

On the Firing Line (Second in a series)
Choosing and Using a Coach

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Beginning shooters start with a coach by default: Mom or Dad, a sibling or older competitor, the club coach, a camp counselor, scout leader, or other program coach such as in 4H or Jaycees programs. Intermediate athletes who wish to excel learn everything they can from their coaches and fellow competitors and diligently practice what they have been taught while beginning the process of learning on their own.

Advancing and elite athletes face a different type of situation. They have progressed to the point where possibly their current coaches are no longer able to help them increase their knowledge and level of performance. In other cases the athlete may never have had a coach and instead learned on their own. Many advancing athletes prefer to do their training on their own. Others, however, wish to find a teacher – a guide – to lead them on the journey to ultimate performance. How do these athletes determine if a particular coach can assist them? What questions should they ask? What are the important factors? What makes a good teacher?

A teacher is a guide: some know the first part of the path while others know the whole way. The best know their own weaknesses thus having insight into their student's weaknesses. They know both the obstacles and the interesting spots along the way. If a guide insists on one fixed path... they have limited knowledge. You want a guide who can assess your unique qualities and who can find the best way for you. A wonderful teacher filled with natural awareness can be a beacon to help light your way to ultimate performance.

An average teacher teaches physical and technical skills. A genuine teacher also conveys the lessons and skills of life through the teaching of mental and emotional skills. Beware of coaches who "win" while smothering their athlete's freedom and enjoyment of the sport. Choose carefully; an inspired teacher will be a positive influence for life.

Teaching is the art of communication – the coach must be able to convey knowledge to the athlete in a form that is understandable and useful. A dissertation couched in theoretical and obscure terms does not teach, nor does it impress; rather it wastes time and energy. The important factor is not what the teacher knows – it is what the students know. They have either obtained their current body of knowledge from this coach, or learned enough from their other coaches to know that this coach can take them to higher levels of performance and enjoyment in the sport. Is this coach able to relate to you in a manner that you understand and that enhances your knowledge, enjoyment, and confidence? If not, look elsewhere!

Gifted teachers may be found in unexpected places. Just because a person is or was a gifted competitor does not ensure that they will be a great teacher. Many are, but at least as many aren't. Conversely, just because someone has not excelled on the world stage in our sport does not mean they cannot be the very teacher you need. They may have excelled in another sport, though they usually do need some sport specific experience in order to fully understand the issues that you will face. The very best coaches do far more than teach shooting; they teach a way of thinking and being while imparting skills to last a lifetime.

Athletes must remember that coaches are human beings who will make mistakes from time to time. As long as the coach is aware of these limitations and open with their athletes there is no problem. Similarly, coaches must be patient with their athletes – they will make mistakes! In fact, teaching patience with the process of learning and improving is one of the most important lessons a coach can convey. Actions teach profound lessons.

How does one find a coach? Ask fellow competitors if they work with a coach. Contact local clubs. Ask at major competitions. If you still come up empty, ask the USAS National Team coaches or Junior Programs Director whom they might suggest. You may also contact organizations involved in shooting competition or training. For rifle and pistol you might also contact the NRA coaching program since they and USAS jointly run the coach certification program for these two disciplines. Once you have some suggestions, contact each coach and discuss your needs and their experience, background, and approach to the game. Determine if they are interested in working with you and under what terms. Also discuss whether or not there will be any monetary considerations. All of this will help you assess their ability and availability to assist you in your journey. Ask who else they assist. You may know one or more of them yourself, or ask the coach if they could put you in touch with them. Asking these students about the coach may help you make your decision. For example, does the coach always “tell” you what to do or what you did wrong, or does the coach ask lots of questions to provoke thought and provide plenty of information about the game? Is the coach a collaborative “partner” who motivates with a positive attitude or a dictator who barks orders and extinguishes enjoyment of the sport? Does the coach show favoritism to certain students to the detriment of others? You need to know.

Regardless of whether the coach is paid or a volunteer, athletes need to remember that the coach has a lot of time and effort invested in their success. A “thank you” now and then goes a long way! Don’t ask a coach to work with you if you expect their teaching to be a substitute for your diligent effort... they will likely demand more effort, not less, on your part. If you have a concern or disagreement, be open and honest with your coach. A good coach will respond appropriately to positive criticism – just as an athlete should. A master guide is a partner!

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)