

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

Christmas Tens

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**“I'd never had that floating peaceful shooting feeling carry over at ALL,
Let alone so strongly into the NEXT DAY!”**

Releasing a shot is easy. Trivially easy. That is, in a practice session when no one is watching and when we do not care about the result. What about when we do care about the outcome or in competition? How often do we painfully struggle to release a shot that counts? Why do we struggle so? Why do we repeat thought and activity patterns that perpetuate the pain and that leave us still well short of our outcome goals?

Have you ever had a shot where the gun seemingly shot “by itself”? That is, a completely effortless and painless shot. You were completely disengaged from the activity at the moment of delivery – and may even have been startled by the shot going off. “I wasn't ready!” How often does this happen to you? What causes this phenomenon? Is it desirable or should it be avoided?

The answer that one hears to the last question depends on who you ask. When describing such a shot to one particular coach, his response was that such shot deliveries were serious errors and to be avoided at all costs. “We call those ‘Christmas tens.’ Those are incorrect shots and must be avoided.” Instead, this coach taught athletes to take full, active control of the shot process and release. The “accidental” shots that released “by themselves” were errors to be avoided in this coach's opinion.

And yet, many athletes when asked if they have experienced the “accidental” or “by itself” shot, will respond that they have indeed had such an experience. Upon further query and reflection, they almost always report that the shot was a deep ten or a good bust (nothing but dust). Yet, they do not try to learn why this happened or how to use the technique because “We aren't trained that way.”, or “I don't trust it.”, or “I get too many fliers that way.”

The “Christmas ten” or “automagical shot” is not an error. It is not an unearned lucky gift. It is an honestly earned reward. Indeed, it is a reward for hard work, appropriate focus, and for a properly managed shot process – especially for properly managing the mental (e.g. appropriately directed focus and awareness) and emotional (e.g. outcome and control issues, and anger management) aspects of the process. Because trusting the deeper parts of the mind is a very “eastern” concept and we grow up within a very “western” culture, we are predisposed to ignore these “strange” ideas.

Because we are so focused on outcome, because we are ingrained in physical and technical matters, and because we are culturally biased away from anything psychological, we depend on physical and technical aspects of releasing the shot, all while under active thought and control.

Time after time athletes and coaches will say that shooting is 90% (or some other large percent) “mental”, without really understanding what that truly means and then spend 99% of their time and effort on physical and technical aspects. We pay lip service to the mental and emotional aspects, fooling ourselves into believing that we know what they are, that we have

them mastered, and that we just need more practice or technical adjustments. We are rarely taught about the immense, seemingly unbelievable, power of the human mind, much less how to “tap in” to that power for our shooting or any other performance activity.

In 2002, after reading a description of these things, Abhinav Bindra wrote: “I have been a shooter trying always to make things [happen]. Meaning I have been always very conscious. But accidentally sometimes it happens to me that I got into the zone of forgetfulness and shot 597, 596,598. ... It is the biggest key to performance which can be written only once experienced. I have experienced it 2 times in my life where I did exactly what you [recently] wrote [about]... results were 596 and 597 at World Cups.”

At the time, Abhinav held the junior men’s world record for air rifle, having won a World Cup at age 18, and was ranked tenth in the world overall in that event. He is also the current World Champion (2006) and current Olympic Champion (2008) in men’s air rifle. Despite these experiences and “eastern” childhood, he was later exposed to “western” training, which caused him some difficulty. Also he now often uses a more active process that he and others call “manufacturing the shot” when he is unable to train as much as he felt necessary.

Not too many years ago, a quite lengthy discussion thread took place on a popular online target shooting forum. The topic was about the so-called “subconscious shot.” The originator of the thread, a well-respected and experienced pistol shooter, explored his experiences and engaged others in the topic. It was clear from the postings that a very small handful of the participants understood the topic fairly well, while most were lost. While the handful had experienced the “surprise shot” and noticed the typically excellent results, they were unsure if this could be trained and reliably applied in competition. They did an excellent job of describing the experience, yet were troubled by “fliers” which came too often and which were quite wide of the mark.

Whenever an athlete makes a fundamental change in their “program” they must expect their results to be less than before while they train the new aspect. This is backwards from how most athletes and coaches evaluate a change: after a trial that is too short to be valid, they accept or reject the technique based solely on whether the score went up or down. The results are not valid. Similarly, these athletes needed to maintain their levels of score and could not or would not train the new technique enough.

When one has been trained to shoot with active thought and active “control” of the process, it is hard to relinquish the perceived control and it is hard to work with a new technique that is so foreign to our culture and training. Athletes who have made this change have discovered that, yes, the groups do open up and the fliers are pretty bad – at first. Then, just as when they were beginners, the groups shrink, the fliers become fewer in number and less severe, and before they realize it they have surpassed their old level of outcome.

The fliers are caused by the athlete trying to take active control right at the moment of shot release!

What causes the good “surprise shot”? When the active part of the mind, which usually is “controlling” the shot, harshly judging mistakes, and worrying about the past or future, is for some reason not doing those things due to fatigue or distraction, sometimes the deeper parts of the mind – which actually do all shooting and actually know how to hit center every time without fail – are suddenly allowed to manage the shot process. The resultant shot surprises the active

thought part of the mind because it was somewhere else. Of course, it cannot admit that this is a good way to shoot because it was not in “control” – despite the resultant “ten point deep.”

This is not mysterious or unreliable. Collegiate and even high school students have been trained to use these techniques with great success.

In one case, two “Type A”, male, over-analytical, engineering students – after 2-1/2 days of an intense and very advanced rifle camp, were shocked to discover this whole new way of shooting. They could not miss the ten ring. Sometimes after a shot they would realize that they had forgotten to look in the spotting scope because they already knew the shot was a deep ten. This was despite their previous dependency on the scope to see how bad their shots were. It was no surprise to learn later that they abandoned this method and went back to their old ways – and old scores. After all, they were at an age that “knows best” and where “fitting in” with everyone else is more important than anything. It isn’t easy to be exceptional!

Digging deeper, we examine a situation that took place in spring 2003. A rifle shooter in her late 20s was referred to a new coach by a mutual friend who was on the National Team. The coach was to work with her while she was in a new town attending graduate school. The two met, discussed her situation, goals, and desires, and put together a plan. Their first training session, really a day long clinic, was outdoors working with 50 meter smallbore rifle in the standing position. Based on their discussions and plans, they worked through her entire game, gently polishing deep and subtle components of all aspects of her game: physical, technical, mental, and emotional. They spent a few hours at this task and the athlete responded excitedly as her confidence grew and as her capabilities improved. Even when adding intensity training later in the clinic, she rose to the task and accomplished a great deal under very intense pressure.

And then it happened. At one point in one of the shooting sessions that day, the coach noticed a profound change in the athlete during a shot. She became much steadier than her already excellent balance and steadiness, all the tiny muscle tremors disappeared, her body, face, and eyes became calm, the rifle settled on target as if held by magnets, the shot release came almost at the instant the rifle arrived on the area of aim, and it was released with incredible smoothness, like melting snow slipping off a bamboo leaf.

The athlete, having noticed a profound change in herself, and having been surprised by the completely different “feel” of the shot process, turned her head to the coach with a look of awe. The coach, knowing what had happened and not wanting to destroy the moment, smiled, and without a word gently gestured for her to return to shooting. Shot after shot she prepared herself mentally, focused on the “doing” of the Present Moment, then aggressively and decisively performed her shot process without care or worry of outcome, and allowed the shot to “shoot itself” without trying to “take control” of the shot herself. She was stunned at the results, at the ease of shot delivery, and in the feelings it evoked within her as she shot.

The next day she wrote: “You've taken me back to the source of all shooting... why's and how's and it is AMAZING! Until now, I'd never had that floating peaceful shooting feeling carry over at ALL, let alone so strongly into the NEXT DAY!!!”

What had happened? How did she do this? Through careful assessment and polish of her already excellent physical and technical game (only very minor, subtle adjustments of technique were required), she gained confidence and the foundation was set for working on the mental and emotional aspects of her game. She was a quick study, intelligent and thoughtful in her analysis

and evaluations, self-aware, and had a very open mind. She was a coach's dream. They worked on her self-talk and self-thought, replacing unhelpful techniques with techniques proven to facilitate and aid ultimate performance.

As all this work "came together" for her, she began to trust herself and her game. Her trust became deep enough that she could begin to "let go" of the "need" to take "control" of the process. Eventually, she just "allowed it to happen" and that is when she and the coach noticed the big change during one of her shots, and then on the subsequent shots.

This did not take place in a comfortable and familiar environment, nor in a pressure free "practice" session. She was on an unfamiliar range (noted for its tricky conditions and for being a great place to learn how to shoot in the wind and mirage), with a friendly yet tough and demanding coach she had only just met, with loud center fire rifle noise around her, while performing unfamiliar intensity drills that truly emulate the intensity of the highest levels of competition. The conditions she faced were quite challenging. She channeled the pressure in positive ways, had faith in her capabilities, and challenged herself to perform without regard or concern of success or failure.

Those who have studied "flow" (popularly called the "zone") will recognize that the degree of challenge she faced, while debilitating to many athletes, is actually an aid to the well – and properly – trained athlete. She experienced "flow" and the "automagical" shot which seemed to "shoot by itself" – and was astounded with the results.

Yes, there are lots of things going on around you; things can go badly, very badly, in a hurry. And yet, you must calmly allow the shot to release itself. Sometimes it is like "Bambi Meets Godzilla!" (Old timers: did you see this film short?) You must be inwardly calm, quiet, confident, and decisive while in the eye of the hurricane.

Remember, tens or nice clay target busts are like babies, puppies, and kittens... you can helplessly and angrily chase them all over the house and never catch any of them, or sit down on the floor, relax and smile, and effortlessly and instantly catch all of them. The choice is yours.

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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Based in the Atlanta, Ga., area, JP O'Connor (email: jpoc@acm.org and blog: <http://jpoconnor.wordpress.com/>) is involved in shooting as a competitor, official, and coach. He is a former Assistant National Coach – USA Paralympics Shooting Team and ISSF Judge, serves on the National Coach Development Staff in both rifle & pistol, and is Coach Emeritus of the NCAA rifle and intercollegiate pistol teams at the University of North Georgia. He enjoys working with a number of pistol and rifle athletes and junior club teams from around the country, ranging from beginners to the highly advanced, in training sessions, clinics, and one-on-one private coaching. Previous installments of this series, additional resources, and book suggestions may be found at <http://www.pilkguns.com/jparticles/jpcontents.htm> and via his blog at <http://jpoconnor.wordpress.com/>. Email questions and suggestions to jpoc@acm.org.

(Biographical information as of August 2014)



Photo Caption: In The Eye Of The Hurricane – Calm, Quiet, Confident, Decisive