

On the Firing Line (Twentieth in a series)

Two Shots Away From Being Crazy

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“Baggage, it’s what we do.”

Have you ever stopped for a moment to ponder what you take with you to shoot? No, not your equipment; what is it that you take with you in your head and in your heart? If you are like most athletes, you approach your shooting, especially competition, with a mixture of excitement and desires, fear and doubt, thoughts about how to handle the shooting session, either optimism or pessimism, and a whole host of other conflicts and feelings. It is quite a mix of baggage, isn’t it? Sadly, it does not help us to perform well at all.

Baggage

Where do all of these feelings come from? What are the essential elements that cause all of our baggage? There are three primary sources of our baggage.

Lack of proper commitment – Most athletes come to their game with only one true commitment: to look good and not embarrass themselves. The desire for the approval of others is so basic and deeply ingrained that they often aren’t even aware of its existence. Because it is so fundamental a part of the athlete’s thinking, it weakens or prevents true commitment to the athlete’s other desires.

Constant judgments – Athletes are full of judgments about everything and everyone. That person is better than me, I haven’t practiced enough lately, it’s too cold or hot or windy to shoot well, my gun or ammunition aren’t up to the job, and a plethora of other usually negative judgments intrude. The constant judgments impede good performance.

On the verge of upset – As if the first two sources of baggage aren’t enough, there is the constant fear of failure weighing on our mind. Oh sure, we may be feeling good today and the shooting might actually be going pretty well. But failure, and the fear of it, are lurking. Sure enough, a couple of bad shots come and we are undone! We are in fear and are always only two shots away from being crazy.

Breaking the Cycle

With a load of baggage like that, it is no wonder we have problems improving and enjoying the sport. As one of my young friends once said, “We have enough baggage in life, why carry any to the firing line with us?” How do we go about breaking the baggage cycle?

Appropriate commitment – Think for a moment about one of the questions in the previous article, “Why do you shoot?” Commit yourself to the enjoyment, the learning, the aspects of the game that appeal to you the most. People will like you just as much, even if you don’t worry about what they think! Commit yourself to the “doing” of the sport. Commit yourself to the “just being” of the sport. Just “be” and “do” and your enjoyment will grow. Interestingly, your shooting will improve right along with! Make up your mind and act.

Extrospection and proper introspection – As discussed in an earlier article in this series, a significant component of choking is self-conscious introspection. Concerned with outcome or other aspects of the competition that are outside the athlete’s direct control, the athlete becomes self-conscious, no longer trusts themself, and takes active control of the process.

This is the kiss of death! Instead, look outside yourself and, paradoxically, also look inside yourself in positive and helpful ways.

Extrospection, though really only a medical term with a very specific meaning, takes on a broader meaning in this context. It is meant to be the opposite of introspection. Look outside yourself. Do you actually notice the range, the other athletes, officials, and others at the competition or training? Take time to talk with them. Take time to notice the weather. Now, take time to actually notice what is going in your preparation, your setup, and in your shooting. Not judgmental, not critical, merely observing without thought or criticism or judgment. Look with the eye of the artist or dancer rather than the eye of the mechanic or technician. Don't just look though, also feel what is happening. Feel it with your body and with your heart. After all it isn't just your body that does the shooting.

Introspection has its place. Not the self-conscious, controlling introspection that stifles the performance. This mode of introspection is so deep, that the athlete doesn't even notice what is happening in their body or mind or heart. Instead, experience the introspection that is aware, free of judgment and criticism and that senses every nuance of your body's feel and your emotions. Experience the mode of introspection that is quiet, calm, and lives only in the Present Moment.

Creativity and acceptance – We are taught, or teach our self, or otherwise develop for our self, a way to shoot. As we improve, we are less likely to deviate from our methods for fear of shooting worse. It is in the trying to always hit the center or break the clay that we limit our self. Get creative and really learn to shoot. Allow yourself to make mistakes and notice what you learn from them. This will lend insight into how to hit the center or the clay even more often.

Shotgun athletes, upon discovering tomorrow's forecast is for high or gusty winds, need to double their training time, not cancel it. Of course many shots will be missed... at first. Allowing yourself to calmly continue without regard to the outcome will open your senses to learning how it all really works. Before long, you will break targets in conditions that leave your competition shaking their heads in wonder. Calm days will become almost boring, but you will enjoy them so much more. On those days, you will "own" the targets! Eventually, you'll "own" them in the wind, too!

Similarly, shoot rifle in the wind without making compensation for the conditions in order to really learn how much the point of impact is affected by each condition. Really learn this and you will do a better job in competition when you really have to hit the center! By always training to hit the center, and focusing on that alone, you limit the possibilities you have of really learning the wind – and learning your real shooting.

In order to do these and many other types of training, you must accept that your score will go down. It is training, you are learning; of course your score will go down! You are building skills. If your score doesn't go down when doing these types of things, you aren't really doing the drill and you are probably cheating yourself of a golden learning opportunity.

Moving Beyond

All these ideas are rather specific. How do we get to the broader perspective?

Stay awake – How often do we "check out" during our training or competitions? What are we missing? How might that have helped us learn and improve? How might it have increased our enjoyment of the sport? Instead of looking for something "wrong" that needs to be "fixed", just notice what actually happens. Then you will really gain insight.

Be open to the possibilities – How often have we thought, “I shot poorly the last time I was at this range or match or competing against this team. I hope I don’t blow it again.” Or maybe the opposite, “I like shooting on this range, I always do well here.” In the first situation, aren’t you already setting yourself up for a fall? Of course you are! In the latter, aren’t you opening the door to the possibility of relaxing too much, or trying too hard to repeat the earlier performance and, either way, diminishing your next performance? Also true!

Your past does not predict your future. To be sure, many play the game that way. They either think about the past bad performance and repeat it, or think about the past great performance and wonder why they can’t repeat it. Instead, shoot as if there is no past or future. Just shoot! You might get a 10.9! You might get a nice bust of that clay... nothing but dust! You might get a run of 25 straight for the first time in your life... or a run of 100! If you instead saddle yourself with all the baggage, the odds are pretty slim that you will achieve these things, and you certainly won’t be able to repeat them when and if they do happen on a fluke.

All of which brings us to the ultimate question of being open to the possibilities.

Why we fear bad shots – Well now, that’s easy to answer, right? Bad shots hurt our score, they embarrass us, they keep us from reaching our goals, they cause us to let down the team or our coach or mom and dad, they cause us to feel bad about ourself and have unmet expectations... ok, I’ll stop now. We may have these feelings and many more, but none of them have anything to do with the real reason we fear bad shots.

We fear the bad shot because we believe it will happen again. At any moment, and likely very soon. This is what we really fear. In our effort to avoid the bad shot, we fall into the traps of low confidence, self-conscious introspection, active control, and choke like crazy.

Many of my students have heard me say, “Champions do not avoid bad shots; they only make good shots. They reject the bad ones before the trigger is pulled.” We aren’t splitting hairs; it really is a different outlook and it does affect our shooting.

If your future is not predetermined by your past and if you can become open to the possibilities of what might happen, imagine what the effect would be on you and on your game. Defensive shooting is already defeated. Defeated by the athlete’s own thoughts about the past. Confident, aggressive shooting in the Present Moment is almost always unbeatable.

Final thoughts –We make this sport so difficult, yet it is so easy. Our opponents don’t slam us into the ground like in football, they don’t throw things at us or run into us like in baseball or many other sports, if our equipment has a glitch, it doesn’t slam us to the pavement and send us cart wheeling and praying for our life at 180 mph like in motorcycle racing, and our target certainly doesn’t shoot back at us. So what is the problem? Baggage! Get over it. Just shoot like you did when you were a beginner, carefree, but not carelessly.

This article, and the 4 that have preceded it, cover a set of inter-related topics on aspects of shooting that are rarely discussed and used in our sport. Take a few moments to review all 5 of them. One of my friends jokingly calls these topics and my related teachings the “fruitcake” stuff. He also sees that they transform the performance of athletes who embrace it.

How open is your mind to these ideas, and to the possibilities?

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)