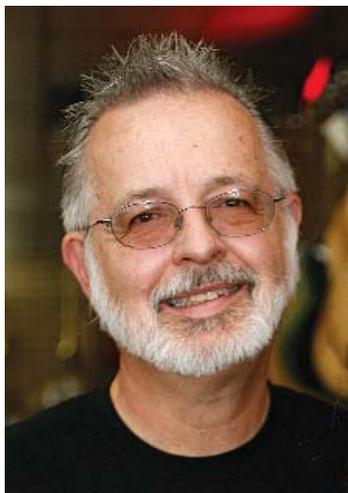


THE LESSON ROOM | BY PETE GAMBER

Hosting Guitar Contests

The music products industry's still buzzing about *Guitar Hero*. Why not take advantage of that buzz and create guitar and bass heroes in your own store? Since 1991, my company has hosted the "Guitarist and Bassist of the Year" contest. It may be the longest-running contest in the United States — sorry Guitar Center. The concept is simple, and it makes an amazing promotion for your music lesson program.



Use the 'Guitar Hero' hype to create guitar, bass heroes within your store

GETTING STARTED

First, pick a month. Hold the contest's weekly semi-finals, say, on four consecutive Thursdays at 7 p.m. or when store traffic is slow. These weekly contests will attract students, parents, friends and — yes — a commotion.

The contest should be open to guitar and bass students of all ages, but you can create different age categories. We group them as 12-year-olds and younger, 13–16 year-olds, and 17 and older. Students can also be grouped by elementary, middle school, high school, etc. I don't open the contest to non-students because it attracts professional deadbeats that never shop at my store.

THE MONTH BEFORE

Develop a contest rules sheet. Get teachers on-board by asking them to pick out books for the contest. You can create a "guitar contest books" display in your print music area with contest information. Student performers should play and solo to backing tracks. I don't let anyone deviate from this. You can then sell them a book with a CD that they can use during lessons. I prefer the Hal Leonard Guitar Play-Along series because it lets less-seasoned players slow down songs.

THE RULES

Set a three- to four-minute time limit for each performance. Don't allow tracks from the Internet — they must be from a book on your list. Judging criteria is based on a point system: 10 points for honoring the time limit, 10 for technique, 10 for groove and 10 for dynamics.

It's important to have prizes for each division. We offer \$300 gift certificates to our store. It's also *very* important that there are no losers. Encourage everyone that doesn't advance to the finals to come back and try again. Comments to the crowd like, "How many of you want to see these guitarists

come back next week?" will be positive and encouraging.

THE WEEKLY SEMI-FINALS

Set aside a special, in-store area with a P.A. setup, CD player and monitor to hold these events. Have chairs for spectators. Try to keep the performance area away from sales traffic but still central. Get your non-guitar teachers to be judges because they're unbiased. They will pick the top two performances in each division. If it's only a difference of a point, pick three or four winners. The more the merrier. Again, stress the "no losers rule" at the beginning of the contest. Talk to the non-advancing students and their parents about what they did well, and invite them back.

THE FINALS

Follow the same format as the semi-finals for the finals, but relocate the event to an outside venue like a VFW hall. A different vibe makes it extra cool. I usually do these on Sunday afternoons because the venues are available and cheaper. Recruit reps and local guitar pros to judge the finals.

The first contestant mounts the stage, the music starts, they bend that first lick and it's all good from there. They all become guitar heroes. **MI**

Pete Gamber is the owner of Alta Loma Music in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif. He welcomes questions and comments at pete@altalomamusic.com.