

On the Firing Line (Thirty Third in a series)

Learning To Compete

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“I shoot well in practice! Why can't I do it in competition?”

The 2007 USA Shooting National Championships provided another illustration of the dichotomy between practice and competition. While some of the athletes performed well, even achieving personal records, many others were unable to duplicate their practice scores. Beginners, intermediates, and elite athletes alike fell victim to the syndrome. Why is this and what can be done about it?

We rarely follow this principle: “Train like you compete and compete like you train.” In competition, many athletes focus on the outcome in one form or another. Score, place rank, making a team, impressing someone, not embarrassing themselves, concern about outcomes as a reflection of self worth, and other outcome-based issues interfere with the athlete's ability to perform the skills they have learned. This destroys the performance – the “doing” – thus destroying the outcome. Note the paradox: focusing on the outcome actually destroys the outcome.

Everyone loves a winner and we are encouraged to be the winner. Emphasis is placed on winning and on outcome. Nothing is said about how to achieve the outcome! We are erroneously taught to just focus on outcome and it will be ours.

We are also taught to “Take control!” and “Make things happen!” Our ego is relied upon to “take charge” and run things. In many activities, this may be useful. In many others, including shooting, it is counterproductive if we interpret the instructions to mean we must take control of the doing of the activity and/or of the outcome. This is yet another paradox!

Finally, we are taught to use only the active thought part of our mind. We are taught to exercise and use this part of our mind to the exclusion of the deeper parts of our mind. Facts, figures, logic, test scores, and grades are the focus of much of our educational training. We are not taught about the deeper parts of our mind, much less how to tap into its power, if we are told about it at all.

It is certainly possible to achieve great things with a focus on outcome and with emphasis on use of the active thought part of the mind. The challenges to that approach are that it takes much longer to reach the top of the elite level, it is much more frustrating work to get there (thus discouraging many athletes who leave the sport before achieving their goals), and their success is not sustainable over time.

Athletes who excel and who are able to sustain their high level of results do so with a different emphasis. They are more concerned with the process or journey of learning and growing as athletes than they are with the outcome. They have learned that such an emphasis is more enjoyable, leads to faster improvement, leads to higher levels of capability, and thus to higher scores. Yes, focus on something other than outcome improves outcome! This is a hard lesson to believe, much less put into effect in our activities.

The first step in learning how to compete is to think about the differences between outcome and performing or doing. Outcome is something over which the athlete has no direct control. All of the outcome factors listed above in the second paragraph are beyond the athlete's

direct control. At this point, some protest that they can control the score outcome and they can shoot a ten on demand. While they may shoot a few consecutive tens on demand as “proof”, this is a false belief as proven by their inability to do so 60 times in a row in an important 60 shot competition. Realizing that outcome is beyond the athlete’s direct control is critical.

How an athlete performs or goes about doing the activity is in the athlete’s direct control. What one does and thinks can be learned, trained, and directly controlled. Again, some protest that they are controlling what they do and think. The challenge is that they are controlling and thinking the wrong things. To understand this, we must explore the differences between learning and doing the activity, which brings us to the next step.

The second step in learning to compete requires an understanding of how the activity is best performed. Shooting, archery, golf, darts, and many other activities are best performed when the athlete has “programmed” a robust process and then allows that process to unfold without intervention. Golfers who think “swing smoothly” just before addressing the ball, and then who quietly allow the swing to unfold on its own, do much better than those who “talk” themselves through each part of the swing since they want to “control” the swing in order to get a good drive.

To understand this, we need to review how a complex task is learned.

In the first phase of learning a task, the athlete carefully monitors each aspect of the task and often “talks” their way through it when first learning how to perform the activity. “Feet like this, hold it like this, look there...” and additional dialogue goes on in the athlete’s mind.

Rather quickly, parts of the task are learned and “programmed” so that the athlete no longer needs to walk themselves through each little step or component. This second phase of learning a task is characterized by much of the task being automated while still retaining a significant amount of monitoring and control on the part of the athlete.

The third phase of learning a task is the full automation of the performance. This requires complete trust on the part of the athlete and it requires that the athlete’s mind remain quiet. This is in stark contrast to the mind state of the first two phases. This fact, coupled with the cultural conditioning discussed earlier, makes it difficult for many athletes to relinquish the perceived “control” they think they have over the process and just allow the process to unfold.

In the seemingly simple task of tying one’s shoelaces, there is no stress over outcome. We just tie the laces and move on. Imagine being so concerned about the outcome that we insert our ego into the process and attempt to control each step of the process, and even attempt to control each muscle movement within each step. Utter failure! We learn how to sit down, stand up, walk, and climb stairs, yet are incapable of describing or controlling each muscle movement. Similarly, attempting to control the shot release or golf swing destroys the subtle movements and timing of each.

The third step in learning to compete is proper training. Mere practice of shooting skills is not enough. Training encompasses skill acquisition, skill refinement, skill practice, skill assessment, skill expansion, physical training to create aerobic capacity and smooth, aerobic muscle and fitness, and much more. Training is also a mindset of stretching one’s limits and continually expanding them. The concept of skills is understood by most as encompassing physical and technical aspects of the activity. Often overlooked, the mental and emotional aspects of the activity are equally important. They become even more important under the pressure of competition. The most frequently overlooked aspect of training is training under true competition conditions. Merely hanging a target and shooting for score does not create the proper environment. Intensity training is required.

Intensity training – creating training situations where the athlete cares about the outcome – is of paramount importance. Here the athlete is able to experience the “match nerves” and explore the techniques of just “tying the shoelaces” instead of controlling the actions. At first, intensity training works just like competition. The athlete often chokes. Then, through learning about thought patterns and self-talk, the athlete is able to experience shooting that “feels like practice” because they have focused on being aware of their actions without controlling or interfering with them, and without focusing on the outcome. As with any skill acquisition, this takes time and effort.

Exposed to a lot of competitions and intensity training, one athlete described how she stepped up her level of determination and raised her standards in terms of what she would accept from herself. She focused this energy into overcoming the natural tendency to “take control” when under pressure and instead forced herself to “give up control” in order to allow the performance to unfold. She became more determined to do this because she knew it would increase her score. She did not become more determined to shoot tens because she knew this would decrease her score.

Many athletes rarely or never experience intensity training, thus having to learn these lessons in actual competition. This becomes a long, frustrating, and often heartbreaking process.

A very few examples of intensity training:

- **First to Five Tens** – After a short sighting period, a “Go!” signal is given and athletes must shoot until they have five tens. Each time they shoot a ten, they loudly call out their count of tens: “One!”, then “Two!”, and so on. The race is on to see which athlete reaches five tens first. The loud count serves to increase the pressure. One of the most effective ways to use this drill is to evenly match pairs of athletes so they have head-to-head competition. This can be expanded into a single elimination tournament where the winners of each pair advance to the next round until an eventual champion is determined.
- **How Many Tens In Five Shots** – Effective in group and in solo training scenarios, the athlete is given five shots and strives to get as many tens as possible. Highly advanced athletes can expand this to ten shots or more. Athletes who merely go through the motions gain no benefit, just as in any other type of training when they do not strive for improvement. Those who do strive and push themselves obtain great benefit.
- **Tens In A Row** – This drill has no upper limit! That’s the point! Count how many tens in a row are shot. When a shot scores less than a ten, start the count over. Athletes must learn to shoot long strings of tens... and expand the upper limit of their comfort zone to match.
- **Shoot An X** – After a sighting/warmup period, the athlete’s ammunition is removed. One bullet or pellet is provided with instructions to shoot an X with this one shot. Tens are not acceptable! Athletes notice quite a boost in intensity! This is repeated as the coach monitors the athletes state of mind and assists the athlete in working into the appropriate mindset.

Notice that all of the above examples are stated in terms of outcome. The athlete must disassociate the desired outcome from the doing in order to excel. This is no different than in competition. Notice also, that anything less than a ten is not good enough. Too often we accept nines as being ok. Difficulty should be adjusted up or down to match athlete skill levels. This still

provides the intensity benefit. Tasks that are too easy or too hard might aid skill development in some cases but have no intensity training benefit and either bore or discourage the athlete.

An underlying theme of this article is the concept of focusing on and enjoying the journey of improvement and discovery. The so-called “Type A” hard-chargers have difficulty with this idea at first. Those who embrace it are transformed.

Clearly an article of this brevity can barely scratch the surface of a topic as complex as learning how to compete. The topics discussed provide a framework for further study. A number of previous articles in this series have touched on related themes.

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)