the first position notes being careful to play the 2nd fret of the A string as perfectly as possible.
 - Step 4: Practice the notes just before and after the position shift, in slow motion.
 - Repeat steps 1-4 until mastery is reached. Remember the quote: “Try, fail, try again, fail better!”
 - Use the chaining method to smooth out the bumps. Repeat this several times a day until mastery is reached.

Nate’s definition of mastery: When you can play it perfectly and automatically, without thinking about it. You are watching your hands play and don’t have to concentrate to play perfectly.