

On the Firing Line (Tenth in a series)

Trying Not to Lose

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There is a saying in our sport that in order to win the gold, one has only to follow a two step process: 1 Shoot a ten, 2 Repeat number 1. Tim Conrad of the USOC Sport Science and Technology Department has a slightly more technical version: 1 Point at the target, 2 Pull the trigger, 3 Go back to number 1. We laugh at both of these for their simplicity, yet there is a nervous edge to our laughter because we know it really is that uncomplicated. Of course, still waters run deep! There is much going on beneath the surface and we rarely master it.

Are you shooting to win? Or are you shooting to not lose? There is a huge difference! In downhill skiing, for example, the champion is attacking the course and is on the edge of control. No thought of the consequences of failure – just focused determination on execution, thus shaving hundredths of a second off of each gate and run. Some of the others are merely trying to get down the hill without running off the course or crashing. They are skiing to not lose – to not finish last. How might this manifest itself on our sport? Let us begin by looking at a couple of athletes.

Athlete #1 has worked hard at her game. Her positions are fundamentally sound, using bone and ligament as much as possible instead compensating with muscle and tendon. She has trained her balance and learned how to tune the natural body sway to a minimum. She knows how to find and check her true natural point of aim – her natural position – and checks it throughout a competition or training session.

Her equipment is properly adjusted and in perfect working order. Her ammunition is of good quality and matches well with her gun. Her sights are configured correctly (very large front aperture for rifle – wide front blade and very wide rear notch for pistol) and her trigger is adjusted to facilitate optimal performance (50gm 1st stage and 100gm total 2nd stage for rifle – 300gm 1st stage and 500gm 2nd stage for air pistol, with equivalents for others – 40 to 80gm or more for men's free pistol). As a result of these things, she never gives equipment or ammunition a single thought while training or competing.

She uses a physical training program that builds muscle tone and endurance rather than just raw strength. It is a balanced program that builds the lower body to improve stability and allow her to stand through a match without pain or fatigue, her trunk for lower back stability and to prevent injury, and her upper body to allow her to lift and hold the gun with steadiness and minimal fatigue. She has developed a strong kinesthetic awareness and is acutely aware of her “inner position” and how it facilitates ultimate performance.

Her training also involves mental training, reading (within and outside of our sport), dry fire, holding exercises, balance work, and various live fire drills. Her holding, dry, and live work involves blank targets and control or training targets to isolate and work on aspects of her technique, in addition to work with traditional targets. She has coaches that really understand her and her game, who she consults with regularly. They, in turn, aggressively seek answers to any of her questions that they don't already have. It is a partnership. She uses an electronic trainer with her coaches to isolate specific issues that need attention. She is willing to alter her technique rather than stick with old habits when they stand in the way of improving her performance.

As important as all of these items are, they merely set the stage for her flawless and effortless technique. She is psychologically ready to take a shot and the first stage of her trigger is already fully taken up before she ever arrives on her area of aim. Thus, she is willing and able

to deliver the shot on her very first steady state, even if this is only a second or two after arriving on the target. Her eye is focused on the center of the target (rifle) or on the center of the front sight blade (pistol) and she allows her subconscious mind to handle the rest. Yes, she (her conscious mind or self) allows her subconscious to perform for her. The conscious mind is way to slow. Often, she will arrive on target and, just at the instant that the gun completely stops moving, it seems as if the gun goes off by itself – almost as if she were a spectator.

When faced with adversity (“bad” shot, range conditions, target malfunction, etc.), she remains calm and positive. When she makes a mistake, rather than becoming angry, she forgets the score and analyzes the failure mode to facilitate correction in future shots. She takes her shots within the first three steady states in her hold (often in the very first one as just described) and never holds on target more than about 8 seconds. While holding, she allows her subconscious to slowly and steadily build pressure on the trigger. She never has “flutter finger” or “chicken finger” which are both symptoms of lack of confidence and point to fundamental errors elsewhere in the technique and/or mental approach (and sometimes in equipment setup – usually with the sights.)

She always addresses the target with confidence. She focuses solely on herself and her game and allows nothing to enter her space. There is never a thought about score, winning, losing, what others think, other competitors, or any other external influence. She confidently applies a fierce determination, intensity, and will while remaining serenely calm in her approach. She trusts herself and shoots to win.

Athlete #2 spends almost all his training time shooting on the range. He tinkers with his equipment in search of a quick fix for the latest problem. He holds a long time to “make sure” that the sight picture is perfect. In his quest for perfection, he runs his eye around the tight little front sight ring (rifle) or at the target and either side of the razor thin rear sight gap (pistol). Triggering is haphazard at best. When he arrives on target, he is not ready to shoot and does not have the trigger ready... he doesn’t trust himself (though is not aware of this and wouldn’t admit it anyway) and needs to see the first steady state before starting his shot process for real. He “gives up” on shots and forces them instead of putting the gun down and starting the shot over. His fits of anger over a bad shot or low score are legendary. He doesn’t like using coaches because “...they make me do crazy stuff. I want to do things my way.” Of course, he wonders why he is still in that slump! His quest for perfection is shooting to not lose.

Although we made Athlete #2 look pretty bad... there are lots of athletes who are much closer to this style of shooting than to the style of Athlete #1. Athlete #1 is very rare in the world, and even rarer in this country. She wins a lot! The biggest difference between the two is that Athlete #1 trusts herself, does the “hard” work, has an open mind, and allows her subconscious to do most of the work. Athlete #2 does not. Study Athlete #1. More on this next time!

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)