

Expect the unexpected

Ever heard the Benjamin Franklin quote, "Failure to prepare is preparation to fail"? (side note: I feel like a lot of quotes are attributed to good old Ben... I wonder if he actually said this one?)

Or perhaps you're more familiar with the classic British Army adage of the "6Ps": "Proper preparation and planning prevents poor performance."

Now, these are obviously very wise – if you don't put in adequate practice and preparation, you'll be setting yourself up to fail.

But is there such a thing as being too prepared, especially when it comes to bagpiping?

This month at Dojo U, we're "Getting Performance Ready" by developing the skills every player needs to produce confident, consistent, high-quality performances. And that's far easier said than done, as anyone who's experienced the nerves of performing first-hand can attest.

Preparation is essential, of course, to set yourself up for success as a piper or drummer, especially if you're performing regularly. Because usually if you're well prepared, you'll have far less stress on the "big day".

Competing at the Highland Games? If you've done the planning to scope out where you are going, what you are playing, and for whom you are playing, you'll be less likely to feel those anxiety spikes in the lead up. Playing a concert? It can help a lot in managing nerves to familiarize yourself with all the details so that on the day all you have to do is play.

But as players of some of the most complex and challenging instruments on the planet, we know that it's not always possible to plan for every variable that might affect your performance. Maybe you go to strike in for the big gig and your bag's suddenly not holding air, or the client double-booked you and another player for the same gig (and you find out when you both show up ready to play), or the band in front of you in the parade had to pull out, so you have to step off 10 minutes earlier than your call time.

Stuff like this happens all the time, and it can be very stressful. But can you ever plan to prepare for the unexpected?

The best way to do this is to learn how to manage yourself. Often when we think of preparing for a gig, we think of the tangible details – time, location, tunes, uniform, warm up time, temperature, and so on. And of course, those are essential things to plan and be familiar with before the event.

But if a surprise spanner gets thrown in those works, have you set up yourself to manage them effectively, and not let anxiety get the better of you in a high stress situation?

Obviously, there are certain musically-focused basics that come into play – keeping a well-maintained instrument, practising regularly, learning your performance repertoire well, and generally working to improve your overall skill and experience as a musician, will all reduce the chance of instrument issues happening in the first place.

Similarly, seeking out as much experience as possible will help you to troubleshoot issues more effectively on the fly – for example, if your bag starts sagging when you strike in for the first time, it can be easy to succumb to that rising feeling of panic, but if you've ever lost a drone reed or forgotten to zip up your bag before, you'll know the possible cause and be able to diagnose the issue much faster and solve it far more professionally. (To simulate this, you could ask other pipers for their 'performance war stories' to see if they've ever encountered any embarrassments while performing that you could learn (and prepare better) from – plus those are the best stories anyway!)

But the only constant factor in all of these situations will be you. So part of preparing for performance should also be embracing a few ways that work for you to help manage your mindset in stressful situations. Perhaps you find it calming to listen to classical music on the drive to the gig. Perhaps taking long, deliberate, deep breaths before stepping out to play helps you find your zen. Perhaps you find that deliberately smiling before you turn to greet a client, no matter how nervous or stressed you feel, makes you feel more confident.

Even just the most basic things like getting a good night's sleep, eating properly, drinking enough water, and allowing yourself plenty of time to get to an event, all have an enormous impact on how much patience and resilience you'll have to deal with the unexpected when it inevitably happens.

You won't be able to prepare for every situation, so accepting that the unexpected will happen can make for a far easier time when it does. And in the meantime, plan for as many of the elements that you can control as possible.

Ready to learn more about the benefits of managing yourself to prepare for success? Join us for our themed month to prepare to perform consistently and confidently every time!

You can also check out our 11 Commandments of Mastery course to learn more about other great ways to set your mindset up for success at the bagpipes.

All the best,

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