

On the Firing Line (Fifth in a series)

Eights are Your Friend

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The phrase “Eights are your friend!” usually evokes confused looks from those who have never heard it before. After all, the goal in the shooting sports is to hit the target each time – hopefully in the center for a “perfect ten” or the powdery bust of a clay target. The phrase is a way to highlight two critical components of training and competing. One of the most important aspects of improving performance is the ability to keep positive energy flowing in the face of difficulty – especially in competition. Equally important is the ability to learn from mistakes rather than angrily forget or ignore them.

Often, when a shooter misses a target or has a bad shot, they are told to forget it and move on. This is only half true. Yes, the miss itself or the low scoring shot – that is, the score or result – must be forgotten. However, the underlying performance of the shot must be analyzed if one is to systematically improve their game. One must also reset and refocus (not “just forget”) so that the error is not repeated. Many times a bad shot will be duplicated on the very next attempt!

Notice that the emphasis is on performance rather than on score. You can't do anything about the score... it is there. You can't “fix” it. Focusing attention on score pulls your attention away from the very thing that will provide a good score: your performance. By performance, we mean your shot process, your technique, your position, indeed all aspects of preparing for and delivering the shot. All of this happens on the firing line within your mind and body – not downrange at the target. The target and score are distractions!

When a beginner makes a mistake, they usually are unable to sense the differences in their performance between the good and bad shots. As they develop, they begin to “feel the difference” between them yet are unable to understand, much less predict or correct the errors. Eventually, an athlete can learn to sense the bad shots – “I could tell the moment I pulled the trigger!” – and finally then to predict them. In these latter stages of development, the athlete can begin to understand the causes of the bad performances and work to correct them or they can give up on the shot (no follow through, etc.), react angrily, and never learn how to resolve the problems.

The developing athlete works toward better performances – the master athlete eliminates bad performances by allowing good performances to take place.

When a bad shot occurs, stay with the shot to completion with good follow through. The time after the trigger is pulled gives you a great deal of evidence that can be used to understand what went wrong. Then, see if you can determine what was different... how the gun moved, what muscles had different tension, how the position differed, how the technique or shot process differed, and so on. In some cases you will discover the cause right away while in others you will only be able to gather evidence that you or your coach can eventually use to find the root problems. As you build the habit of actively working on understanding what happens as you fire a shot, you will be able to improve your game and enjoy it more instead of suffering the frustration and anger of yet another bad shot caused by an unknown problem that you can't ever seem to find and correct.

This approach will also make it easier to maintain positive feelings and thoughts! Anger and frustration are blocks to the flow of positive emotion. The anger and frustration become the

focus and cause even worse performance. Embrace the process of learning as a journey of self-discovery and growth.

Here is an example of this technique at work – before and after. Last year, we met an advanced young athlete at a selection match. It didn't take long to notice that she was having difficulty because of her angry reaction to scores that were below her expectations. This pattern usually repeated itself after each event and position. She was unable to recover and resume a good performance nor was she able to understand what was going wrong in the first place. Worst of all, she sometimes accidentally disturbed other competitors because she was so worked up. This was discussed with her on a couple of occasions but the problem wasn't really solved.

She asked for my assistance with some technical issues in her game and the search for answers was on in spite of the fact that we live hundreds of miles apart. Of course, my plan was to also solve the “attitude” situation! In discussions with the national team coach and an OTC technology specialist, information was gathered about the athlete's shot technique based on testing done by them on the athlete at the OTC using their electronic trainer system. This allowed me to learn about her error modes since she wasn't fully aware of them – because she was upset each time the occurred.

We discussed awareness, performance, learning from mistakes, positive energy, and the negative effects on her performance of the old behavior pattern in a phone call. At this point, the athlete was given an “experiment” to perform that would facilitate a better performance and asked to observe what effect it had on various aspects of her technique. It was also explained that the experiment would likely result in much larger groups (lower score) which was fine since this was a training drill – not a match. This was an attempt to eliminate the negative aspects of low score in order to let the drill work correctly and to give her a “safe” drill that would allow her to experience a stress free performance. Sure enough, she was able to explain with great detail and clarity the changes in her technique in terms of hold time, aiming accuracy, trigger control, visual comfort, and overall confidence in the shot as the experiment's steps were performed in sequence. She even laughed about a couple of shots that “got away” since there was no score to upset her and since she could tell why they had happened.

Although the experiment was useful in solving a technical problem, it was purposely constructed in a way that allowed her to discover for herself that she was capable of handling an error in a positive way that allowed her to learn more about her game and thus improve it. She had heard “Eights are your friend” previously from me, but now understands it through her own experience and works on maintaining that attitude. Be nice to yourself and do the same.

You will learn more from one bad shot than from nine good shots.

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)