

**On the Firing Line** (Sixth in a series)

## **Practice? ...Or Training?**

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The notes are as clear in my memory as when they were last played thirty years ago. Masterfully played on the piano by my mother, Ernesto Lacuono's Malagueña is a complex and wonderfully moving piece of music. She would sit down and, without a thought or any music in front of her, launch into a performance of the full version worthy of a concert pianist. The dynamics and tempo changes to fit the music were beyond compare, and the passion and feeling of the music - indeed the music itself - flowed from her fingers into the instrument and out into the room. One could not listen without being moved.

Years later, while exploring aspects of ultimate performance (music, dance, ice skating, swimming, weight lifting, pole vaulting, shooting - it's all the same), I discussed her piano performance with my mother. In the course of the conversation she made a most interesting comment: "I was never a great pianist. I was just well practiced."

She went on to explain that she had worked hard to learn a number of difficult pieces very well, which allowed her to perform them expertly. However, if handed a new piece, she would have had to work laboriously to bring it up to the same standards - unlike a master pianist who would do it rather quickly and easily.

Have you ever seen a football game? Have you ever seen a football practice? How about a baseball or basketball game and their practice sessions? Have you ever seen how these athletes train? Does their game look like their practice? Of course not! Have you ever seen a shooting competition? How about a shooting practice? More often than not, they look the same! What's going on here?

The vast majority of shooters, at least in this country, spend most of their practice time doing exactly what they do in a match: get into position and shoot for score. They are "well practiced" shooters. The "well practiced" performer knows how to do certain things very well. Regardless of whether it is music at the piano or shots toward a target, one can repeat the process over and over and, through trial and error, eventually learn to perform fairly well. This is a time consuming and frustrating process.

This also results in the performer reaching a plateau that limits their potential. It becomes impossible to reach higher levels of performance without completely relearning the techniques and approaching the game from another perspective. Athletes who are already on a national team or competing on the international level are not willing to "break" their game and rebuild it all over. The problem is that it is possible to reach these levels while being only well practiced.

The few athletes that seem to be so much better than most often have a much different understanding of the game and much more knowledge of it. You know that you need to be balanced, but do you know how to check it and actually set it up right? You may have been told about inner position, but do you really know what it is and how to sense and use it? You know correct natural point of aim (NPA) is important, but do you know how to really and truly check it? (If you don't know those first two, then you don't really know this one!) You know it is important to remain calm and relaxed, but do you know how to calm and relax yourself - physically, mentally, and emotionally - in a matter of moments in the heat of the match - or while the clock is running down on a finals shot? Do you tire easily in the course of several matches? The list goes on and on.

As for practice time, do you merely practice or do you train? Do you ever do drills to build your awareness of balance, inner position, and NPA? What about drills that allow you to focus on consistency and feel rather than score? How about drills that build your confidence while increasing your ability to break a shot automatically after a very short hold? We give lip service to the fact that our sport is 90% or 95% (or some large percent) mental. Yet, what do we spend 90% or 95% or 100% of our practice time on? The physical and technical game! Are you a conscious control shooter? Do you believe that is the way to Olympic gold? After all, in our culture we are taught from a young age to “pay attention” and “concentrate” when we want to do something perfectly. Yet that is not the way to do it! Cultural pressure often prevents us from finding better ways. Instead, do you trust yourself enough to relinquish conscious control to your inner self and allow the shots to unfold? Do you know how to do this - or even believe in it?

Admittedly, some of these ideas are controversial. After all, there are any number of shooters who are well practiced, who utilize conscious shot control, and who usually only shoot for score in practice that have done well. Some even make the national team and win medals in international competition. Some of these are rare individuals who just happen to have the right mix of skills to go along with their hard work; for others it’s just hard work and determination.

Yet we watch groups of shooters from other countries (China, Korea, Germany, among others), and an occasional shooter from our country, dominate the medal standings. What is the difference? The dominant shooters usually have a deeper understanding of the game. They have come to understand the concepts being discussed here and find ultimate performance to be almost effortless, even in an important match. They do drills that build skills, skills that translate into improved and more consistent performance, performance that translates into higher scores. They never work on score. They almost always allow their shots to happen for them - almost as a detached spectator - rather than with conscious control that strives for a “perfect” shot. The conscious mind is too slow!

Deciding that becoming a better shooter is just a matter of “more practice” is the slow, unreliable, high risk path to ultimate performance. What got you to your current level may not be - indeed probably is not - what you need to get to the next level, or the next several levels. Even among my own students, I see some who understand this and others who look at me like I’m nuts!

As a national team coach said to me during a discussion about a number of up and coming young shooters, “The ones that make the changes now are the ones that will do well in 2004 and 2008.” Are you working to be a great shooter?

Or are you merely well practiced?

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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](http://www.pilkguns.com).

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(Biographical information as of October 2009)