

On the Firing Line (Fifty-first in a series)

Faith

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**“Faith is taking the first step,
Even when you don’t see the rest of the staircase.”
Martin Luther King, Jr.**

The previous three articles in this series have explored a number of interrelated topics culminating in a discussion of steadiness of the rifle or pistol at or near the moment of shot release. Shotgun shooters, archers, and others may be forgiven for skipping the articles though would be well advised to go back and study all three since there are many insights that relate to all disciplines. In the end, one’s acceptance of these or any other concepts depends upon open mindedness and faith.

Logic And Science

Too often, we use logic, science, and math to tell us what is or is not possible. We worship at the altar of science and math to the detriment of other valuable concepts. As a result, we often “lock in” our beliefs of what is and is not possible and limit our possibilities in scientific research, sport, and life. To be sure, science and math are valuable beyond measure; it is exclusive reliance on them to the exclusion of other factors and approaches that is the problem.

How often do we say “That isn’t true!”, “That cannot be!”, or make similar statements? Did you do so while reading the last three articles or while listening to your coach at a recent training session? Really... are you that sure?

The entire sporting world and scientific community believed that it was impossible for a human being to run a mile in four minutes or less. Scientific papers were published proving the fact. Roger Bannister and his “impossible” four minute mile have already been discussed in this series!

Our ego tells us that what we believe is true because we believe it is true. Yes, that is circular – and oh so common! We use logic to “prove” our point and ignore other relevant information. Yet, how often do we later discover that quite something else is correct?

Open Minds Open Doors

Years ago, while participating in a pistol masters camp at the Olympic Training Center, a couple of incidents took place that illustrate the effects of open mindedness or the lack thereof.

At one point, an intermediate level athlete was being closely watched by the head coach and they engaged in a short dialogue about a particular aspect of the athlete’s process. The athlete was having difficulty with a particular aspect of the shot process. The conversation ended when the athlete, in response to a suggestion, said “Oh, no, this is how I do it.” The athlete had no faith that he could learn something new to improve his shooting, instead believing that any change would “break” his game. Closed minds close doors.

Another athlete, struggling with keeping his eye on the front sight of the pistol instead of erroneously looking at the target, heard a suggestion to use a small white dot or other mark on the sight as an aid, and asked a coach about the technique. “No, that is a waste of time. Go ahead and try it for ten shots to prove it to yourself. You will see that it will get blurry and be of no use.” Sure enough, the coach was right. Or was he?

Let’s think for a moment about the dynamics of the situation. What is the issue? The athlete is looking at the target instead of the front sight. Can that habit, or any habit, be broken instantly? Generally not. What happens when one looks from the front sight to the target? The blurry target becomes clear while the sharply focused front sight becomes blurry. That means a white dot on the sight will, by definition, also become blurry.

The use of the dot is not a failure. Instead, it is a training aid to the athlete to show that he is now looking at the wrong place! With the dot aiding in increasing his awareness, the athlete was able to correct the issue and build a new habit. Eventually, the white dot stopped getting blurry... and the proper visual technique was now habit. Because the athlete had an open mind, and despite the “conventional wisdom” he was given, he was open to improvement.

Belief Without Proof

Because we are taught to rely so heavily on logic, science, and math, we have difficulty believing anything we cannot see or prove to ourselves. This effect has profound impact on religion, though that topic is a separate discussion. It also has deep effects on how we approach everyday life in school, work, and in sport. How many times have we heard a parent, coach, co-worker, friend, or boss tell us something isn’t possible – when we believe otherwise? How many things have we not accomplished because we did not make the attempt, either because we or someone else believed the task to be impossible?

Eddie believes in the possibilities of the seemingly impossible. He also knows which of his employees have a similar mindset and openness to possibilities. Many years ago, he approached one of his employees and asked what he knew about a particularly difficult and tricky topic. “Nothing.” was the reply. Eddie continued: “Good! Would you explore the topic and let me know feasibility of creating a product?” In two weeks the employee had done his research and studies and reported that he thought it might be possible. Six months later they had the software product in production at a client. Both Eddie and the employee believed they could create the product, even though they had no advance proof that it could be done.

And so it is in sport. Not one Olympic champion ever had proof in hand that they would eventually hold the gold. How many others, lacking proof or even belief in the possibilities, gave up the chase or never even started?

The First Step

The key to success is to take the first step. Not just once, but numerous times throughout one’s journey. Have the guts, the faith, the belief to take steps in the direction you wish to travel. Are you assured of success? Of course not! Are you assured of an interesting and fulfilling journey? Most likely! After all, the journey is what you make of it.

The journey most likely will have its difficult times. This is the hardest part of the hard work of success. Shannon Miller has enjoyed phenomenal success as a gymnast. Given that in the sport of gymnastics one must be very young to be successful, it is easy to assume that a huge

dose of raw talent is the key. Find the most raw talent and there is your next medal winner. Surprise! Just as in shooting, golf, football (American or otherwise), and any other sport or pursuit, the ultimate prize goes to the hardest worker. Shannon did not have the most raw talent among her peers. Quite the contrary, she fell so much that her body was covered with bruises. She never quit. She always got up, kept training, and kept adding bruises. Eventually, she fell less and soared more. Her story, and that of air rifle Olympic champion Nancy Johnson, are but two examples. Neither knew the end outcome – both believed and were willing to take the first step.

In the summer of 2003, Jamie Beyerle and I held a six day “High Performance Shooters Camp” in Jacksonville, Florida. Twenty athletes immersed themselves in intense drills, competitions, and discussions. Jamie had just won her first World Cup gold medal and imparted her fierce competitiveness to the athletes. They realized that there is more to shooting well than mere technique. It takes heart and guts, or “teeth” as one coach describes it. Like all good athletes, Jamie has faced adversity and times of great difficulty. Yet she has always “taken the first step” even when not assured of success – and “attempted” anyway.

The slogan at our camp was “What would you attempt to accomplish if you knew you could not fail?” What have you failed to attempt because you feared that you might fail? Take the first step!

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)