

TRAINING

Performing magic is an incredibly satisfying experience when everyone watches together, your technique is flawless, and the audience has an enjoyable time. This is the dream situation to be in for any magician, but in order to get there it takes a lot of discipline, preparation, and hard work beforehand. Being proficient in sleight-of-hand not only takes sacrifice to master techniques, but to also make them look completely disguised where it appears that nothing is going on.

Learning sleight-of-hand is no different from learning anything else such as a musical instrument where the more you put into your training, the more you will get out of it. No one picks things up perfectly the first few times and it will not happen overnight, but with a strong dedication to training, everything will get easier as time goes on.

The Importance of Training

The most important point I have come to realize over the many years training in sleight-of-hand is that your training sessions will be (and should be) harder and more tedious than when an actual performance occurs. Training sessions are not glamorous, very repetitive, and sometimes outright boring, but without those very sessions you will never come close to achieving the results you want. The harder you train when no one is watching, the easier it becomes when the show really does happen and several people are watching.

One analogy I like to use when it comes to sleight-of-hand training is from the culinary world. There is a breakdown when cooking a meal for yourself which is composed of two parts: Prep Time versus Cooking Time. The better the use of your prep time is, the easier and less stressful your cooking time will be as a result. It is much easier if you have all of your ingredients together and ready to go before you start the cooking process so you are not running around trying to find certain ingredients once the cooking starts. That means you should have all of your vegetables peeled and cut, the seasonings ready to be sprinkled on, and the pots ready for the food to be put into. When all of those elements are lined up and ready to be used, all that needs to be done is to cook the food. If you are in the midst of cooking, but then all of a sudden you realize that you forgot to peel and cut the carrots, you have to stop what you are doing and wait until the carrots have been prepped. The other food might get overcooked, the sauce could become too reduced, or something else might happen that could have easily been avoided had you prepped everything beforehand.

The same principle there can also be used when performing a magic show. If you are right in the middle of performing a routine, but then all of a sudden forget what happens next, what do you do? The flow of your show stops, people wonder what is going on, and the ability for your audience to be fooled has disappeared (pun intended) completely. It is imperative to know what you are doing at every stage in your show so everything flows naturally and there will be no major distractions to worry about – at least not on your end.

Training Effectively

Having the right mindset is crucial in order to become more adept at sleight-of-hand and that is why I prefer to use the word 'training' and not 'practicing'. The choice of words between 'training' and 'practice' is a deliberate one that makes you become more focus on what you are trying to accomplish. All athletes train for their respective sport, so why should magicians not be any different and train on their techniques?

If your goal is to master shuffling a deck of cards but only 'practice' doing so, all that really happens is you picking up a deck of cards, maybe check to see what is on the television, probably listen to the radio, think about what happened at work or school, and generally just drift off into space. When you 'train' at shuffling a deck of cards, you are sitting or standing at a table, there is a mirror or video camera in front of you so you are able to check at how well you are doing, and there is no TV or any radio on to distract you.

If you know you need to train more effectively to become a better sleight-of-hand artist, then your attitude should not be that of dread. It should be of excitement and fun since you know that with more and more training, you will become better and better at your technique and better able to fool your audiences.

If training in front of a mirror seems boring or lonely to you, there is one option that can be done to help remedy this. This is an idea I picked up from professional magician Michael Ammar and it has made my training sessions more enjoyable ever since. If your training regiment consists of standing in front of a mirror, you can put pictures of beautiful women (or men) on the walls or floor of your room that will act as your audience while you train. You can put pictures of whoever you want whether it is an actress, athlete, model, or anyone else so you can look at them while you train. This way, if you ask someone to take a card, you will have your own private audience there to watch you and see you in action whether it is a model, actress, or athlete - whoever you want.

Another important point to always keep in mind is to know what you will be training on before you start. What is it that you wish to achieve at your training session? By sitting down and just thinking about what you could do only makes you daydream and space out even more and have no actual training take place. You need to know what you are going to do before you start so when it is time to train, you can get right into it and know what exactly you want to work on.

What are your goals? Do you have any?

Training Aids

Starting and maintaining a training regiment on a regular basis is important, but it is also just as important to make sure that you have as much help as possible on your journey. It will still take a good amount of time to learning and having the necessary skill with sleight-of-hand, but that does not mean you cannot have training aids along the way. The adage of working smart and not hard is great here since each item mentioned will help you become more proficient with sleight of hand over a shorter period of time.

Below are three of the more commonly used training aids when it comes to sleight-of-hand with each one having you focus more on your technique, routines, and voice work. These items are easy to come across and odds are you already have one - or all of them - already.

MIRROR – It is hard to see what you are doing when your head and eyes are looking in one direction while your hands are doing something secretive and unknown in another. The trick is that if you cannot see how good or bad your technique is, how do you expect to become better at it?

The main advantage with using a mirror is that you will be able to see where your hands are, how you hold your props, and how you generally act overall. There is, however, a disadvantage in using a mirror which is that it does not give you the honest feedback when doing a ‘secret’ move. People look where you look and if you need to look at your hands when performing, then everyone in the audience will look at your hands as well. This will in turn make it more difficult to execute any secret technique deceptively since everyone will be looking at the moment you perform it.

VOICE RECORDER – Ever wonder how you sound to an audience? If you have never voice recorded your own performances before, the first time you do this you will be in complete shock. “Do I really sound like that?” The first time I really listened to an audio recording of myself I wanted to throw up because I could not believe how I sounded. Luckily it was at an open mic so no one really cared what I was doing or saying at the time, but it goes to the bigger picture of making sure your voice comes across.

The first thing you may notice about your speech is that you talk way too fast and do not articulate what you want to say. The first thing you can do to better yourself is to simply slow down and breathe when you speak. Take a deep breathe, relax, and go slowly with what you are doing. There maybe nerves brewing inside you, you may be performing a trick for the first time so you are unfamiliar with what to do, or you simply have no idea what to do or say as you are performing. All of those could be factors in why you are not at your best. That’s O.K. Nothing works the first time out and without hearing where you are now, you will not be able to see where you can go later on.

With technology being what it is today, you can simply purchase a cheap voice recorder at any electronics store and right before you go on stage, simply press record and put it inside your jacket or pants pocket so it can pick up what is said during your performance. That way, when you go over and listen to your recording at a later time, you can simply listen and review all the things that you missed while you were in the moment of performing. Believe me, when you are in the moment of performing, there are so many things that can get by you, it is great to have something that can catch it all so you can possibly use some of those nuggets at a later time. If you have a smartphone, odds are that it already has a voice record app already installed on it which makes it all the more easier to record your shows.

VIDEO CAMERA – If you really want to become more adept at sleight-of-hand, this would be a wise investment for you to have as it is the most powerful training tool any magician can have. While training on your technique or performing an entire routine, the camera will not blink for one second so you will be able to see the good, the bad, and the ugly. You will see firsthand if you really are as skillful as you think, if you flinch when the secret moment takes place, or if you are at all entertaining to anyone.

Many times when trying out a new routine or technique it has been outright embarrassing when watching myself on tape. You may think you can fool some people, but with the unflinching stare of a camera, it gives you the objective third eye to show you what your audience will see. It is so much better to go thru this process in your own privacy where no one will be able to see rather than having someone come up to you after your show and tell you to your face that they know how it was done. iPhones, tablets, etc. are the best tool for this to take place so if you do not have one - or all - of those items, it would be wise to use technology to help you out.

Final Thoughts

So why train? Depending on how you answer that question will determine how far and high you will take your sleight-of-hand skills and abilities. It is up to you to decide if you want to put in the time, energy, and sacrifice into becoming better. I can only imagine what professional athletes go thru for their training which is unbelievably demanding for their respective sport so why not compare their training routines with what you do?

Training will always be the hardest part in any endeavor, but it is also the most important part. The harder you train, the easier your performance will go. If you have your technique down to where you can do it under fire in the real world, it makes it that much easier to just let it go when performing and have one less thing to worry about when in front of a real audience.

Tennis legend Martina Navratilova once responded to a question by a young tennis player who asked how long she trains and her answer showed that to be the best, it takes work.

“If you have to ask how long training is, then you don’t deserve it”.