

On the Firing Line (Twenty-second in a series)

Predator And Prey

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“Do you make things happen, or merely let things happen to you?”

A number of athletes approach a competition with an air of confidence, decisiveness, and a “take-charge” attitude. These athletes are on the offensive and go after their goal. Others have an approach that is better described as being hopeful, tentative, or even fearful. These athletes are on the defensive and attempt to protect themselves from failure. It turns out that an athlete needs a healthy mix of both offensive and defensive mental and emotional skills to provide an optimal performance.

Dr. Sean McCann, Director of Sport Psychology for the US Olympic Committee, makes a distinction between offensive and defensive skills. [McCann, 2003] He asserts that an athlete needs both. Offensive skills are the attributes and techniques that allow an athlete to dominate a competition and to be a great athlete. Defensive skills are the attributes that allow an athlete to handle adversity and to be a consistent performer at the highest levels. This article is loosely based on Dr. McCann’s outline with a number of ideas added.

Offensive skills

Desire to Win – The athlete must have the “fire in the belly”, that is, the passion for the sport and for challenging competition. They must “really want” to win, not just say it.

Competition Plan – Before event and during waiting and rest periods, the time – and thoughts – must not be random. The athlete must have worked out exactly what they want to do, how they will prepare, and determined what they will focus on at each phase of the competition. Within the competition, during the actual shooting, the athlete must have a robust shot plan. Most importantly, they must actually do what their shot plan calls for. Any deviation will cause problems! This shot plan must be robust and not depend on “fragile” techniques.

Visualizing Success – Visualization or imagery or mental rehearsal are underutilized techniques. Even if the athlete cannot “see the pictures”, this rehearsal is critically important since it is the ability to evoke the “feelings” of the experience that is most important and that has the most value. Additionally, the athlete must be able to imagine themselves performing well when they are most under pressure. If the athletes cannot “see” themselves shooting tens, they certainly can’t actually do it.

Supportive Language – Everything the athlete says to themselves must be positive and useful. “One shot at a time.” “I love this pressure.” “I love the feeling of rising to and meeting this level of challenge.” “I think I have the advantage.” “I’m going for it.” “Calm, relax, quiet... yet confident, aggressive, decisive.”

Goals and Behavior – Properly formulated and used, goal sets actually change behavior and provide internal motivation. Many top athletes know this, build their goal sets properly, and then discover their passion being fueled by their goals. Yes, instead of being mountains one has to climb (a sign of improperly set goals), properly set goals actually become the motivators.

Perform Like an Athlete – An accomplished athlete is not timid and does not hesitate. An accomplished athlete acts. Now. The best shooting is performed that same way. The athlete is truly committed to the action and is comfortable with the risk. One must stop thinking about all the bad things that could or might happen and just shoot.

Confidence – True confidence, not mere bravado, is a job, not a gift. Confidence comes from hard work. It comes from the athlete discovering and trusting that their physical foundation is solid, their technique and equipment are excellent, their mental processes are robust and their emotions are in order. This is a process that takes time. In short, as the athlete discovers that they can perform at ever higher levels in ever larger competitions, their confidence grows with them. Without hard work in all areas, this is not possible. Confidence is a job, not because one “must work on” their confidence directly; rather it is a job because it only grows when the athlete is working and growing.

Defensive skills

Training Consistency – When an athlete faces adversity in a major competition, their ability to survive – even thrive is a direct function of the correctness and consistency of their training. If their training is haphazard, undirected, wasteful of valuable range and other training time, and merely practices mistakes, then there is no solid foundation upon which to expect a stellar competition performance to take place. Use training time wisely, use it fully, and fill it with correct, focused activity so that the desired actions become the automatic actions that surface under pressure.

Anxiety Control – It is easy to cave in and give up in the face of all the negative feelings and self-talk that surface when the pressure is on. Our fears are negative and it is easy to find “proof” that they are correct... that last bad shot for example. Anxiety takes hold when we take our focus away from a quiet confident mode of “just shoot.” One cannot be nervous when deeply focused on the task. One must ignore all the “demons” in the head and become, in essence, “bullet-proof” to anxiety.

Impulse Control – Anger, frustration, and impatience are negative blocks to the flow of positive emotional energy. Each is a reaction to external events when our expectations and desires are not met. Interestingly, we can control each of these – and must. The athlete next to you may anger you by some action that disturbs you, or you may be frustrated by a bad shot, or you become impatient with yourself because it is difficult to quiet your mind and heart. You can decide that the situation does not matter and ignore it or properly address it. Or you can become angry or frustrated or impatient because the situation is not what you expect or demand. Guess which reaction just took you out of your game!

Energy Management – Although this topic includes physical aspects of shooting, it really is meant to address mental and emotional aspects. After having “given your all” in the event in order to make the final, do you have enough reserves to reach deep inside and do it again for the final? When you are physically tired or fatigued from travel or illness, can you bring yourself to raise your intensity level to the optimal point as if you were healthy and rested? Do you respond to the competition and adversity in the event, or do you wilt and dream of another day? Today is the day! The event isn’t over until after the final. You cannot sleep on the line... you must force your intensity level higher through your will power. You must decide to seize the day, not let it run you over. Each of these is a choice that is within your power to make.

Resilience – Competitions do not always take place under ideal conditions, nor does everything go the way an athlete wishes it to. One must be resilient in the face of challenging range conditions, equipment failures, bad shots, or even entire bad days. It is not the end of the world and it is not a reflection on the athlete’s self-worth. Those who realize that the “bad” things are part of the process of growth and learning, and who learn from the situations, are those who develop resilience and who always seem to bounce back.

Flexibility – Almost anyone can learn to shoot fairly well in a training environment. Serious competition is an entirely different matter. Conditions may not be ideal, yet this is when and where the athlete needs to produce a solid performance. As the saying goes, “stuff” will happen and the athlete must either deal with it or give up. When the pressure of competition or other factors cause the size of the hold to open up, the athlete either digs deep and trusts their technique, or... deviates from their game plan, “tries harder” and shoots like a rookie.

Focus Amidst Chaos – A determined and well trained athlete can focus so intently on their activity, that all external interference is effectively walled off. The demons may rage, but they cannot penetrate the athlete’s awareness. What is the athlete’s job? Merely to focus on performing this one shot or sequence correctly. Nothing more. Focus on the performance... the “doing” aspects... and everything else will take care of itself quite nicely.

Simple Thoughts – Under pressure, one can only have the simplest of thoughts. A fragile technique that relies on a complex checklist, for example, may work wonderfully in training but cannot hold up in competition. One must have a very simple thought process, trust it, and trust that all the other aspects and actions of the shooting are already well “programmed” or “memorized” deep in the mind somewhere. It is these deeper action memories that will take over in the heat of the moment. Whatever has been most reinforced in training will come out.

Practical Application

In essence, offensive skills get you into the final, while defensive skills get you the medal. An athlete with great defensive skills and weak offensive skills will perform on a very consistent basis but only at a level much lower than their potential. The athlete is generally unwilling to experiment with new techniques or changes to their routine. Change, and thus growth, is not part of their system. Conversely, an athlete with great offensive skills and weak defensive skills will sometimes have an amazingly good performance (usually in training) but never on a consistent basis. The athlete is unwilling to stick with one set of techniques for even a short period of time. Stability, and thus consistency, is not part of their routine.

Athlete and coach must assess the athlete’s strengths and areas where additional work is needed. By exploring both the offensive and defensive types of mental and emotional skills, opportunities may be found to strengthen the athlete’s overall game. At elite levels, one must have a complete “tool kit” of skills and techniques. One area or skill cannot compensate for a weakness in another area. All aspects must be fully developed. Each of is an area rich with possibilities for exploration and work by the athlete and coach.

Observations – 4 Keys For Elite Athletes At Major Competitions

Be Fully Ready – When competing at a major competition, an athlete must be fully ready even before arriving at the venue. Training time is limited, nor is this the time to build skills or shoot a practice match. One’s confidence must already be rock steady. As the match begins, each and every sighter must “mean something” to the athlete. One cannot “work into it” during sighters... that tentativeness will go nowhere that is good.

“Off-road” vs. “Highway Driving” – As a match begins, all may be well. The shooting, while determined, seems to be flowing fairly easily. One is on the highway and cruising! Then something happens. It might be score awareness, a sudden tension, or a bad shot. At this point the athlete has a decision to make. Pretend all is well, stay on the highway, continue to go “full speed ahead” and have several bad shots. This is when you let things happen to you. Or the choice can be to go “off-road” among the bumps and rocks, slow down a bit and focus on the

basics. Use the breath to help calm and focus the mind. Use the techniques that have been refined in training and earlier competitions to get oneself back on the highway. Focus on the basics, work through the situation, and one will quickly discover they are back on “cruise control.” This is when you make things happen. It is a choice. Make it happen.

Abhinav Bindra of India has what appears to be a flawless shot routine, both on paper and in the actual performance of the plan. Indeed, on most shots, his execution of that plan is flawless. He will have moments when he must, as he says, “manufacture a shot”, because something isn’t going just exactly according to plan. Rather than let the situation defeat him, he has developed an ability to slow down a bit to go off-road and resolve the situation instead of mindlessly speeding down the highway and wondering later what went wrong.

Expect Hard Work – Great shooting, really great shooting, is hard work. Very hard. Moderately good shooting is not. Understanding this difference is critical. Expect to work hard. Expect to struggle and learn and refine and probe the dark corners of your game... and of your mind and heart. Train for the hard competition days. When we do high intensity training, many of the athletes will come off the line and literally be shaking like a leaf and their heart will be pounding. This will often show in their amazingly horrid scores... at first. But they learn how to dig deep inside themselves and learn how to perform when things are not perfect. They begin to amaze themselves by doing things they thought were not possible. This boosts scores and confidence. Later, in contrast, a rough match is easy for them. And the scores show it.

Train Above Your Goal – One must always go to a competition expecting to shoot their average. Personal records in competition are fun, and do happen. But not when they are expected. Expect the average, set goals higher than that, and be open to the possibility of a record. If you are training at a world record level, then a “bad” day will likely result in a medal.

Many events now are so competitive that perfect or nearly perfect scores are required to win the event. One cannot have an average that is higher than perfect! Here, an average a couple of points lower says that the athlete is not ready to consistently win the event. When Abhinav first was training in the USA, many people commented, “He never shoots a nine!” Indeed, he had numerous 600/600 training sessions. He knew that his chosen event, men’s air rifle, required a perfect or nearly perfect score in a major competition. Therefore he worked quite hard to ensure that this level of performance became his norm.

There is no substitute for confidence gained through having performed well in the past. The past is not guarantee of excellence in the future, but it does prove to the athlete that they are truly capable of reaching the harder goals. This confidence then fuels their work. Proper training is a key component of this.

Closing Thoughts

The game is different for athletes at the elite level. Expectations are external, explicit, and extraordinary. The game is no longer just for the athlete’s personal enjoyment. There are additional strains of travel and jet lag. The season is long, sometimes they seem to run together. Periodization in training is a challenge. Peaking at the right times is also made more complex. The sport becomes a job. This is when the athlete must have a burning passion. ...and a complete toolkit.

Successful performance at the pinnacle of sport requires a solid physical and technical foundation. Many athletes mistakenly believe nothing more is required. Ultimate performance comes from the head and the heart. Build a rich, diverse, robust toolkit of mental and emotional

skills, just as you do with the physical and technical toolkit, and prepare to amaze yourself. Are you going to act like the prey, or will you act like the predator?

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Reference:

[McCann, 2003] – McCann, Dr. Sean, *Role of Offensive And Defensive Skills In The Shooting Sports*, unpublished presentation notes, 2003.

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)