

On the Firing Line (Forty-seventh in a series)

More Conflicts

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**“You are not being paranoid
If they really are out to get you!”**

Continuing on the topic of the conflicted athlete, the following email provides an opportunity to amplify on the topic of clearing conflicts and to discuss a couple of common themes. The email is edited ever so slightly so that the identities remain confidential – in order to protect the innocent... and the guilty! If you think you know who wrote the email, you are incorrect. If you think this email is about you (feeling guilty?) and you want to confront the writer, save your energy, look in the mirror, do some serious thinking about your priorities, and then reflect on the ideas presented here. Everyone else may enjoy a peek inside the mind and life of another athlete in order to gain valuable perspective for one's own journey.

An Athlete Writes:

“Subject: Hi JP!!”

“Long time no talk! First off, I wanted to thank you. My first year in college I had a lot of ups and downs with my shooting and I was ready to give up. I took a long break over the summer and came back to school this year willing to make a fresh start. I went through all my notes that I had taken at your clinics and somehow everything has just clicked! I've been shooting better than I ever have in my life, even reaching a new personal best. :-) Every single day when I'm shooting I think of things that you have said and things I have read in your articles. So I just wanted to thank you for helping me so much!”

“I did run into a problem though that I wanted to ask you about. I have been much stronger mentally this year than I ever have been. I have been enjoying the process of shooting and not caring about the outcome at all. But one girl on my team wasn't happy with my improvement because that meant she was no longer the top on the team. She started playing with my head, and long story short, I really let her get to me, and had a terrible match this past weekend. I thought I was mentally stronger than this but I am stuck on what to do next.. I shot a practice match today and was able to bounce back a little, but it is still all in my head.”

“A second question is about another guy on my team. He is an amazing shooter – in practice.. But when it comes match time he lets the pressure get to him. He demands perfection and when he doesn't get it he gets so mad at himself. He demands to be the best on the team. I keep telling him that he is going about it all wrong and focusing on the wrong things. So far I cannot get through to him and he is ready to give up. I don't know how to convince him that he is going about it wrong. He says he cannot do it any other way. You are the only person I can think of that would have some good thoughts about this.”

“I am so sorry to bombard you with such a long email, but I have been meaning to reconnect and thank you and then these last two situations I described were new and I don't know how to address them.”

“Thank you so much JP and I hope everything is going well for you and your family. I hope to see you again sometime!!”

Situation 1 – “Should I stay or should I go?”

It is apparent that the writer of this email faced many similar issues and conflicts as the athlete that wanted to quit who is mentioned in the previous article.

It is easy to set up a negative thought pattern when one is frustrated: “Yes, I did love to shoot before, but I don’t now because I don’t do well in competition. I hate it. Coach tells me to train, but why should I? After all, I just do worse in each competition. I don’t like to shoot any more so why should I even bother? I should just give up.” Note the circular argument? ...and circular downward spiral? The athlete is getting worse because they have reduced their training inappropriately and especially because they have already decided they are not going to do better.

This is a classic “Dark Moment” and the athlete must make up their mind to overcome the current emotions and do what is needed. Most often, this turns out well. Is it difficult? Is it sometimes a long process? Is it frustrating? Most certainly.

The athlete who “toughs it out” usually breaks out into good times again, as with this athlete. The athlete who says “I cannot” does not. Instead, they lock themselves into a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Notice that the first sentence says “usually” the athlete breaks out. There is no certainty. Some athletes will point to that and use it to justify their inaction. There are no assurances in sport or in life. We can give up and “prove” that we were right or we can stay the course – and quite likely surprise ourselves.

Several years ago at a “High Performance Shooters” camp, the camp shirts included one of my slogans: “What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?” One must continue to attempt – without any assurance!

Situation 2 – Jealousy

This is a touchy topic – and sadly, it is more common than many people realize. The jealous athlete mentioned in the email is hurting her teammate, her team, and most of all herself. The energy that she puts into hurting everyone could be used in a positive manner to improve her own game. Then everyone benefits.

Ultimately, shooting is an individual sport. We may put together club, high school, college, and even national teams, though at the end of the day, there are still individual scores posted. Many people cannot see past this. They tear each other down, or just fail to help each other at best, and everyone on the outside beats them in competition. Others realize that by helping each other, all benefit, and everyone in the group performs better against outside competitors. The best teams consist of individuals who put the common goals first. Then, individual goals come along for free.

In extreme cases, the harassment goes past the verbal or takes different forms altogether. Spinning sights just before a match begins is not unknown! Sadly, serious gun damage is not unknown either. These things are done in very sneaky and sometimes subtle ways so the perpetrators are rarely caught. In fact, many of these cases are done by people who are otherwise not critical in order to reduce suspicion. When odd things happen, one must not believe that it cannot happen here. Luckily, the vast majority of folks in our sport are positive and supportive. The tiny minority does exist, however.

One of the many challenges we face as we strive to become a better athlete is that what other people think, or more correctly, how much we care about what other people think, has a profound effect on us. We want to get along and be happy and some people then use that caring quality as an opening to manipulate the one who cares. It is hard for one to “harden their heart” to that manipulation. One must stop caring about what unhelpful people think. Consider the source and ignore them. Besides, nothing “burns” them more than seeing their rival ignore them, smile, and thrive!

When confronted with this situation, the athlete must “consider the source” and the motives, and realize the other person really is out to hurt their enjoyment, learning, and performance in the sport. That is no different than stealing money or other possessions. We defend ourselves against the latter, and should do the same for the former.

Sometimes the very people and institutions that in theory should be the most helpful provide the largest obstacles. The jealous teammate is an example. Regardless of the obstacle, we need to understand the situation, get past the fact that they “should” not be part of the problem, and work around them.

Situation 3 – Outcome Focus

The perfectionist athlete is forcing himself down a very common path, one that is full of frustration and that is common with the conflicted athlete. He has a teammate who is attempting to show him a different way, a fruitful and fulfilling way, yet he cannot bring himself to change anything about his mindset.

In the email we are told “He says he cannot do it any other way.” As long as he believes this, he will remain in the downward spiral. As a number of coaches like to say, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome.” This poor guy is “Two Shots Away From Being Crazy” as discussed in article 20.

Only when he “hits bottom” and opens his mind and heart to a different way, will he be able to break the current situation. His Interfering Self is so dominant that his Performing Self is thwarted. Article 39, “Breaking Out of the Matrix”, discusses these two selves. The bulk of the articles in this series address the outcome (result) vs. performance (doing) theme either directly or in related ways.

One day a text message arrived from a long distance athlete I work with. “Hey JP, call (athlete name) right away. He just hit bottom and is now ready to listen to how we approach this game. I think he could use a good boost of encouragement, too.” We had previously discussed this athlete’s situation and realized that he, like the subject of the email, was unable to “change his mind” despite our ongoing work with him, and that we would have to wait for the opportune time – while hoping he didn’t leave the sport before that time arrived. Luckily the athlete is now very happy with the sport, himself, his progress, and his performance.

In another situation, after 2-1/2 days of an intense high performance shooting camp where a comprehensive shot process program was presented and implemented, a couple of the “Type A” guys were shooting so well that they “couldn’t shoot a bad shot” as they described it. They were transformed and amazed. They were in total “Zone” mode and often forgot to spot their shots since they knew they were deep tens. You could even see the change on their face and in their performance. Sadly, their Interfering Self took over and within days they had rejected the lessons learned and their shooting returned to mediocrity. After all, they “knew” better.

The situation faced by the young man who is profoundly outcome-based is quite common. If he likes to read, time spent studying “Body, Mind Mastery” by Dan Millman would be well spent. Alternatively, watch the “Peaceful Warrior” movie. It is worth the effort to track down and watch. Another athlete commented just a couple of months ago that she asked for the movie for Christmas after it was shown at an advanced shooting performance clinic and she watches it whenever she needs a reminder about how to go about her journey. She is really enjoying her shooting, even with the stress of her college team schedule.

By far the largest obstacle we face in our journey is staring back at us from the mirror. We can train the Physical and Technical to any extreme we want, and yet barely take the first step to learning to compete when it counts. We must also learn and train the Mental (Thought) and Emotional (Heart) aspects every bit as much. The author of the email thought long and hard about her shooting, realized this, and drew upon resources available to her to redirect her mindset and shooting. Give this some thought!

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 August 2014)