

# Mandolin Training Camp

Written & Illustrated by Bradley Laird

This book has a two-fold purpose. One purpose is to TRAIN THE MIND in the relationships and locations of notes on the fingerboard, to learn their sounds, and how they can be used to improvise. The second purpose is to provide a set of exercises to TRAIN THE BODY (the fingers, the hands, etc.) to play well and execute chosen notes with ease. Both purposes are accomplished simultaneously. Each exercise learned well will advance the student mentally and physically.

The book is a follow-up to my earlier publication "Mandolin Master Class." This book will make more sense and be easier to understand if you have studied the earlier book. If you have a basic understanding of music theory as it relates to the mandolin you should be able to use this book and gain plenty from it. But, this book will be most helpful when viewed as a sequel to the first book. Information about the "Mandolin Master Class" and other learning tools for mandolin players is available online at [www.mandouniversity.com](http://www.mandouniversity.com) or by contacting me at the address below.

This book is primarily oriented towards the bluegrass mandolin player though many of the techniques described apply universally to every fretted instrument. This book is designed to help all mandolin players achieve better technical proficiency on the instrument. As a tool for beginners, intermediate, and advanced players it presents a systematic approach to improvement.

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# Introduction

Nearly all good teachers and good players endorse the idea of playing exercises. Master composers like Bach wrote large numbers of etudes, which are exercises, for his students. Football stars don't just play football games. They train in the gym too! This book is your mandolin gymnasium. When you go to the gym you "workout." There is a reason it is called a "workout." It involves work! But, as any athlete will tell you, there is a feeling of exhilaration that comes after a good workout. Then you can go "play" and you will play better. Whatever your game is—golf, archery, bowling, or mandolin—you will enjoy the playing more if you commit to a regular exercise program. Some of these exercises are difficult. Some are pretty easy. When they are all easy they have accomplished their purpose.

Exercises work because they present difficult challenges that you must overcome. In a tune setting you might encounter "that difficult passage" once in the entire solo. An exercise will present difficult passages a lot more frequently. I admit that you can take those difficult sections of songs and isolate them and practice them with an "exercise mentality." That is a good thing to do. But, just practicing difficult parts of tunes is not a broad and planned approach to technical and mental improvement. No good athlete does just one particular exercise. The smart athlete engages in a regular, long-term, circuit of planned exercises. Musicians should too.

Incidentally, if you are a bluegrass "picker", start thinking of yourself as a "musician." Bluegrass players are some of the best musicians in the world. The instruments are not easy to master, the tempos can be wicked, and the rewards (in money, fame, and recognition) are few. There is a false image out in the world that somehow bluegrass "pickers" are not "real musicians." Dispel that myth, not by challenging someone when they make that erroneous assumption, but rather through self-improvement and learning.

Remember that treadmill you bought 5 years ago? Or was it a set of weights? Or was it that mandolin instruction book? Are you still using it? How many miles did you run on that treadmill? Owning a treadmill doesn't do anything, except clutter up the extra bedroom, unless you get on it everyday and run! This book is a useless bundle of paper unless you use it! And, like the treadmill, using it regularly and for a long, long time is the way to get the most benefit from it. (If you bought this book 5 years ago and are reading this sermon again and feeling guilty that you didn't really use it much there is no time like NOW to get back on the program.)

## **We Must Start Somewhere**

I think there are plenty of sources for learning songs, breaks and solos for the mandolin. Some very talented and diligent authors have prepared all sorts of good books full of tunes and solos to learn. You probably own a stack of them. I do. I have learned a lot from the "tune books" and "how to play the mandolin" books. But, here is the scenario that inevitably plays out each time I purchase one of these books:

I find the book. I think that if I buy the book I will be rocketed towards my goal of becoming a great mandolin player. I buy the book. I take it home and skim through it. I attempt to play a tune in it. I find a difficult spot and I try it a few times. Still I can't quite play what is written. I begin to think about what a rotten mandolin player I must be. I try the tune again. I can't quite do what is written. Not easily anyway. I turn the page and try another tune.

Oh, this tune is easier! I try some of it. The first measure seems really easy and I like the sound of it. The second measure is not too hard. I play measure one and two and think "this is cool" and then I try measure three. What? He thinks I am going to slide my third finger to the 15th fret? I try it. Can't do it. I turn the page again.

Surely I am not the only mandolin player who has had these kinds of experiences with books. After a few days of fooling around with the book and learning very little I find that the new book, which I just knew was going to turn me into the master mandolin player, has moved down in the pile and is soon forgotten. This sort of practicing behavior doesn't accomplish much. It screws with your head and makes you think you will never amount to much as a mandolin player.

Sure, once in a while I hang in there, really work at the difficult spots, maybe changing a note here and there to suit my inability, and actually learn the whole song or break. I might even whip it out at a jam session and try to play it. Usually I get it about half-right but feel I gained something from the effort. But, mostly I find songbooks full of tabbed out songs and breaks to be confusing and not very productive. I would guess that in my collection of songbooks there are well over 2,000 tunes. Yet, ask me to play the ones I learned right out of the book and I might hit you with a dozen or so.

## **Why Books Are So Hard to Learn From**

I have written quite a few tunes for the mandolin and I have observed that when I sit down and write a song the song always comes before the tab (or notation). It is more accurate to say that I thought up the tunes as opposed to saying I wrote them

As rapidly as you can play the open first string twice followed by the open fourth string played twice. (I chose this because it is something most of us don't often do and you probably will have trouble with it to make a point.) That high E twice then the low G twice, over and over. How fast can you do it?

If you can do it very slowly, good. As you speed up did you begin to hit some wrong strings? If you can't play it accurately at the speed you normally play "Salt Creek" then you have found an example of something that needs work and there are exercises that you can practice that will increase your speed and accuracy in playing the precise string you intend, when you intend to.

Here is the punch line of all of this:

**Practicing a good set of exercises will help  
you play EVERYTHING better.  
Practicing tunes will help  
you play SOME things better.**

## **Diet & Exercise**

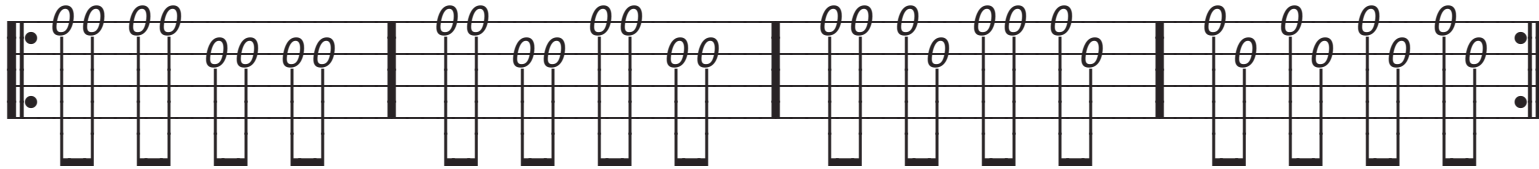
Practicing a song can also be an exercise of sorts. Probably most of us learned to play by learning a set of songs. And from what we learned in the songs we found we were able to play other songs that we had not yet practiced. So, in this way, the songs were serving as a vehicle for learning much as an "exercise" does. But, a planned program of exercise practice, exercises designed to expand your skills in many directions, will accomplish more than just practicing a stack of tunes and you will gain more from it.

The comparison of practicing tunes versus practicing exercises is similar to dieting. You can plan out a diet and follow it and it causes you to lose weight. Or you can just eat less. You lose weight either way. But, with the diet you have more predictable results. Same with exercises.

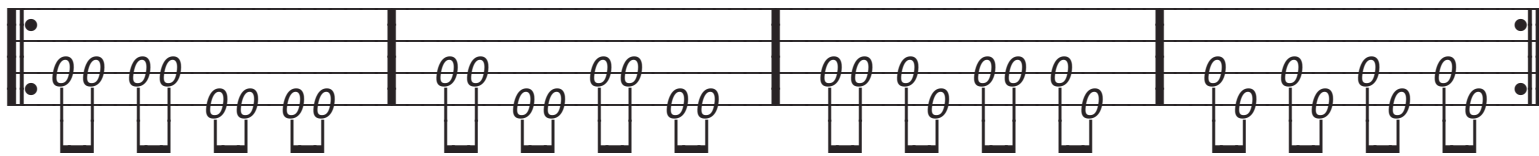
But, whether you are practicing songs or exercises (or both) you must follow your own plan or you will get mediocre results. Let's say that you and I both decide to go on the same weight loss diet. You make me a copy of it at work when the boss is out playing golf. We start on the same day. One month later you lost 10 pounds and I lost 2 pounds. Why? You followed the

# Right Hand Exercises

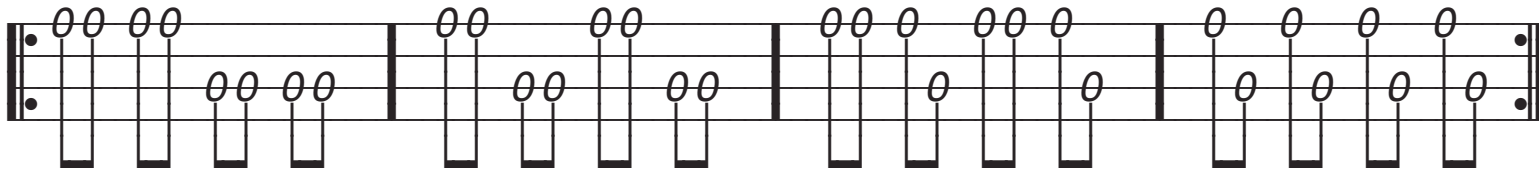
Exercise 0.1



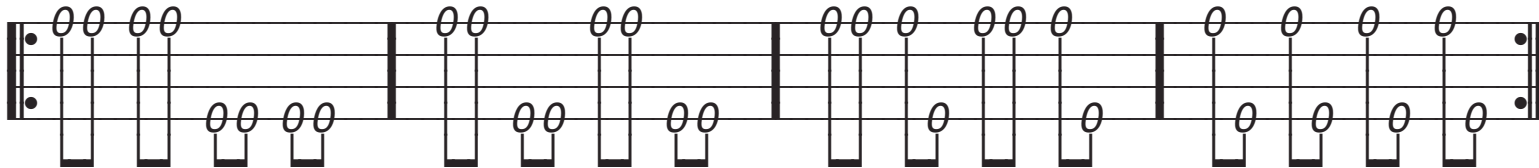
Exercise 0.2



Exercise 0.3



Exercise 0.4



Note: This symbol is called a repeat sign. It is a double measure line with a pair of dots.

All measures that are between the 2 repeat signs are played twice.

In this case, play them hundreds of times. Or millions of times.

## Why Some People Advance and Some Lag Behind

Here is a good opportunity for me to make a point about one of the things that keeps a lot of potentially great players from advancing. When faced with something that is difficult to do which of the following do you tend to do?

- a) Try it and then move on without mastering it
- b) Work on it until you have mastered it

The large majority of players tend to do "a" and the better players are in the "b" category. You may counter that some things are easier for some people than for others. This is true to an extent. But, keep in mind that if you practice something to the point where you can do it "pretty good" you will develop into a "pretty good" player. If you practice something until you can do it "dang good" you will develop into a "dang good" player. Same goes for the categories of "not worth a hoot", "fair to middlin", "average", and "totally awesome."

You are not going to become a "totally awesome" player if the standard you strive towards during practice sessions is "pretty good." You must be your own critic during practice sessions and observe how you are doing. Can you do it better? Playing something until the point where you are getting 80% of the notes right, and then going to watch "America's Funniest Videos" will not do anything beyond making you 80% of the player you could be.

## The Difference Between Practicing and Playing

A student who came to me mentioned once that he was practicing 3 hours a day. His playing was not improving much by my estimation and I was mystified how this could be the case. What he was working on was pretty basic stuff and yet he seemed to be making very slow progress.

To try to solve this mystery I surprised him at his next lesson with the following instruction: "I will sit in the next room and I want you to do a 30 minute practice session, exactly as you do at home. I will just listen and then offer my comments when you are done."

accuracy. If this was not true how could there be a Ricky Skaggs or a Chris Thile?

The brain is very flexible and can be coaxed into doing many things (good and bad) if you train it. One way to train the brain in the art of good timing is to play with other musicians who play with good timing. But, if you are doubtful whether you have "good timing" how are you going to decide if they do? Sure, if you can get Tony Rice to come over on Tuesday nights you can be sure your guitarist has good timing. But, can you judge the timing of the local crop of pickers? Have you ever tried? I think you will find it to be an interesting exercise. But, one hint: If you begin to analyze other players timing you better keep your trap shut. Announcing to someone that you think their timing is "a bit off" (unless you are the teacher and they are paying you to tell them) is a sure way to make an enemy, never be asked to play with them again, and possibly end up with some broken bones. It is wiser to spend your time analyzing your own timing problems. Same goes for marital problems, financial problems and hygiene problems.

A safer way to study timing in private is to use a metronome. The more you play with a metronome the easier it gets. And the easier it gets the better your timing will be.

## The Metro Gnome

The initial phases of working with a metronome are frustrating. But, you will get better at it. And eventually you can give the metronome to someone else who could use it. Eventually. Like after 50 years of dueling with it. I think of the metronome as a little house occupied by a dastardly little gnome. The gnome is an unfeeling, uncaring, unsensitive jerk which doesn't care if you even exist. (I have played with some musicians who were like that too!) So don't feel bad if you swear at the cursed thing. The gnome doesn't care. If he notices you at all he will be amused by your suffering.



Later, as you progress in your ability to stay with that danged clicking, you may even find that you and the gnome have become more friendly. If you beat the gnome at his game he will leave you alone. And when you think you have gotten all of the use that you can from the gnome, you can take a sledgehammer to the thing.

Exercise 1.6

**G** **C**

3 2 1 4

**G** **D** **G**

2 1 2 1 2 4 1 4 2 1

Exercise 1.7

**G** **C**

1 4 1 2 1 4 1

**G** **D** **G**

# Roots & Thirds in G

The purpose of this exercise is to familiarize you with the relative location of the THIRD to the ROOT. All 7 exercises follow the basic 12 bar blues progression that is found on the CD. The previous exercise was all about learning to find the "1" or the ROOT. There is always a THIRD located 4 frets higher than the ROOT. Remember the 2-2-1-2-2-2-1 Major Scale Pattern? From the first note of a major scale to the second is a two fret increase and from the second note to the third is also a two fret increase. So, if you jump directly from the root to the third you have gone up 4 frets. (Easy as 2 + 2, right?)

Knowing where the thirds are in relation to the root (your benchmark) is a step towards finding the notes of the chord and a stepping stone to finding all of the notes of the arpeggio. Improvising using lots of roots and thirds produces a very harmonious sound as both of the notes are found in the chord. (The major chord contains only the root, third and fifth. We will study the locations of the fifth soon.)

Try to visualize, whenever you are playing the root (1), that there is a third (3) four frets higher.

## Exercise 2.1

The first diagram shows a 12-bar blues progression for G and C chords. The fretboard is divided into six 2-bar segments. The first four bars are for G (root at fret 0), and the last four bars are for C (root at fret 5). The notes in each bar are: fret 0 (open), fret 4, fret 0 (open), fret 4, fret 5, fret 5, fret 2, fret 2, fret 2, fret 2.

The second diagram shows a 12-bar blues progression for G, D, and G chords. The fretboard is divided into six 2-bar segments. The first four bars are for G (root at fret 0), the next four bars are for D (root at fret 2), and the last four bars are for G (root at fret 0). The notes in each bar are: fret 0 (open), fret 4, fret 0 (open), fret 4, fret 2, fret 2, fret 0 (open), fret 0 (open), fret 0 (open), fret 0 (open), fret 4, fret 4, fret 4, fret 4.

**Exercise 7.2** - All of these exercises are for the right hand, left hand, and the ear. Learn the sounds of 1-2-3-5-6.

**G** **C**

**G** **D** **G**

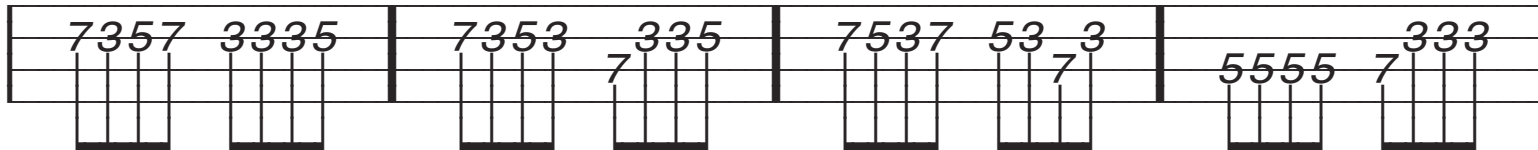
**Exercise 7.3** - This is starting to sound pretty bluegrass! Listen to recordings and try to identify when pentatonics are being used.

**G** **C**

**G** **D** **G**

# Transposition Practice

Here is a bit of music for you to try transposing. It is a little bit of "Sally Gooden" using the pentatonic scale. This one is in the key of C. That 3rd fret note in the first measure is a C and it is the "1" or root.



Before you write anything out try your hand at moving it around as I described earlier. Slide it up one fret. What key are you in now? Go up one more fret. Now what key are you in?

Move the entire thing over so it starts on the 1st string. Now what key are you in? Next, slide it up two frets from that position. What key are in now? If you followed all those instructions you should be in the key of B.

Now try writing the passage out in the key of B starting with your "1" note on the 2nd fret, 2nd string: (I gave you a couple of freebies to get you started)



Try writing the passage out in the key of D with your "1" note as the open 3rd string:



# Progress Record

Here is a place to keep track of your practice progress. Write in the date when you feel like you are able to play the particular exercise perfectly at the metronome speed listed. (Two beats per measure, four 8th notes per beat.)

Exercise	Page	40	50	60	70	80	85	90	100	104	108	116	120	124	128	132	136
6.6	61																
6.7	61																
7.1	62																
7.2	63																
7.3	63																
7.4	64																
7.5	64																
7.6	65																
7.7	65																
8.1	67																
8.2	68																
8.3	68																
8.4	69																
Major Scales	74																
9.1	76																
9.2	76																
9.3	77																
9.4	77																
9.5	78																
9.6	78																

# MandoUniversity

## Tools For Improving Your Mandolin Playing!

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### **Mandolin Master Class (Book + CD)**

Written by Brad Laird. Learn to improvise! Understand the important concepts, basic music theory, use of the major scale, use of the pentatonic scale, how to navigate the fingerboard using "triangulation", how to use the Circle of 5ths, how to use the "number system" for chord progressions, how to construct scales and chords, how to practice effectively and how to decide "what to play." Book includes an innovative idea called "The DNA of the Fingerboard" (and a transparent overlay) to help you unravel the mysteries of the mandolin fingerboard. Theory section has 6 self-tests (with answers) to be sure you understand the material. Written in an easy to understand conversational style. Companion Audio CD contains chord backup tracks for practicing what you learn, "test driving" your improvisation over various chord progressions, ear training exercises, and even a multi-speed metronome. 70 pages of information, charts, tables, and exercises. All exercises and examples are written in tablature. No standard music notation. Comb-bound and lays flat. MMC501.

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### **Metronome on Audio CD**

A 24 speed digitally produced metronome on audio CD. Play on your own stereo or computer sound system. You control the volume so you can hear the sound over your instrument. A must for loud instruments. Makes a perfect "programmed" practice session as the tracks automatically advance from one speed to the next. Track speeds range from 40 to 160 beats per minute. Each track is 3 minutes long. Arranged with smaller increments in speed as the tracks advance to more difficult levels. Practice tips and track/speed chart enclosed. MCD501.

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### **Free Beginning Mandolin Lessons**

Download the free 24 page Beginning Mandolin Lessons and get off to a good start. Information at [www.mandouniversity.com](http://www.mandouniversity.com).

### **Mandolin Training Camp (Book + CD)**

The second book by Brad Laird. This book is a follow-up to Mandolin Master Class and provides 84 pages of information and exercises to help you gain control over your fingers! Mandolin Master Class is about "what to play" and this book is about actually being able to do it! The exercises presented range from easy to extremely challenging. But, the exercises progress in an organized way to lead you to a better understanding of the fingerboard while building speed and dexterity. The book includes detailed micro-analysis of finger mechanics to help you find the most efficient way to execute passages on the mandolin. The book presents information on position shifting and plenty of exercises to develop that important skill. All of the exercises follow a consistent chord progression and the Audio Companion CD provides chord backup for all 12 major keys. A record keeping section allows you to track your progress with each exercise. Mandolin Training Camp is a challenging and informative book which can elevate the skills of all mandolin players to new levels of expertise. Good for teachers to use as a supplement to teaching songs and chords. All exercises are presented in tablature. No reading of standard notation required. 84 pages. Lays flat. MTC502.

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