

**On the Firing Line** (Twenty-sixth in a series)

## **Culture of Shooters**

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**“Nothing is broken.  
Stop trying to fix it.”**

Culture has such a fundamental influence on our ways of thinking that we don't realize the effects. Only when people from two cultures meet do the effects become apparent. This is especially true when the people from eastern and western cultures meet. Americans are especially prone to being “culture unaware” because of the size of the country and the resultant geographic isolation from most other countries. For example, American business people must often be taught about other cultures, especially when traveling to Japan or other eastern cultures.

### **Culture of Shooters**

Despite the dramatic differences among cultures around the world, there is another culture that is constant no matter where the athlete calls home. This is the Culture of Shooters. The effects of this culture, as with any other, are so pervasive as to be invisible. There is one foundational concept in this culture: *“There is something wrong with my game and I must fix it”*.

This attitude and approach is so ingrained and taken for granted that it isn't even noticed. “Something is wrong with my shooting and maybe this article will give me an idea of how to fix it.” Sound familiar? Rarely is another approach even contemplated. Shooting isn't the only sport with this culture. Archery, golf, tennis, and most other sports are all a part of his same culture of “fix it” people. Let us learn a bit about this culture and then explore another culture.

The performance of our chosen sport requires complex and intricate movements that are precisely timed. We don't normally do activities like this, so we must learn how to perform the activity. Most people hack away at it while a few seem to stand out above the rest. When you go to shoot, what is your plan? Having no plan is useless. Having a plan to “fix” something is worse! When coach and athlete talk, it goes something like this:

“Fix what?”

“My shot release.”

“What part of it?”

“The part I am doing wrong.”

“What part are you doing wrong?”

“I don't know.”

“How will you know when it is fixed?”

“I will hit the center of the target.”

“What if you don't hit the center?”

“I'll have to fix it.”

“Fix what?”

“My shot release.”

... It only gets worse from there!

So often we hear “Coach, if I can just fix my (fill in blank here), I’ll have it all figured out!” This is wishful thinking and nowhere near the truth How can an athlete possibly “fix” something or improve without awareness of what needs improvement? The “fix it” mentality uses tips, tricks, hints, pointers and random trial in an attempt to “fix” the problem. Of course, there is no real knowledge of the problem; only of visible symptoms. Improvement is haphazard: “Now I’ve got it! Now I don’t!” One moment; unbeatable – the next; worse than a beginner. Always two shots away from being crazy.

Imagine for a moment that we are both working on our own picture puzzles, each with hundreds of little pieces. Yours is a beach scene and mine is a mountain scene. If you have trouble with your puzzle, I won’t hand you a piece from mine and say “Here, try this. It worked for me in that situation.” That would be absurd! Now imagine for a moment, that our puzzle pieces are all upside down – we don’t know there is a picture on the other side. Every piece is the same solid color. If you ask for my help, you willingly accept the puzzle piece that I offer you from my side of the table because the pieces all appear to belong together. Too bad the piece that worked so well in my puzzle won’t work at all in yours. Athletes and coaches do this all the time! We need to understand what style of “puzzle” is involved for each athlete.

There are different styles and methods of shooting, just as there are different picture puzzles. Bob Foth and Dan Jordan, both of whom have won numerous medals in international shooting competitions (including Bob’s medal at the 1992 Olympics and Dan’s medal at the 2004 Paralympics), have very different styles of shooting. While there are certain underlying principles that their styles have in common, there are any number of significant differences. If the two of them mindlessly traded “tips” then very soon they both would shoot very poorly.

Bob used a method that is very specific and that is not all that common. He did this because certain very specific circumstances forced him to do so. Despite his success with his method, he urged me to continue to train athletes with the much different style that he saw me teaching because his way was harder, required more training, and was difficult to maintain. In effect, he was saying “My beach scene worked well for me because of certain specifics. However, it would be best for your students if you continued to teach the mountain scene and only switched to another scene if specific circumstances require it.” Yet, most of the time, athletes (even many at elite levels) and coaches randomly trade puzzle pieces without realizing what kind of puzzle they are working on. When we have no idea what is wrong or why, or even what kind of technique is being used, we will “try” anything with widely varying results.

How then is it possible for athletes to excel in the sport if they, like most, are in the Culture of Shooters? If an athlete randomly happens to come up with a style of shooting that works for them and trains with it a great deal, they can do quite well with it. They have no real understanding of the process, yet are shooting well. Gary Anderson (2 time Olympic champion in rifle) is often heard to say “A well practiced mistake beats the eternal search for perfection.” By finally settling down and doing something and learning it well, the athlete performs much better than if they are constantly changing things. They got lucky in their “fix it” journey and found something that worked just well enough that they left it alone for awhile. Many athletes do not get so lucky.

### **Culture of Awareness**

How do we break the “fix it” pattern and what do we replace it with? For an insight, let us look at how a small child learns to walk. How many times does the baby fall down while learning to walk? I’m not sure I can count that high! Does the baby set out to “fix” what is

wrong? Does the baby say “Stupid baby!” every time he or she falls down? Of course not! The baby merely becomes aware of what was done and what happens as a result – and then modifies what is done and repeats this cycle over and over. It is really quite simple.

It is time now for some culture shock. Instead of fixing things, we are going to use our awareness to learn what is happening and to learn to discern cause and effect. The new culture says: *“There is something going on in my shooting and I must become aware of it.”* Step to the line with that attitude and resist the urge to fix everything. Just be aware of what is going on. You will be amazed at the insight you gain and then it will become clear what to do differently. This may take time, but it will happen. Additionally, one must be willing to explore doing things differently so that different results might take place. Some will appear to be better and some worse, yet all will provide insight. This is not the same as random “trying” – rather it is thoughtful experimentation based on things the athlete and coach become aware of. Always changing things randomly, or always trying to shoot nothing but tens in practice, will rob you of the opportunity to actually learn what is going on.

When you are training – or competing – and you catch yourself trying to “fix” things, stop and take charge. For example, when coaching or training, I sometimes have to stop myself from falling into the “fix it” trap! Be aware and insight will come to you. Rather than judge and attempt to fix, merely be aware. Rather than focusing on what is wrong, be open to the possibilities of what good things could happen. You could actually hit the center of the target. The people who are the most successful in life are the ones who focus on the possibilities. This holds true in sport as well. Rather than burden yourself with the weight of “broken” shooting, enjoy the uplifting experience of shooting with your focus on the possibilities. The stories of the two athletes in the previous installment of this series provide dramatic examples of the power of considering the possibilities.

One evening, an advanced athlete was telling me about a problem he had noticed and that he (and others) had been unable to fix. There is that word again! They had tried one thing after another to no avail while expending a great deal of energy and time. He described the “problem” to me and we agreed that it was actually a symptom. He was encouraged to not worry about it, to not attempt to fix it, and to merely use his awareness to discover what was really going on. I wandered off to another athlete after we agreed that he could best do this on his own and asked him to get my attention and let me know if he had any questions during the session. Left to his own devices, this advanced athlete did exactly as was suggested. A bit later, having not heard from the athlete, I went over to him and he reported exactly what he had discovered, what he had experimented with as a result of the discoveries, and that the symptom had not only disappeared, but he knew why and how it had come and gone. The issue isn’t likely to return again, nor will it remain unsolved for very long if it does return. He took a step into the Culture of Awareness!

## **Summary**

The Culture of Shooters is so much a part of our shooting that we don’t even know it. No one is immune, not even coaches and elite athletes. Experience has proven this many times over. The Culture of Shooters looks externally to others for tips, tricks, hints, and pointers from others for solutions. External score is a major focus. The mode of operation is: “Observation – Judgment – Reaction.” Inconsistency results.

The Culture of Awareness is a brave new world. Everyone is capable of working in this manner, yet so few chose to do so. The Culture of Awareness looks inside themselves for insight

and answers. Internal performance is a major focus. The mode of operation is: “Awareness – Response”. Competent stability results.

Take your pick! As with any aspect of shooting, the choice is yours.

### **Acknowledgements**

Dan Jordan always encourages me in my journey off the beaten path. Dan introduced me to the Culture of Shooters and to Fred Shoemaker’s wonderful book, listed below.

Lauren Herrington, a young rifle shooter, spontaneously created the art work upon hearing of the Culture of Shooters.

### **References**

Millman, Dan, *Body, Mind Mastery: Creating Success in Sport and Life*, 1999, New World Library – This book has transformed a number of shooters. Buy it!

Shoemaker, Fred, *Extraordinary Golf: The Art of the Possible*, 1996, Putnam – This article is based, in part, on Chapter 3: *The Culture of Golfers*. Another “must buy” book.

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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](http://www.pilkguns.com).

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(Biographical information as of October 2009)

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