

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

Believe

©2005 JP O'Connor

**“We do what we think.
We become what we believe.”**

This article marks the 25th installment of the On the Firing Line series. At the time of the first article, I never would have imagined the series would still be going strong almost 5 years and 25 installments later. If someone had suggested this would be the case, I would not have believed them. So it is fitting that “Believe” is the title and theme of this article.

When asked what the difference was between a day when she fired a 390 in air rifle competition and a day when she fired a 397 or better, a 19 year old World Cup champion in smallbore rifle replied “The only difference is in my confidence level that day. If I believe I am on top of my game that day, I am. If I don’t believe I am, I’m not.” She didn’t say a word about her technique, positions, shot process, concentration, or anything other aspect of shooting. Just that one concept.

In writing about his study of “flow”, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi says that one of the critical elements for flow to take place is that the challenge of the task must be well matched with the capability of the performer. Even when this is true as determined by an outside observer, such as a coach, the performer themselves must believe this is the case; otherwise flow cannot take place.

Abhinav Bindra of India, a brilliant technician and performer in our sport, echoes similar sentiments. One may indeed be among the best in the world (as he certainly is), yet one’s training process and schedule must be such that the performer believes they are prepared and able to meet the challenge. If this is the case, he will find himself in the “flow” state or “zone of forgetfulness” when he shoots and the results are world class. Other times, as when competing in a World Cup with very limited training ahead of time due to work and school, or in a new discipline with a new rifle, he may or may not have the same level of belief in his preparedness to match the challenge. This is all very normal and affects the way the performance unfolds. Because he understands these concepts, he is able to plan his training accordingly.

With all the emphasis we place on technical aspects of the sport, such as our equipment and technique, and on the physical aspects including our positions, it seems odd that something as seemingly simple as what we think or believe can have such an impact on our performance. Yet, experience repeatedly shows just how true this is. The stories of two champions lend insight and illustrate this theme quite well.

Rebuild My Confidence

When an athlete loses confidence and no longer believes that they can perform at a high level, it is frustrating, at best. But all is not lost as this athlete discovered.

Despite numerous achievements, including gold medals and at least one record setting performance, this 19 year old athlete was coming off of a season where one thing after another had eroded her confidence and it showed in her scores. Two months before a national championship, she asked an old coach of hers if they could work together to help her work through the current situation. They talked about the situation, her feelings about it, and most importantly, explored her assessment of why she was struggling and what she thought was

needed to break the cycle. They also discussed the coach's observations and suggestions and together they came up with a plan of action.

Some of their training session activities were planned in advance by the coach. At one point, he suggested a short session using a Noptel electronic trainer "just to see" if they might notice anything interesting or helpful to the process. Uncharacteristically, but by design, the coach allowed the athlete to see the instant replay right after each shot. After only the third shot, she commented on how good her hold appeared to be on the computer screen. After she completed the ten shot series, they discussed what she had observed. Once again, she believed in her hold. Progress was being made.

Other training session activities were decided upon almost in real time as a response to observations by athlete or coach of what was happening in the session or what the athlete was noticing or feeling. They used a mix of drills all designed to allow the athlete to rediscover just how capable she really was. The entire two month training program was designed around just that one idea; the athlete must rediscover how good she was and believe in herself again.

At the conclusion of their last training session's wrap up discussion, the coach then asked the athlete to imagine making the final in the air pistol event. Her body visibly reacted in fear. They then discussed the dynamics of a final, and of starting near the back of the pack in a final, along with how she could approach the event in her mind and heart. Once she was comfortable with this idea and felt equipped to handle a final, he then asked her to imagine not only making the final, but starting it in first place. Again, her body visibly reacted. They discussed the very different dynamic that would be at work in that situation, and again how she could approach it. The coach said that he wanted her to be prepared in case those things happened. After all, neither of them could predict the future, and she was shooting quite well again. She didn't believe that she could even make the final, and her coach helped her open her mind to the fact that it might just be possible and that she could perform well in a final.

At the national event, her qualification performances were absolutely dominating. Imagine her surprise when she discovered that she had made the final... and was starting in first place! In the final, she started out quite strongly, then faltered. An 8 shook her up and then she followed with a 5. This stunning development sent a jolt of adrenaline through her like an electric shock. As the scores were read, she worked mightily to burn the extra adrenaline and calm herself before the next shot. Many in the crowd thought she was going to give up on the spot. Though soft spoken, they didn't know how determined this athlete was.

Although "Eights are your friend", shooting a 5 when contending for the gold is quite a challenge to overcome. After calming herself as much as she could after that devastating shot, she was only able to deliver an 8 on her next shot. This was still a great accomplishment under the circumstances. Only with this shot did she relinquish first place! She continued to believe that she was capable of shooting well, calmed herself even more and finished strongly in her remaining shots to claim the gold medal.

Believe In Me

The power of one's belief's about one's ability to perform was made strikingly clear to a young athlete and her coach on a day that made a difference in both their lives.

At the age of 15, and with only 1-1/2 years of shooting experience behind her, this athlete was about to compete in a huge air rifle final round. The hall was packed with athletes, coaches, spectators, and media. Having posted a qualification score that she later labeled as "low", she

found herself tied for 5th place and shooting in the 6th position of the final. She assumed that she would shoot her final and finish somewhere in the middle of the pack.

Realizing this, her coach sat with her for a chat a few minutes before the final. Her eyes grew wide with fear as he started by reminding her that the World Cup champion mentioned earlier had won her gold medal starting in exactly the same situation. He said he didn't tell her this because he expected her to win or that he would be disappointed if she didn't win; he merely wanted her to believe that it was possible. He then went on to invite her to open her mind to the possibilities of what might happen that day. He told her how the others in the final might be approaching the final and how that might open the door for her if she did her part. If she stayed within herself, dug deep inside, and did what she knew so well how to do, anything was possible. Of course, the outcome also depended on how the other 7 athletes performed. But if she did her part, everything else would take care of itself. A year later she would write about the experience in a school essay:

“[My coach], was talking to me before the final started and told me that I could and would win. All I had to do was trust myself and it would happen. I doubted that I would win. I told him “Yeah, right coach, you go on and think that.” But he just told me to trust myself and to take my time and I would surprise myself.

Her first nine record shots all scored 10. At that point she could stand the curiosity no longer and looked at the live update scoreboard. She was shocked to find that she was in first place! Collecting herself, she managed a solid 9 on her last shot for a 99 raw score and a final total over 101. When she realized that she had won, her emotions poured out. Without even pausing to take off her shooting coat, and with tears of joy running down her face, she called out her coach's nickname, gave him a big hug, and said “Nobody believed in me but you. I didn't even believe in me, but you did.”

“[My coach] was the only one who had faith in me to win. All I had to do was trust myself and I could accomplish my goals. My school coach never believed that I could win. My teammates believed in me less. My own boyfriend never really congratulated me or believed that I could win either. My parents were happy for me; however they were just as surprised as I was because of my low qualifying round score. Only one person believed in me and it wasn't even me.”

“The final taught me to believe in myself and that I can accomplish anything. This lesson in what I am capable of greatly shapes how I now approach difficult or impossible looking tasks. I know now that if I only trust myself and follow the task through to the end I can accomplish anything.”

Lucky is the coach who gets to hear the rest of the story. Neither athlete nor coach will ever forget that day.

Final Thoughts

In both of these stories, the athletes were very good technicians and had proven their mettle in competition. Yet, each did not believe they could achieve their goal. In each case the

athletes had a coach help them find a way to overcome that challenge. They learned that, despite adversity and even disaster, they could prevail. They learned to believe in themselves.

Both of these examples also illustrate some of the points discussed in the previous installment of this series on the topic of partnering with a teacher. These athletes were strongly assisted by their teacher through mutual communication, commitment to their common goals and to their work together, and good old fashioned hard work.

Make no mistake, however. Regardless of the coach's contribution, the athlete is the one who must stand all on their own and perform. Even the best coach cannot "produce" a winner if the athlete is not up to the challenge. Both of these athletes were and are winners, with and without their teacher. In the examples, the teacher merely contributed.

We truly do what we think and we become what we believe. If we think we will shoot a bad shot... we are almost always correct. If we believe that we can't ever win, we are right again. Yet, if we think we are going to shoot a good shot and allow ourself to do it properly, it is normally quite good. If we believe that we can win, we are well on the way.

Ultimately, it is the athlete who must do the work, and face the test of competition... and believe.

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.

Permission is granted to distribute FREE copies for non-profit educational purposes provided the article is kept unedited in its entirety with all notices, copyright, and other information contained in the document. Any other use requires advance, specific, written permission from the author. The author may be contacted at jpoc@acm.org.

Based in the Atlanta, Ga., area, JP O'Connor (jpoc@acm.org and <http://www.america.net/~jpoc/>) is involved in rifle and pistol target shooting as a competitor, is a former Assistant National Coach – USA Paralympics Shooting Team, is a Level 3 coach, serves on the National Coach Development Staff, and coaches the rifle and pistol teams at North Georgia College & State University. He enjoys working with a number of pistol and rifle athletes from around the country, ranging from beginners to the highly advanced, in clinics and one-on-one private coaching, all on a volunteer basis. He also works with musicians and athletes in a variety of sports.

(Biographical information as of October 2009)