

Speed Bursts: A Caveat

For those who don't have right hand speed and are trying to get it, speed bursts can be seductive. Some years ago, I tried to increase my right hand alternation speed. Since I often see speed bursts recommended for developing speed, I worked at them. After only a short time, I was excited when I hit a burst at 184. I seemed well on the way to my goal of sustained fast alternation.

But the apparent quick success offered by speed bursts was a dead end. I soon found that I couldn't do extended fast alternation merely by stringing together a series of speed bursts. Over time, the reason became clear. Far too often, bursts rely on tension for speed. For a short burst, this isn't a problem—the burst is finished before the tension grinds us to a halt. But for longer passages, this tension has more time to gum up the machine.

So I've soured on speed bursts as a means to developing right hand speed. I now regard them as a potentially huge waste of time. Certainly they can be a false hope for those trying to develop fast alternation for extended passages.

Let's not toss the baby with the bath water. Speed bursts are a useful part of a guitarist's arsenal, provided we've a more nuanced understanding of their pros and cons.

For example, when playing a fast extended scale, I might fall behind at the beginning. But I can catch up further into the passage. When I fall behind, I almost unconsciously kick into a burst that brings me back to the beat. Obviously, falling behind is a flaw to be corrected. But in a real world situation, being able to slip in and out of a burst during an extended scale is a good corrective skill. And it's not only useful for correcting a lapse. Aligned with a subtle ear, slipping in and out of a burst can be a powerful means for shaping tempo and rhythm in a musical way. An obvious application is to snap off the end of a fast scale with a quick burst on the last few notes. An imaginative player can find other uses.

When working on right hand speed, the main advantage of speed bursts is psychological. Bursts can go a long way to convincing you that speed is possible. That's no small thing. If you've never hit alternation at, say 160, then you're unlikely to believe you can do it. A quick success with speed bursts can buck up your confidence. Having hit 160 in a short burst, you start to believe, and believing is essential to doing. After all, if you don't believe you can do something, then you're halfway to not doing it. For this alone, speed bursts can be a step in the right direction.

But you must clearly understand the limits of speed bursts. They're not a silver bullet. If you believe extended right hand speed is merely a rejiggering of speed bursts, then you're doomed to a future of hit or miss right hand alternation.