

On the Firing Line (Eleventh in a series)

Working to Win

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In the previous installment of this series, we described two different athletes – one that is very successful and one that is much less so. The critical differences between them provide insight into how to train, how to compete, indeed, how to deliver each shot.

The successful athlete is not obsessed with the mechanics of the game. The unsuccessful athlete is obsessed... to the exclusion of all other considerations. He “controls” his shooting using the conscious mind. Why is this method unsuccessful?

Have you ever driven somewhere and realized that you were never conscious of the act of driving? “I don’t remember driving home!” Maybe you raced cars, motorcycles, or bicycles and discovered that you were unaware of what you had just done. Your conscious mind was preoccupied or silent and was not participating in the task at hand... yet you were able to accomplish it. If you are a musician, I dare you to play a scale at full speed while thinking about each individual note. Every musician that I have asked to do this has said it cannot be done. They state that they don’t think about the notes and just play the scale. When they perform, they think about the music... almost by “feeling” it. They do not think about the notes, or their difficulties with certain passages, or about what the audience might think. To do so is to invite disaster! A touch typist cannot think about each individual letter or keystroke. Instead, they hear or see the words in their mind and they flow onto the page through their fingers almost as if by magic. Of course, there is no magic – they are not trying to think about or control the process with the conscious mind. It seems so obvious and clear in these everyday examples. Why do we insist that it is different for shooting? One must trust oneself and “let go” to allow the great performance.

The successful athlete is always looking for weaknesses in her game and for ways to correct them. The unsuccessful athlete shows up to practice, shoots awhile, practices the same mistakes as last week (or last year), complains about his score, and goes home. How will he ever improve? Are you willing to change the way you shoot? If you do the same things the same way... how is that ever going to improve your performance (and thus your score)?

Do you really want to improve, or do you give it lip service? Are you willing to break off a shot process and “start all over” when a shot isn’t going just right? Or do you just shrug your shoulders and vow to “do better next time”? Lip service! When you are having problems in practice, do you apply extra effort or give up? What about in a match? “Here we go again, I’ve blown it so why bother?” “But I want to be good, coach!” Lip service! Nancy Johnson had a rough time in practice at the 2000 Olympics and again during her match. She didn’t give up or start worrying about her problems. She stuck to her task, talked to her coaches, maintained composure and positive energy, focused on her performance, and ended up with a gold medal! The champion makes good shots. The others just shoot their shots and hope they are good. The champion isn’t afraid to put the gun down – sometimes a lot – in order to eliminate the “bad” shots and deliver a shot correctly every time.

Another part of the difference is willingness to change. “I’ve always done it that way!” Yet the athlete never wins. “But I want to win and I’m working on it!” Lip service! In watching a videotape of one of the finals in the 2000 Olympics, it was obvious that one shooter was making fundamental mistakes that had been pointed out repeatedly by the athlete’s National and Olympic Team Coach, myself, and others – two full years earlier! This athlete never learned to change. “I want to win!” Lip service!

What needs to change? It varies for each individual of course, but a pattern emerges. Sometimes fundamental position mechanics are in need of adjustment. Without these changes, there can be no improvement. Usually, however, it is in the subtle nuances of the shot process that one finds the most improvement. And those nuances often lead right back into the athlete's attitude... how they think about themselves, their game, and their shot process. Open your mind and you will open doors!

One cannot just flip a switch and get "in the zone" merely by willing it. One must set up their mindset, their positions, their equipment, and their shot process to allow themselves to get "in the zone". It's sort of like fishing: no matter what we do, we cannot "make" the fish bite. However, if we do the right things (right time of day, good location, right bait and technique, etc.) we can facilitate the process to maximize the chances of the fish starting to bite. In shooting it's a bit more straightforward: if we do the right things, in time our mind will take over and – almost without realizing it – we discover that we performed well and often did experience "the zone".

What is your job when on the firing line? "Shoot a ten!" No way! "Well, ok, just shoot!" Wrong again! Your job is to do things the correct way. Focus inward. Train toward understanding what is correct and what isn't. Stop yourself when you sense problems or catch yourself doing something incorrectly – instead of being lazy, giving up on the shot, and pulling the trigger. In some ways it is really simple... short holds, break off the hold when that "sixth sense" says something is different, attack the competition with confidence, quiet the conscious mind, and let it unfold. We just seem to want to make it so complex!

The champion performs only good shots. The champion only allows good performances. Think like the champion – be like the champion.

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)