

Tips for new dulcimer players ...

Frequent short practice sessions

At first, set aside 15 – 20 minutes each day to practice. If you can practice 10 minutes two or three times a day that's even better. In the beginning it is important to practice a little each day rather than marathon sessions once or twice a week. This frequent playing helps to build up callouses on your fingers as well as stretch muscles in your fingers you never knew you had.

Fret like typing on a computer

When fretting, try to use the end of your finger not the flat of your finger. Holding your fretting fingers more upright like you do when you type on a computer will help you speed up your playing as you improve your skills. You'll need to keep your fingernails on your fretting hand very short to do this.

Choose songs you know

For your first songs, pick songs that you know very well. The better you know the tune the easier it will be for you to learn how to play it on the dulcimer. If you have TAB for songs you like that includes chords, don't let the chords intimidate you. Almost all TAB can be played with just the melody and middle string and no chords at all at first.

Play slowly to learn the tune

Begin by playing tunes very slowly. You learn tunes by learning the notes and, just as important, the time intervals between the notes. By playing a tune very slowly you learn the notes and the intervals between notes at the same time. Once you can play a tune slowly, it will be easy to speed it up. The "muscle memory" in your fingers will take over and put your fingers in the right place at the right time.

Memorize the tune

Once you can play a tune, begin to memorize it. Memorize one small section at a time even if it's just 4 notes at a time. Then put two sections together. Then work up to four sections at a time and so on. Soon you'll be able to play the entire tune from memory. Among many other benefits, playing tunes from memory allows you to add your own unique style to make the music "yours".

Play the whole tune through

Lastly, play the whole tune. Calm yourself, take a breath, hum the first few notes of the tune in your head, and then begin to play the tune from memory. I find it is sometimes helpful to sing or hum along to the tune in my head as I play. You'll get to the end before you know it having played the whole tune through!