

On the Firing Line (Fourteenth in a series)

Expect The Unexpected

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The pair had skated magnificently. Though other competitors had skated extremely well, none had done so with quite the same level of ease and artistry as they had. Yet, the gold medal wasn't theirs. This was certainly unexpected, given how the competition had unfolded. How would they react on the world stage of the Winter Olympics? Jamie Salé and David Pelletier of Canada reacted with disappointment, yet with grace. Then events unfolded which were even more unexpected: an official admitted irregularity in the judging and duplicate gold medals were awarded as a direct result. One never knows what to expect in competition!

A well-rounded competitor is prepared for "anything and everything" that possibly could happen with a competition. Merely preparing for a "perfect" competition will leave the athlete unprepared to handle situations that deviate from "normal" situations. The athlete must even be prepared to handle situations that were completely unforeseen.

At a World Cup, someone tripped over the leg of a competitor who was about to deliver a shot in from the prone position. Luckily, the shot didn't go off! How did the athlete react? This athlete was very experienced and, after ascertaining that the error was a freak accident not likely to be repeated, turned back to the task at hand – performing quality shots. Had the reaction been one of anger, the athlete would have allowed the problem to get into their head and it likely would have taken them out of their game. What if the shot had been fired? Again, a calm reaction and discussion with an official would allow the situation to be resolved properly and the athlete would return to the competition with minimal distraction.

Dr. Robert Walter Johnson Jr., of Lynchburg, Va. used to teach his tennis athletes, including the young Arthur Ashe, to play every ball that was a few inches outside the lines as if they were inbounds. Why? Because he knew that many of the out of bounds balls would be called in due to the racial discrimination that took place in that era. The athletes came to expect the unexpected and were able to play accordingly. Not only did they make the shots – they were able to remain calm and not allow the biased officiating to get into their head and ruin the rest of their game.

Of course, most times, the officials are not part of the problem. There are other sources of excitement! Each athlete must preplan how to handle a myriad of problems that can surface in competition. What to do if a gun malfunctions, which malfunctions are allowable – and which are not – and how each is handled and scored is not something to learn at the moment it happens. Targets will malfunction sometimes. What type of challenge is best for each particular type of problem? When are additional sighting shots allowed and when are they not? When is additional time allowed and how much? How will the weather or other conditions affect the competition? Knowing what to do in each case can often make the difference in the outcome of the competition.

At the Championships of the Americas, a rather unusual target problem appeared which affected a couple of athletes in one of the 50-meter events. Due to a software bug in a new release of the ROM chips that control the electronic targets, left and right were reversed so that a shot at 3 o'clock would show up on the monitor at 9 o'clock! When an athlete usually shoots shots close to the center, it can be hard to figure out that this is happening. "Did I really miss the call on that shot or did the wind really change that much?" might be going through the athlete's

mind. After losing time and cranking the sights the “wrong” way, the problem became clear. How should it be handled?

If an athlete contests the value of a shot, they risk losing an additional 2 points if the challenge is not upheld. However, shot value (score) is not the issue here. The athlete should tell the official that they believe the target is not functioning properly. There is no penalty for this, even if the official disagrees with the assertion. The athlete should be moved to another target and additional time should be granted – possibly up to the full amount of time elapsed so far in this particular case. (The malfunction was present from the beginning and affected the athlete’s game from the outset.) Hopefully, the athlete will catch this early in the event. Unfortunately, the first time this happened, it took time to become clear and thus confused the athlete and the officials. The athlete ended up not receiving enough additional time to complete the event in a normal manner. This was an example where the unexpected caught athletes and officials off-guard.

It is clear in many situations that the rules will have a major effect on the outcome of the event. One expects the officials to have a thorough understanding of the rules and their appropriate application in each situation. Although officials work very hard to handle things in the correct manner to ensure a fair contest, they are human as well. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the athlete to understand the rules. To what degree should they know the rules? One could argue that the athletes must understand the rules for the events they compete in to the same degree that the officials are expected to. After all, it is the athlete who is affected if the rules aren’t appropriately applied to a particular situation. Athletes need to understand not just the rules... but also the rulebook itself and which rulebook. Rules can be taken out of context, situations occur which the rulebook does not address, rules appear to be contradictory (usually a context problem, not a rule problem), and more than one rule – sometimes in different parts of the rulebook – may apply to a situation. One must be very familiar both with the rules and the structure of the rulebook. There is one and only one correct answer to any rule question: “Let’s look it up.” One must know how to do this quickly, correctly, and completely! Merely finding one rule that appears to apply to the situation at hand may not be sufficient.

Have a plan for the unexpected. Specifically plan for things that can be foreseen such as a gun or target malfunction, weather conditions, crossfires, or other common problems. Also plan how to handle the truly unexpected. Remain calm, communicate with the officials, deal with the situation – regardless of its outcome – and resume your game.

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)