

The great spring tension debate

It is Spring, so what better time to talk about spring tension (pun apology).

This is another hot debate in the drumming community. Most of the debate centres around foot speed and endurance.

The first thing is, are your issues with speed down to your technique, quality of the pedal or pedal settings (primarily spring tension). A sturdy, well made pedal will certainly feel nicer under your foot, and feel like you have a little more control. Flimsy pedals feel flimsy. Basically, a reasonable pedal should have at least a half solid plate rather than no plate and just side clips/springs. Beyond that, suggested improvements come from things like pedal fabrication, material and quality of the bearings. Having said that, all these things are demonstrably a fairly low percentage of ability to play lengthy and fast pieces or grooves. Some of it will come from how you feel playing on nice equipment. The fact is though if you develop good technique, you can actually replicate a lot of what you are capable of on any pedal. I for example regularly swap between £30 pedals, Pearl 201 powershifters and DW, and can play all the same songs without any noticeable difference (this is potentially on 3 different surfaces as well between pads, mesh and standard heads).

The theory behind faster pedal movements is primarily to do with spring tension. Many argue that high spring tension allows them to play fast because the beater will fly back quicker, and yet there are innumerable well known drummers such as Jojo Mayer who can play with incredible foot speed and play with low tension (described by him as straight out of the box settings).

High spring tension can achieve high speed but that method requires more input of energy and muscle. The result is likely that you will also therefore be louder. This could result in a trade off of being able to play in a dynamic way also. Lower spring tension requires less energy to push the pedal down, but more control to allow the beater freedom of movement and to spring back rapidly. Buddy Rich once demonstrated this by playing with the springs completely removed. So, which is best. The short answer is you have to experiment to find out what is right for you.

As far as technique is concerned the most basic thing to do is spend time between both heel up and heel down. Some are reluctant to develop heel up because it initially feels uncomfortable because you will be slightly unbalanced. Avoidance is sadly not a cure though. In basic terms heel up and heel down are primarily to do with volume and power. If you are playing a light ballad you probably don't need the power and so heel down is more appropriate. Sitting behind the kit though, when you are playing mf or f you may not realise how little of the sound is projecting outwards.

Heel up also gives you more freedom in your ankle movements. Heel down is like trying to use your wrists whilst your forearm is pressed against the side of your body. Heel up will also allow for toe/heel or heel/toe techniques, sliding (although I find this one to be inefficient) and so on.

Of course the inconvenient news is that to develop speed and control, you need to spend a lot of time doing it. Work on exercises that demand faster feet such as adjacent 16th or 32nd note bass drum notes. Work with a metronome to build speed gradually. Finally try jamming to songs that challenge this skill, even if at first you don't catch many of the faster notes. Keep grinding away and you WILL get there.