

On the Firing Line (Ninth in a series)

Critical Moments

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My ears burned and my face was red. Erich Buljung's voice was raised and his words were quite firm and direct. I hadn't been scolded like this in years, especially not in front of others. We had been shooting air pistol at the Master's Camp and I was due for some strong "corrective action" from the coach. Paraphrased, part of it went something like this: "You bring back one target with a pair of deep tens right on top of each other, and then the next target has two sloppy eights! And the target after that has tens again! What are you doing! I'll tell you: You aren't giving each shot the same level of intensity and focus! You are wasting your time if you shoot that way!" Though it only lasted a couple of minutes, it felt like it lasted for days!

Swallowing this bitter pill took a few hours – which made shooting free pistol rather interesting that afternoon – yet I realized that he was right on the mark in his assessment. Focus does not always come easily to me and he had gotten my attention! The next day's shooting, and all subsequent shooting, now had a rather different approach! Later, Erich made sure that I understood that his method of delivering the message was not a personal attack... instead, he realized that he needed rather strong medicine to get my attention so that I would truly hear and understand his message. I learned a few critically valuable lessons – both as an athlete and as a coach – from that experience!

Significant amounts of time, money, effort, and thought go into the selection of our shooting equipment and in the development of solid shooting positions. We spend countless hours on the range practicing our shooting. What are we really practicing?

The most critical moments in our sport surround the delivery of the shot. Clearly, this is affected by the state of our equipment and our positions. However, how our shot process is constructed, and how we think about it is even more critical. Yet we give this little thought.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes the shots seem almost effortless, while at other times they seem so difficult? In the latter case, it often seems as if we dread the shot and then are scared to see how it turned out. Have you ever noticed that on the days you are confident you usually shoot well? Have you wondered why this varies from day to day or even within one session?

The answers to these questions revolve around the fact that, while we realize the importance of equipment, positions, and other aspects of the physical and technical game, we do not give the mental and emotional aspects of the game nearly enough thought. Our attitude about a shot has at least as much to do with its outcome as does any other aspect of our shooting.

For example, on the first day of the 2001 Field Target Nationals, I was squadded with the eventual winner. Upon arriving at one particular target, he exclaimed: "I hate this target. I always miss it!" Instantly, a thought crossed my mind: "He will miss it here, too." And he did. "What is your favorite target?" I asked. "Not this one!" he replied. "Actually, the target you are about to shoot is your favorite. Then you will hit it!" I responded. He smiled as the idea took hold.

In the same vein, many of the kids I work with joke about 2 of my famous questions asking them what their favorite gun (air or .22) and favorite position is. Each has fallen into the trap of coming up with all the wrong answers and they delight in watching someone new fall into the same trap! The answer of course is: "The one you are shooting now is your favorite!" Tell yourself that! The same is true in outdoor prone or field target where different targets and distances are involved. The current one is your favorite!

Some will argue that you are lying to yourself, which causes additional stress on the mind. I don't mean literally that the gun or position one is shooting must become their favorite. Rather, it is a way to focus on positive thoughts. "This is my favorite gun, position, distance, target, or whatever... and I will do well with it!" Even if one did not do well last time, they have at least given themselves the opportunity to do well this time. What do you suppose the outcome will be if they instead say: "I hate this position! I always mess it up and shoot poorly!" What is going on in your head? Will those thoughts enhance your ability to perform well?

Similarly, a young shooter from Ohio told me that she and her friends often joke about my saying "Eights are your Friend!" at practice because they follow it. They realize that the phrase is not meant literally – rather it is meant to remove focus from score, emphasize the learning value of less than perfect shots, and keep positive thoughts and energy flowing, which are critical to ultimate performance. Of course, this learning can happen only if one has an open mind and will embrace the mistake as the learning opportunity that it is. Practice now becomes more fun and improvement is facilitated by the positive attitude and energy.

What should be going on in the critical moments? Ideally, a focused, quiet, calm, intensity is present. No chatter, no fear, no concern, no stress, no tension, no word, no thought. Just quiet awareness – almost as a spectator – as the shot unfolds. The eye and conscious mind are far too slow to perform at the levels we strive for. Yet many shoot this way. The body and subconscious mind must be given control. They are trained much more than we realize since we so seldom let them take over and show us their capabilities. We must trust ourselves... our inner selves. One drill we use to enhance this has shooters delivering shots with their eyes closed (in a carefully controlled drill for obvious safety reasons)... they break the shot only when everything feels right. The groups are usually very tight and right on target.

One of the biggest mistakes we make is not putting the gun down and starting the shot process over when we need to. Have you ever noticed that sometimes a weird "sixth sense" tells you not to deliver the shot and instead start over? How often do you ignore it? Trust that sense! Many people feel that once they are on target, they are determined to deliver a shot "no matter what." Others will hold a very long time to make the shot "perfect". You cannot make a perfect shot – you can only perform correctly and the reward will often be a perfect shot. This is a subtle yet huge difference.

Although psychologically difficult at first, one can learn to break off the shot program and start over. Champions do not avoid bad shots – they strive to make only good shots. Put the gun down, reward yourself ("That would have been a nine or an eight."), and then go on to the "next" shot and perform. This is also helpful when you have a string of tens going and you get nervous about it... each time you put the gun down would have been a nine. Congratulate yourself for not making that shot and move on with confidence.

One of the other athletes at the Master's Camp didn't want to change anything about their routine: "No, this is how I always do it." was the reply. Yet the scores had plateaued. Are you stuck in a rut? Do you "...always do it this way..." and wonder why you aren't improving? Do you take full, complete, and total responsibility for your shots? Or do you have a closed mind about how to shoot well and have lots of excuses for why they aren't all good shots? How good do you want to be? Hard questions, I know. My ears were burning! Are yours?

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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(Biographical information as of October 2009)