

THE LOOP EXERCISE METHOD FOR FAST PROGRESS

by Pete Wernick

I'm proud to start a regular column here in the hallowed pages of Banjo Newsletter! I look forward to answering your questions on anything I can help you with.

To “get rolling”, I'd like to share with you the method I have used for years to iron out problems in my playing, in the shortest possible time.

The “loop” I refer to means taking a short segment of a piece and playing it repeatedly in rhythm without stopping. Using this method will help you tackle many different kinds of challenges, such as:

- * Cleaning up rough spots
- * Increasing speed
- * Memorizing
- * Improving tone and clarity
- * Developing finger muscle strength and coordination

Isolating and repeating a musical section that needs work has some important advantages compared with practicing an entire piece: First, it lets you work on one thing at a time, forcing you to concentrate on just that one thing without distraction. Second, hearing a short section repeatedly makes it easier to focus on the details within it that are actually responsible for the whole passage sounding faulty. When such spots are located, it's often possible to create a shorter repeating loop featuring just a single problem spot. Isolating each smallest possible problem, one by one, is an excellent way to clear up the whole.

Here's the “loop” method:

1. Troubleshoot. First step is to listen to a piece and look for problems. A recording device can help here by giving you a chance to hear yourself while you're not being distracted by all the effort that goes into the playing itself. As you listen to your playing, listen carefully for the *first tip-off that this music is not being made by a top pro player.* (This may seem like a hard standard to hold yourself to, but it will help you focus on whatever it is about your playing that is anything less than top notch.) Very possibly, you will hear a problem in the first line of the song: an unevenness, an unclarity, a scratchiness, etc. That is where to start.

2. Create a loop. In other words, determine a short section that includes one or more problems. By “short” I mean no more than two measures, or perhaps only one. It’s best to go with a section of exactly one or two measures, as that will allow the repetitions to come out in rhythm. Once you’ve played the section through, go back and *repeat it without hesitation, so the playing stays on beat*. There is your loop. Now, there can be problems jumping right from the end of the section to the beginning. Aside from the awkwardness of playing the section in such an unfamiliar way, a more important problem may be an incompatibility of the fingerings (right or left hand) between the two parts. For instance, if the section ends with a thumb note and also begins with a thumb note, one of the two will need to be changed or eliminated. Typically the last note of the phrase is less important than the first, and can be left out.

3. Slowly practice the loop to be sure it’s memorized. Don’t worry how slowly you need to play it, *just make sure the sequence of notes is correct*. Work on doing it without needing full powers of concentration. (In cases where the loop is being used for memorization, do this step till you’re satisfied it’s accessible to you easily whenever you try to call it up.) If you need to concentrate hard just to correctly play the loop, keep practicing it till it comes more easily. You need at least part of your mind free to enable you to exercise critical judgment as you play. This is necessary in the next steps.

4. Playing the loop at a comfortable speed, set your metronome to that speed and check yourself for timing irregularities. Be sure the first note of the loop, and all other notes that fall on beats (two per measure) are aligned with beats on the metronome. Get comfortable with the repetitions and start *concentrating on listening*.

5. Play the loop as slowly as you need to play it correctly. That is, if the passage is coming out sloppy in any way (unclearities, timing rushes or lags, etc.), play it more slowly and try to *avoid any mistakes. No mistakes!* This may turn out to be what seems quite slow, but understand that *perfecting the loop at slow speed is the pivotal step*. If you can’t play this section accurately at a slow speed, how could you expect to play well it at a challenging tempo? Here is where the bugs get ironed out. Repeat the loop steadily. Each time the problem spot comes around, listen for it and try to make the necessary correction. Listen for correct timing, smoothness, clarity and proper volume. Don’t let it rush or drag.

6. If a problem persists, determine the culprit. What finger is not doing its job right? (gets there late or not to the right place, or with not the proper force or coordination) The problem you hear is caused by the undertrained muscles control that finger. The solution to the problem is to *make that muscle or muscles do their job right*. The strength and/or flexibility and/or coordination they need is gained through practice, just like the muscles of an athlete or dancer. *Sheer repetition* will allow power and ease of movement to develop, resulting in better sounding notes. (A welcome benefit: As you condition finger muscles as a way of cleaning up certain licks, you'll find improvement in other areas of your playing which are controlled by those same muscles.)

7. Develop, if appropriate, a smaller loop exercise to focus even more specifically on a problem move. The idea is the same as when making the original loop: Concentrate on just the problem to save time and maximize focus. The loop may be just four notes, or a 1/2 measure, in length-- one repetition per beat. Use the same guides as given in step 2 to create this smaller loop, so that the move can be repeated smoothly and effortlessly. Now, *as before, memorize and smooth out this new, smaller loop, and determine how slowly you need to play it to get it right. Keep practicing it!* Whether working with the larger or the smaller loop, *make sure it sounds good*. If it doesn't, slow down and concentrate better. "Sounds good" means *as good as a pro player*. If it's not that good yet, repeat it while asking yourself just what aspect doesn't sound good enough. Try to fix it.

8. As the sound improves and stays consistently good, increase the speed. Watch for problems you would previously ironed out to recur. That will happen as you put the motions "under load", as by playing faster, or louder, or allowing your concentration to slacken. Your goal, ultimately, is *to be able to play this phrase at any speed, at any volume, without having to strain*. This could be a long term project, spanning years of development, but persistence will gradually win out.

9. As the problem section smoothes out, continually try it back in the context of the tune. Are the transitions in and out of the section smooth, or *do the problems recur?* Perhaps you can only do the loop when concentrating on just that section. It's harder to suddenly come up on a difficult section and breeze through it. If so, the transitions themselves need to be practiced loop-style.

10. Consider each problem solved when it consistently sounds good, even the first time you try to play the tune on any given day. *If you can't the problem is not fully solved.* A good sign is when you find yourself breezing through what used to be the problem area of a tune, confident that it will sound good. *Put yourself to the test* of playing it without looking, even when thinking of something else, faster than you would normally play it, etc.

11. Keep working on problems you spot in the piece. Working on several loops during your practice sessions will accomplish a lot in time – though it may take a long while to truly iron out all the bugs in a single piece. *When you're done, though, you'll have a lot to show, as the positive muscle training will carry over to many other parts of your playing.*

12. As you develop mastery of the technical execution of a piece, start working on the "something extra" aspects: accents, drive, flow, feeling, etc. As you play it *ask yourself* whether you're struggling with it, or are you relaxed. Are you playing mechanically or as though it means something? *Is this the very best you can make it sound?* Is there some way someone could make it sound better?

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