

Bank On It

In the TV game show “The Weakest Link,” the contestants have to “bank” on certain questions so they can collect the money from that question and the previous ones. The more consecutive questions they answer correctly, the more money they make – if they remember to bank the money. This creates an interesting little drama. Contestants get caught up in the excitement of answering questions against the clock, and they forget to bank the money, so the right answers don’t pay off.

When you solo, you essentially build phrases that need to be “banked,” or finished cleanly. You can’t just play easy stuff – that would be like getting all easy questions in the game. And you can’t throw caution to the wind, either, or you won’t get many right answers.

Essentially, it comes down to risk management. You’ve got to take risks for your music to be interesting, but you also have to control the risks to a certain extent. One element of risk management is knowing when to quit, or “quitting while you’re ahead.” The longer you string ideas together, the greater the risk may be. Sometimes that’s perfectly OK, because the musical ideas may call out for sheer adventure. Most of the time, however, it’s good to end on a winning streak.

The Winning Streak

Sometimes the most vulnerable parts of a solo are the ones where you try to attach just one more piece to the line and it breaks. By focusing a little extra mental energy on visualizing clean phrase endings, you can create a “winning streak” of solid phrases.

That does not mean you should play only short, safe phrases, or retreat from intriguing possibilities. But each clean and meaningful phrase can build toward the next one, until your winning streak outshines any mistakes along the way. Sometimes it’s a matter of stopping just before you’re accustomed to, and applying that remaining bit of energy to your next phrase. In time, you’ll build confidence as you put strong phrases in the bank towards strong solos. Great players are great risk managers – highly adventurous, but just enough under control to pull off the great ideas.