

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

Put the Cork in the Bottle

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**“At the end of training,
When you are tired and ready to quit,
You must do one more hard thing every time.”**

My friend Jim came over to me on the range to point out something he had noticed. He was serving as one of the range officers on the 50 meter range at the 1996 Atlanta World Cup. As the Olympic test event, this World Cup had drawn most of the best shooters from around the world. His comment was something to the effect “Have you noticed something today? Isn't it interesting how all these athletes can shoot ten after ten, long strings of tens, and then several of them give up a nines on the last one or two shots.”

As an accomplished and life-long shooter, Jim was watching the athletes very closely. He noticed that some of the athletes appeared to “finish” their event with one or two shots remaining. That is, they lost focus, or became impatient, or otherwise altered their rhythm and routine for the last one or two shots. Some may have reached their physical and/or psychological limits. Some may have been excited or disappointed at their performance and just wanted to get it finished. Others may have just lost focus, having shifted it, or allowed it to shift, from the present moment to the (near) future and the end of the event.

Regardless of why or how, the athletes in question failed to stay on track and could not “close the deal” as it were. Many others, of course, stayed on their game for every shot and took higher finish rankings.

The last shots are often among the hardest. The end is in sight, a goal or milestone may be within reach, fatigue has set in, and any number of other factors conspire against the athlete. The mental toughness required to “maintain” is more than is demanded of us in most of our everyday life. This toughness comes through a variety of training attitudes and methods, and through competition.

One aspect of training that is important does not seem so important until one thinks about it for a moment. At the end of a long or intense training session, or when the athlete is tired, one must do “one more drill”, just when it appears that day's limit has been reached.

Abhinav Bindra calls this “Putting the Cork in the Bottle” meaning that the athlete must finish the session with one more activity to build mental and physical toughness. After all, tie-breakers start with the last ten shot score, and finals competition is at the very end of the event.

In addition to the title, the quote at the beginning of this article is inspired by his comments. Athletes who constantly challenge themselves to reach beyond their comfort zone stand a much better chance of prevailing in competition. Doing so in training on a regular basis sets the stage. Many of the best athletes follow this principle at the end of almost all their training sessions. Abhinav suggests that the drill not be “easy” and instead that it should be intense and challenging. Again, this is to better prepare the athlete for the end of an event and for the final round.

Two of the members of the 2008 USA Olympic Team, when they were college teammates, spent a great deal of their training time, not just the end of a training session,

challenging not only themselves, but each other. Already individual NCAA champions, and members of a perennial NCAA champion team, they still challenged themselves to become even better competitors. They did this through a variety of methods, including “intensity” training.

One of the games they played, is known by various names including “3 & 0” (three and oh) or 5 & 0. Each athlete starts with a score of zero. They each shoot one shot, and whoever has the higher value shot gets the point, so the score is 1-0. They shoot a second shot, and if the same athlete again has a higher value shot, the score is 2-0. If the other athlete has the higher shot value, the first shooter’s point is taken away and the score goes back to 0-0. One or the other of the athletes is always at zero. In order to win, the score must reach 3-0. With well matched training partners, such as the two mentioned here, this game can go on for hours. Sometimes, they would never reach 3-0, instead constantly battling back and forth at 1-0 or 2-0 until they had to go to class or dinner. Their exploits in international competition, including some very dramatic and/or dominant wins, proves the value of their training. One suspects that these two do similar training even today, when their schedules allow.

Another favorite intensity drill is called “First to Five Tens”. This can involve a pair of athletes, an entire group (all vying for “gold-silver-bronze” placing), or as a single elimination tournament, where athletes are seeded and paired, and advance to the next round only if they prevail over their partner. With a group of 8 or 16 athletes, this gets quite exciting!

The drill is a race to see who can shoot five shots that each score as a ten, before anyone else. Go too slowly, as in a race, and one cannot win. Go too quickly and rush, and one cannot get the shots in the middle. To add to the excitement and pressure, they are instructed to call out – loudly – their current count: “One!” after getting their first shot value of ten, then “Two!” and so forth. The idea is to add to the intensity... those who fall behind really feel the pressure, while those who are up to four and are trying to close the deal feel a different kind of pressure. It is not unknown for an athlete who is ahead 4-0 to lose 4-5.

After a short period for preparation and sighter shots, the following commands are given. First, “Load”, followed by ample time for all to cock and load their rifle or pistol. Then “Rifles on stands” or “Pistols at ready”. When all are settled, then “GO!” Everyone shoots until the outcome is decided.

First time participants are often shocked at their reaction to this drill. Later they will report, “I have never felt those things except in a match!” It is quite fun to watch each athlete during the drill. As frivolous as this “game” may sound, it allows athletes to build incredible skills and mental toughness. Veterans of this and other intensity drills find they relish final competitions, rather than dreading them, knowing that they have the experience and toughness to thrive in a final when others are wilting. One often hears “We love to shoot finals!”

This “intensity” training is a critical factor in developing mental toughness and in “inoculating” athletes from choking. (See article numbers 17 and 18, “Choking” and “Choking Cures” for more on this topic.) Intensity training involves recreating within the athlete the actual feelings of competition, that is, the adrenaline and desire for outcome. Seasoned competitors learn how to meet the challenge of outcome focus by facing it often and learning to manage themselves. Intensity training is a critical component in this learning.

Notice that merely hanging targets and “shooting a match course” does not simulate competition. Intensity training is performed through drills and games where the athlete truly cares about the outcome. Head-to-head competition drills with a well-matched training partner do a wonderful job of recreating the “match nerves” of real competition. Merely going through

the motions of a match course generally does not, in and of itself, provide the same situation for the athlete.

One night, we had reached the end of training with a group of about two dozen rifle and a few pistol shooters. Most were “regulars”, while others were guests. My younger daughter was home that weekend from college and came to train with us. She had already put in a very long, very intense, self-directed training session, as she always did, having no coach while away at school. The regulars, knowing how our sessions went, were not sure if we were truly finished or not, and asked. Of course, I suggested we “Put the Cork in the Bottle” and do one more short drill to put the finishing touches on the evening.

In good spirits, yet very tired, my daughter asked if she could skip the last drill. Before I could respond, a voice came booming from about 20 firing points away “Michelle, How good do you want to be?!” Michelle exclaimed. “OH! Now his students are even saying it! Darn! Ok, I will shoot!” Everyone laughed good-naturedly at how one of them had used my signature saying to keep her going, and we went to work for a few more minutes. In our post-training wrap-up, where we compare notes, Michelle showed her target, then commented on how surprised she was at how well she shot despite the fatigue. She also commented on how she could use that insight in her next competition.

Constantly challenge yourself, provide yourself with a good mix of intensity training to go with your other training activities, and always “Put the Cork in the Bottle” when you think you cannot do one more drill. You will love the results in competition.

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)