

On the Firing Line (Fourth in a series)

Preparation Begins Now

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The familiar range command “preparation begins now” signals the period of final preparation for an event. Shooters make last checks of their equipment, take their position, and begin to settle in for the competition. There are a number of things an athlete can do prior to hearing this command to ensure a good performance in the event.

Preparation in one form or another actually begins days, weeks, months, even years ahead of time. Using a carefully crafted training plan, schedule, goals plan, and coach consultation, the athlete actually begins to prepare long before the day of competition. As the competition nears, training is tapered down a bit, and the athlete focuses on relaxation, hydration, sleep, planning for their approach and handling of the upcoming event, and lighter training to keep sharp and confirm that everything is working well. This is how your training program works, isn't it? Or is yours more haphazard and less well planned and executed?

For the majority of competitors, shooting is a hobby. As such, any time available for the sport is generally used for competition or range training. “There isn't time for the other stuff,” the competitor will say. Yet, their enjoyment of and improvement in the sport would be enhanced by taking a bit of time out for equipment and ammo checking, planning, goal setting, seeking out good advice, and working on broader and deeper aspects of sports performance rather than merely showing up for practice and shooting. Break things down into small steps. Focus on intermediate steps and work through them and revise as needed. Almost without noticing it, you will discover that your performance has improved in time.

The very best athletes have learned how to learn. This allows them to understand the various aspects of the sport and to constantly refine their performance. Understanding that becoming a world class athlete is a process – and that learning is a part of that process – the very best athletes constantly evaluate their game. They may not change something right away, yet they are evaluating it for possible future change. They understand that it takes lots of time and properly focused effort to reach their goals. In a broad sense, this is part of their preparation.

Whenever something is seen as too difficult it is only because it is that way in relation to the level of preparation. Winning a national event is difficult for someone who has not prepared fully. This takes time, of course! Winning an international championship seems almost easy to most who have achieved that level of success. It is because they were well prepared in all aspects of their game. Any roadblock or failure is always the result of improper or insufficient preparation. Good athletes work on some aspects of the sport, especially those they are good at doing. Great athletes work on all aspects of the sport, especially those they are worst at doing.

Finally, the time has come for competition. Have you arrived early enough so that you are not rushed? For major events this means arriving early enough for light training the day before. If you are crossing many time zones, you will want to arrive even earlier. Even small details like when to fill your air cylinders are important – wait too late and it can prevent you from training before the competition. You have already decided which ammo to use, haven't you? Now is not the time to make this choice. Train only for a short period of time... all you are doing is making sure you understand the range conditions and confirming that you are ready for the competition the next day. Do not fire a full match or do any other shooting for score. Merely remind yourself of the “feel” of good performance. This will allow you to approach the competition with confidence.

Each time you set up or pack your equipment, have a system. If you are haphazard, items will be misplaced and steps forgotten. This increases stress before, or during, the very time when you desire decreased stress. Have a place for everything and a sequence in which you complete each task. There is a reason that the master does not allow the apprentice to prepare the utensils for the tea ceremony, the brushes and canvas for the painting, or the bow for the archery contest. This is part of the preparation and helps place your mind in the mode for competition.

Athletes who constantly chat right up to – and sometimes beyond – the preparation period are already at a disadvantage. It takes time for the mind to enter the proper state for the competition. Give it a chance! Some elite and highly experienced athletes may disagree with this. Most athletes do not have the level of training and control required to ignore this step – and even some of the most elite could gain additional benefit by returning to this habit.

Now the time has come to take position for the event. Do you just step to your spot and pick up your firearm? Hopefully not. Carefully check the placement of your feet and the positioning of your body. Then become aware of your balance and refine it so that you are as steady as possible that day. Carefully check the relationship between your body and the target. For rifle and pistol this is the natural point of aim or static position where the body will naturally tend to point the firearm. For running target and shotgun, the athlete must ensure that the dynamic body position will naturally move to and beyond the spot where the athlete expects to engage the target.

Once the competition begins, the sighting shots are still part of the preparation. While called “sighters” because they are used to confirm that the shots are going where desired, they could also be called “settling” shots. Use your sighters to make the final mental transition into competition mode, establish your rhythm, and get the body working the way it needs to. Some events have a fixed number of sighting shots. In the events where the number of sighters is at the athlete’s individual discretion, a well prepared athlete rarely needs more than about 10 to 15 shots. Much less than this doesn’t allow everything to be fully ready for most athletes. More than this is counterproductive except in rare cases.

When you hear “preparation begins now” it merely signals the beginning of the last little phase of preparation for an event. Plan your activities accordingly and you will find that the sport is even more enjoyable and your performance will improve more than you expected.

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)