

On the Firing Line (Twenty-fourth in a series)

A Process For Breaking Out

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“Are you committed to your shooting? Or merely involved with it?”

Dr. Bob Rotella is considered to be one of the very best coaches in professional golf. Because golf is a “big money” sport, it attracts a large number of top quality coaches and Dr. Rotella is among the very best of an elite group. His books are classics in sports teaching. Shooting, golf, and many other sports are almost identical when it comes to the non-technical aspects of ultimate performance. His ideas are universal and apply to almost all sports, including our sport of target shooting.

Despite the number of quality coaches available in golf, many athletes who aspire to greatness on the PGA tour never seek out a good coach as a resource to assist them on their journey. So often athletes in every sport “go it alone” even though a great guide could make the journey faster, easier, more enjoyable, and allow the athlete to achieve at a much higher level. Dr. Rotella outlines a process to “break out” of the normal mediocrity and achieve at any level the athlete desires.

If you want to play your best game ever – that is shoot well and easily and truly enjoy your shooting – you must admit to yourself that you want to be good and that you have the necessary talent to do well. Stop asking yourself “Can I be good enough?” I sometimes ask my students “What would you attempt to achieve if you knew you could not fail?” It isn’t usually a question of “can” an athlete be great; it is a question of “will” the athlete do what it takes to be great. Get over it and get to work! But that's not all. You must truly commit yourself to a process that will improve your game. Dr. Rotella outlines a 7 step process.

1. Choose the right teaching professional.

Not every coach or athlete is a great teacher. The very best serve as a guide, a leader, a resource, a teacher, and an inspiration to the athlete. How does one choose a teacher?

Just because the teacher is not a former champion, it does not automatically mean they are unable to guide you on your journey of reaching your goals. Often, they are more than capable of guiding you. People will argue that they cannot learn from someone who does not (or did not) shoot as well as them, or that the coach doesn’t know what the athlete is feeling. While this is true in many cases, it is not universally true. Such prejudice prevents the athlete from taking advantage of a great teacher.

Conversely, just because a teacher is a former champion, it does not automatically mean they are able to guide you on your journey of reaching your goals. Often, they cannot teach effectively. The majority of athletes are good at what they do, but have less understanding of how they do it, and even less understanding of how to teach it. Happily, there are those who are great at teaching, but they are a distinct minority. Often an athlete will look to an elite athlete as a teacher, when that elite athlete would serve better as a training partner or as friend and inspiration.

You need someone who knows how to teach the sport, how to teach the broader and deeper aspects of the sport and of competition... and most of all, how to teach you specifically.

Whether your teacher is a former champion or not is far less important. This has been proven repeatedly in shooting and in other sports.

You need someone who understands that there is far more to ultimate performance than just getting the physical and technical things mastered. Those aspects are merely the foundation. The mental and emotional aspects of sport performance are far more important, and have a much greater effect on your game, than the physical and technical aspects. To be sure, the physical and technical aspects are critical – foundational – yet the mental and emotional aspects are the keys to unlock your potential. You will fall short of your goals until you also understand this concept and act accordingly.

You need someone who will take the time and effort to understand you and your strengths and weaknesses and guide you accordingly. No cookie cutter teaching at the higher levels! The teaching must become less structured over time, yet more rigorous, and always specific to the individual student. A great teacher will also help you train with purpose, create and maintain a healthy balance in your life, and provide an objective outside opinion.

2. Communicate your dreams and goals to your teacher.

When your teacher knows what you want to accomplish, they are in a much better position to assist you in making it happen. When a teacher and an athlete do not have the same understanding of goals and commitments, it can cause communication problems between them. The teacher ends up thinking the athlete is not committed and the athlete thinks the coach pushes too hard, or the teacher thinks the athlete drives themselves too much and the athlete thinks the teacher doesn't care. Either way, it hurts the process.

There must be a deep level of trust and commitment between teacher and athlete. This takes time to develop and requires constant and clear communication and understanding. It also requires a teacher who is willing to make your goals their goals for you. There will be times of disagreement requiring athlete and teacher alike to stay focused on the long term goals, work through the short term challenges, and be open and honest with each other.

3. Get your teacher to teach you as a student who is serious about improving.

Your teacher must understand that you are serious and want to work hard and are willing to do the “hard” things needed to reach your goals. Rather than showing up and giving you a few tips now and then, you want your teacher to dig deep over the long haul and really show you how to change your game to raise it to whole new levels. Simplistic tips usually go nowhere in the long run. You need solid work over a long period of time.

You want a teacher who will hold you accountable and encourage you. There will be times when your spirit and motivation sag. Your teacher will help you through those times, yet remain sensitive to your needs.

4. Make a plan for improvement with your teacher and stay committed.

Training without developing your own plan is far less effective. Although your teacher can guide you in developing effective goal sets, schedules, and training plans, ultimately they must be your own in the sense that you decide they are in fact what you truly want. Lack of a plan allows the athlete to drift and an improperly constructed goal set actually demotivates the athlete. Conversely, a properly constructed goal set, in concert with an effective training plan, actually helps motivate the athlete. At that point, motivation is rarely an issue.

Teaching without commitment is far less effective. The best teacher in the world is powerless if the athlete is not committed. Similarly, the best athlete in the world is not helped by a teacher that is not also committed. No matter how talented and hard working the athlete is, without commitment to the actual process by both parties the athlete will fall short of their goals.

Remember that your teacher can only be as committed to you as you are to your plan, to your self, and to your teacher. An athlete cannot ask a teacher for more commitment than the athlete is willing to make. Your teacher is making a big sacrifice for your benefit, so you need to match the commitment level that you have asked your teacher to give you.

5. Sustain and honor your commitment.

Lofty goals require a long and often frustrating and difficult journey. Only the athlete who remains committed – through action, not just word – reaches their goals and dreams. You have invested much time and effort in your self. See it through. You must remain committed – to your sport, to your plan, to your teacher, and most of all... remain committed to your self!

There will be difficult moments between athlete and teacher. Open and honest communication is an important part of the commitments each has made to the other. Avoiding a conversation, or your teacher altogether, when a problem arises is unprofessional and is not being honest with your teacher. Communication is most important in the difficult times. Of course, your teacher must reciprocate in this area as well.

Merely being involved in your shooting or waiting for coaches and skills and awards to come to you will get you nowhere. You have to go after it! You must understand the difference between committing to and working toward something instead of merely being involved and “trying” harder.

6. Break old habits and develop new ones.

One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting a different result. Think about it! Champions will tell you that you must have an open mind and be willing to change in order to improve. The challenge is to sustain that attitude.

Champions are different because they are willing to learn. They dare to change their game and their own inner self when needed. We are so worried about score that we refuse to do anything that results in a drop in score. Yet, often we must “back up” out of a dead end in our game in order to take a new course. If we are patient and allow the score to drop, the new direction will result in higher scores once the change is assimilated into our game. Many athletes are afraid of “breaking” their game, refuse to change except very little, and cheat themselves of the possibilities.

7. Practice efficiently and effectively.

Competition is nothing more than a test of what you have really learned. Training should be about learning to compete. Anyone can learn to shoot tens in practice. Shooting tens in a big match is the key.

Are you going through the motions and paying lip service to your self, or are you committed to improving and actually making the effort? Do you shoot a set number of shots and call it a day? Or do you truly use the training time, work on skills, do “hard” work like intensity training or drills that you don’t really like to do but that will make you a tougher competitor?

Your training time is a gift. Your teacher’s time is a gift. Use both wisely.

Putting the process to work.

Sport shooting is generally not a big money sport and does not attract a large number of teachers. As a result, your local school or club coach is the coach you will interact with the most and may even be your only coach. Other athletes have no teacher other than teammates or an interested parent. Commit to your game and communicate with your coach or coach surrogate. You both will benefit!

A good teacher also may be an athlete or coach from outside of your school or club. For example, the best music students learn from their director at school yet they also take private lessons from an outside teacher. It should be no different in shooting. Clinics, camps, seminars, articles, and books also expose you to additional teachers and ideas. You must be able to evaluate all of this information to properly determine which pieces fit your “puzzle” and which pieces, while helpful to some, are not helpful to you. Conversely, coach who says that you should always listen only to that one coach, and no other, is not a good teacher and is giving you some very bad advice.

Great athletes quickly learn to become their own coach. While it is true that you are your own best coach, and must learn to be independent in competition and training, advanced and elite level athletes often do best when partnered with a good teacher. Josef Gonci is a classic example of that effect. He worked very closely with a teacher during the time that he dominated men’s rifle. In our country, Nancy Johnson partnered with Dan Durben as one of her teachers on her quest that resulted in Olympic gold in 2000. Probably the most dramatic example of this process at work is the partnership between cyclist Lance Armstrong and his teacher Chris Carmichael.

Remember that it takes time for this process to work. It takes time each week in communication between teacher and athlete. It takes time for the benefits of your work to affect your results. Sometimes the athlete will notice immediate improvement in some areas. Other times, it may take 6 months for an improvement to become apparent. The ultimate athlete is patient! So is a good teacher.

Your scores in competition and your enjoyment of the sport will both grow immensely if you will allow yourself to actually learn the game – really learn it! However, you must have and actually act on the single biggest thing that is missing in most athletes – true commitment.

Are you committed to your shooting or merely involved with it? What, you may ask, is the difference between being involved in your shooting and being committed to it? An example provides a clear illustration of the difference. When it comes to a bacon and eggs breakfast, the chicken is merely involved. The pig, on the other hand, is truly committed.

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)