

On the Firing Line (First in a series)

“Flowing in the Zone”

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A warm sense of comfort and serenity enveloped the athlete. All was calm and peaceful. His body anticipated every move needed to control his equipment, as if the equipment, his body, and his subconscious mind were one. A serene sense of “feel” told the athlete that everything was working just as planned. No sound or sight penetrated his consciousness except the cues needed to adjust his performance. His mind was quiet, with no chatter of self-talk, no concern for the outcome of the competition, no attempt to control his movements, no conscious thought at all.

Spectators, coaches, and officials could see the large number of determined competitors working shoulder to shoulder toward the same goal. They could see the nervousness on the faces of many of the athletes before they started, while other athletes seemed to show no outward sign of anxiety at all. In the midst of this frenetic activity the athlete remained calm, even in the face of mistakes that could have grave consequences. He focused only on his own private performance, carefully honed through years of training. Afterwards, other competitors and coaches shook their heads when talking about this athlete’s accomplishment that day.

Analyzing his performance later, the athlete discovered that, in addition to performing the movements and techniques he had studied, he had also used skills he had never been taught. Because of his dedicated training and his knowledge of the sport and his equipment, his confidence was high, and he was able to absorb these new methods intuitively. He watched – almost as a detached spectator would – as his body and mind worked together with the equipment to take his performance to a new level. The athlete made special note of these insights and recorded them for future reference, to reinforce what he had learned that day in competition.

What has just been described? Is it an Olympic shooter in Sydney, Australia, this past year? It’s possible. The story certainly could be a description of a shooting competition. Knowledgeable athletes and coaches realize it could be a description of an athlete in any sport. Actually, it is a description of what one athlete felt during a motorcycle road race. Triple-digit speeds, sliding tires, other competitors just inches away, deafening noise, stifling heat, and the ever present danger of injury or death ... that’s the competition environment. Makes shooting sound easy by comparison, doesn’t it? How can an athlete perform under such conditions?

It is both simple and complex, and is the essence of ultimate performance, taking years to master. Our road racer had trained many hours every week for four years. He was patient with the process, and he allowed his technique to mature slowly over time. He read books, magazine articles, and interviews about his sport. He ensured that his equipment was in perfect condition since there was never any room for error. Yet he never thought about the danger. After checking his equipment before each ride, he then forgot about it and “felt” the machine, the road, and his body.

Oblivious to the fact at the time, he was training much the way a champion does, even though he thought he was just having fun. (Aha!) He had trained so much that his subconscious mind knew how to control – even anticipate – everything, and his confidence in those skills allowed him to quiet his mind to let his experience take over. When he pushed faster on the racetrack and discovered both tires were sliding in the turns, he quickly learned (“felt”) how to make subtle steering adjustments with the throttle to maximize his speed and use the sliding as an advantage. Only because the equipment was set up perfectly, only because he had developed a

deep understanding of the dynamics, and only because the training had given him great confidence could he perform that day. Had he been unfamiliar with the sport or the equipment, or not understood what was going on with the tires, he would have been afraid of the sliding machine, increasing his fear of crashing and worsening his performance. In fact, riders who fear crashing usually do. Similarly, shooters who fear a bad shot instead of allowing a good one to happen generally get the bad one. The brain has a subtle but extremely powerful control over everything we do. Harness and direct the power, and excel – ignore or fight the power, and flounder.

What the road racer did was no different from what the very best shooters, gymnasts, divers; indeed all athletes do to achieve ultimate performance. Train the body and the mind, trust that training, and then allow the performance to happen naturally. It sounds simple, but there is much more to the story, and many ways to go about it.

In this series, we will take the journey toward ultimate performance. We will explore specific mental, emotional, physical, and technical skills and the effect they have on each other, training techniques, and ways of thinking about and growing in this or any sport. Each article will typically focus on one or two elements that will help you become a better shooter. Additionally, I welcome and solicit your comments and suggestions.

So, who was the motorcycle road racer? Me. It was the first time I had ever seen a track.

The “On The Firing Line” series is published by the national governing bodies for Olympic shooting in Japan and the USA, and has been adapted for archery as “On the Shooting Line” published by USA Archery. Olympic Coach Magazine, the National Association of Soccer Coaches, and others have referenced selected articles. The entire series is available online at www.pilkguns.com.

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Based in the Atlanta, Ga., area, JP O’Connor (jpoc@acm.org and <http://www.america.net/~jpoc/>) is involved in rifle and pistol target shooting as a competitor, is a former Assistant National Coach – USA Paralympics Shooting Team, is a Level 3 coach, serves on the National Coach Development Staff, and coaches the rifle and pistol teams at North Georgia College & State University. He enjoys working with a number of pistol and rifle athletes from around the country, ranging from beginners to the highly advanced, in clinics and one-on-one private coaching, all on a volunteer basis. He also works with musicians and athletes in a variety of sports.

(Biographical information as of October 2009)