

Breaking the Speed Limit, Part 1

Exercises for Your Pick and Fret Hands



SHRED WITHOUT SPEED IS NOT SHRED AT ALL THAT said, we shredders don't play fast all the time; we just need to be able to when it's called for. And when we do [shred](#), it should feel comfortable and effortless. How do we attain this level of proficiency? Are there shortcuts? Well, yeah—sort of.

You've probably heard this advice: Start slowly and gradually increase your speed. Good idea. If you play something 100 times sloppily, your 101st attempt will probably be sloppy, too. But play something 100 times accurately, and the 101st time should be accurate, too. Eventually, however, this approach will bring you to a wall: you'll

become stuck at a disappointing top speed.

If you've ever hit one of these speed barriers, it may be because your pick hand's motion, which worked well at moderate speeds, just couldn't cut it at higher ones. But exactly which higher-speed motion works? Alas, you have no way of knowing until you actually reach those speeds. Enter

what I call *top-down* exercises. Instead of working up from lower speeds, for these exercises you jump in at the top of the speed range, to get the right feel, and then work *down* until you reach a tempo at which you can pick accurately. By practicing both top-down and bottom-up routines—that is, by hitting your speed limit from both directions—what used to be a brick wall becomes a stepping stone.

Play the chromatic (moving in half steps) exercise in **Fig. 1** with a [metronome](#), and gradually increase your speed until you reach your limit. Notice that your pick hand becomes tenser as you play faster. Once you've hit your max, write down the metronome marking.

Next, look at **Fig. 2**, a tremolo-picked single-string exercise based on the E harmonic minor scale (E-F#-G-A-B-C-D#). As indicated by the groups of three diagonal lines, pick each note repeatedly and as fast as possible. Use a medium to heavy pick, and play just on its tip, neither too loud nor too hard. For fast picking, I favor a wrist motion, or rotation of the forearm. Some players prefer elbow motion, while others (jazzers in particular) opt for finger/thumb. Experiment with all three approaches, and stick with whichever

works for you. Most players prefer to angle the side of the pick that is closest to the neck slightly downward, toward the floor, so that the pick crosses the strings at a bit of an angle; this helps prevent the pick from catching on the strings. Hold your pick with a little give, and make tiny adjustments whenever you notice any string-catching. Above all, make sure to use small pick motions.

For the following exercises, you'll want to slow down some, in the interest of synchronizing your fret and pick hands, but stick with your new pick-hand motion.

In **Fig. 3**, emphasize each fretted note slightly; that'll help with the synchronization. **Fig. 4** is another chromatic idea, this one on a single string, with position shifts. If your fret hand has any problems here, first try playing the example with hammer-ons and pull-offs and at a slower speed, until it's nice and even. Then, speed things up and add the picking. Finally, go back and play Fig. 1 as fast as possible, and check your speed with the metronome—I'll bet you're already playing faster.

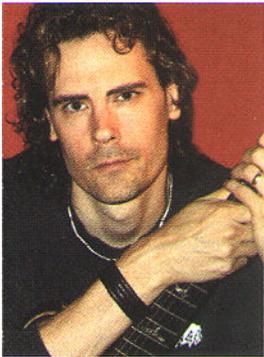


Fig. 1 Track 76

♩ = 100-200

Fig. 2 Track 77

♩ = 90

Fig. 3 Track 78

♩ = 144

Fig. 4 Track 79

♩ = 100-200