

On the Firing Line (Seventh in a series)

Football Ballet

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“Coach Faust wants to see you in his office.” The three sophomores looked nervously at each other. Although he frequently spoke with them on the field and in the locker room, the varsity coach didn't usually call JV players into his office unless they were in trouble.

They were relieved when they heard: “You three have done a great job on the JV team this year. Also, your leadership and attitude are outstanding,” he told them. “However, your abilities and skills as they stand now are not going to get you on the varsity team next summer unless you enhance them with the training that I'm going to propose to you.”

They were shocked to hear him propose that they take ballet because this would enhance the particular weaknesses they had and ensure them a place on next year's team. They reluctantly agreed, though didn't advertise this to their friends. The following August, all three not only made the team, they earned starting positions – on a championship team that had three or four players at every position. There was a stampede of football players to the ballet studio after everyone heard how these three had suddenly improved so much. These three athletes held their starting spots all through their last two seasons. Coach Faust's teams went on to win several state and national championships.

In last month's article, we made a distinction between two major types of preparation: merely shooting a match program (practice) and doing drills to improve skills (training). The terminology (which is often interchanged) is less important here than the difference in activity. Sending football players to ballet in order to improve their kinesthetic awareness certainly is an extreme example; yet entirely reasonable. Other teams couldn't understand how this team could beat them so thoroughly. One of the many reasons was because they had built skills through a variety of training methods.

A rifle or pistol athlete who is at least to the intermediate level can usually shoot a tighter group on a completely blank target than they do on regular targets with an aiming black. The vast majority of shooters don't know this or the insights it can give. Most give us a funny look when the drill procedure is first explained. We have them shoot a ten shot group on a completely blank card. Since there is no aiming mark, the athletes are instructed to feel a consistent position for each shot. If the target isn't all black, we explain that “aiming” at the developing group will defeat the purpose of the drill and to trust their feel of the position. We prefer to use an all black card, however.

After the group has been fired, the athlete is surprised at how small it is - usually a single hole about 6 to 8mm across for air rifle and usually not all that much larger for air pistol. When asked how it is possible for them to do this they often have no idea. Of course, it is because their body and subconscious mind are so used to the routine that without the visual input they still place the body in the exact same position for each shot. It is this inner position or kinesthetic feel that enables world-class performance.

The athlete that takes advantage of this effect does far better than the one who constantly changes their position and equipment and never builds a pattern of consistent position, shot process, and performance. The blank card drill is also useful in building excellent trigger control and sight alignment skills. The idea is always to build skills and skill awareness.

To reinforce the reliance on inner position or feel, and to reduce body sway in training and competition, we have the athlete stand in position without their gun as if preparing to shoot

and close their eyes. At first they move quite a bit since the eyes are one of the most important inputs to the balance process. We ask the athlete to feel the ebb and flow – or rhythm – of their movement and to feel if they are falling forward and correcting back up to center, or if they are falling back and correcting forward up to center. Then, through slight adjustment of the feet, they are taught to tune this sway out as much as is possible for them at the time. They notice that there is a natural rhythm of steadiness and sway, like waves at the beach.

This drill enhances inner position feel and reduces body movement, which helps in the athlete's confidence in their hold. We then add the gun and have the athlete repeat the process. Some of my students use this drill every time as part of their setup process to shoot and at least one has been observed starting all over with it again when having difficulty in the middle of a match. Better to fix problems now than to waste the rest of the match!

Do you think your natural point of aim (NPA) is carefully checked as part of your routine? If you close your eyes for only 2 or 3 seconds you aren't checking anything! Try ten full seconds, wait until you feel a steady state (as in the balance exercise) and then open your eyes. Surprise! Now adjust by moving the entire body and do it again until you find that you are still on target. If you adjust merely by moving a foot slightly, as is often taught, you detune the balance from the previous step. This often takes several iterations the first time or two you do it.

Athletes who have no trouble with the blank card, balance, and NPA drills are introduced to another interesting drill. Happy that we have now restored the target for them to aim toward, they are surprised to hear that we are going to have them shoot with their eyes closed! The athlete is instructed to go through their normal shot routine and, at the moment that they would be ready to release the shot, they are told to close their eyes for several seconds and feel their movement, just as in the balance drill. When feeling a steady state, they are to release the shot. What a heart stopper this is for them! Of course, we are closely watching to see that they stay safely on target and have a large, safe backstop area. Groups fired this way are often tighter than the already small blank card groups.

When it comes to competition, I often tell my students to “dance the dance” or “sing the song” without thinking about it, or to “just shoot” as one student said to me. For example, at the 2000 NRA Collegiate Pistol National Championships, the women's air pistol team championship (three to a team) was won by Ohio State University. The third member of that team had only been introduced to shooting three or four months earlier. It was clear to see, however, that she had a number of highly refined skills. In discussions with her it became obvious that her training in dance had developed a number of physical, mental, and emotional skills. All she had to do was add the technical skills of shooting to the mix. She equated the performance of the shot sequence to performing a dance. Many shooters only develop the technical skills and miss the other three.

Most shooting practice that we have observed involves score just as in a match. Instead, we need to build skills: hold duration and quality, hold technique, trigger technique, sight alignment, shot process details, especially the mental process or program for a shot, inner position, emotional maturity and skills, balance, setup and preparation routine, inner position or feel, and a myriad other details need to be part of the shooter's “automatic” routine.

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 (jpoc@acm.org and <http://www.america.net/~jpoc/>) is involved in rifle and pistol target shooting as a competitor, is a former Assistant National Coach – USA Paralympics Shooting Team, is a Level 3 coach, serves on the National Coach Development Staff, and coaches the rifle and pistol teams at North Georgia College & State University. He enjoys working with a number of pistol and rifle athletes from around the country, ranging from beginners to the highly advanced, in clinics and one-on-one private coaching, all on a volunteer basis. He also works with musicians and athletes in a variety of sports.

(Biographical information as of October 2009)