Subtle Details

Advanced athletes need insight and assistance from coaches or other athletes, just as they did when they were beginners or intermediate level athletes. What they need often differs, however. By the time an athlete has reached an advanced level of performance, most all of the big details have been pretty well taken care of. Usually – though not always! More often than not, as an athlete progresses, it is subtle details that make a difference. Often, these are discovered when someone else looks closely at the athlete's physical and technical game. Similarly, finding, exploring, and resolving subtle details in the mental and emotional aspects of the game require the "assistant" to really understand the athlete's approach – and a real rapport and communication between the athlete and the teacher.

To have an impact on an advanced athlete's game, a coach or training partner must take time and effort to really understand what is going on. They must also understand how the various aspects of the sport work together. Making a change in one aspect of an athlete's "program" almost always has an effect in other aspects. This can work against the athlete, or to their benefit.

In working with a young air pistol shooter, it was discovered that she had limited ability to call her shots. She said that she could not tell where they were going and that she couldn't seem to find out what errors she was making. The athlete was reminded of the basics, including to really look at the center of the front sight, was asked to do some shooting, and was watched very carefully. Right away, we found that, like many young air rifle and air pistol shooters, she was not using any hearing protection because the noise was so slight that she felt that it didn't bother her… and the earmuffs did. No great revelation so far. Watching closely, a blink was noticed on each shot. Closer examination showed that the blink was not an anticipation blink – rather it was a reaction to the noise of the air pistol being fired. She was asked to use the earmuffs as an experiment, again reminded of her basics, and fire a few shots. After each shot, she was asked to call the shot before being shown the target screen. Imagine her surprise when she called the very first shot accurately! …and all subsequent shots. There was no great surprise here (except to the athlete) since the ability to call one's shots involves a number of inputs, with the visual "evidence" being among the most important. She just needed someone to take some time and really look at what she was doing. Only by taking time to really look at what is going on can one find and fix subtle (yet often seemingly obvious) details like this one.

A classic example that sometimes gets knowing nods when mentioned, yet is often given lip service when it comes to actual shooting, is the effect of front aperture size on many aspects of the shooting performance. When introducing a 15 year old to the shooting sports in 1997 (on a one-time "try it" basis), this fact was made blatantly obvious to me. Sarah had asked to try both rifle and pistol. I expected her to do quite well since I had seen her compete in swimming since she was 12 and was quite impressed with her approach. Indeed, with the air pistol and a sporter air rifle, her performance was amazing. However, on her very first shot with a precision air rifle, she uncharacteristically gave the trigger a huge jerk. Without comment, I quietly asked her to hand me the rifle so that I could "check something". After a few moments of thought, I realized that the last user of the rifle was quite a good shooter and that he liked small front apertures. I changed the aperture to the largest size I could find and, without comment, handed the rifle back to Sarah. The very next shot, and all that followed, were delivered with flawless trigger control. By not tipping her off to the "problem", it was fixed as rapidly as it had developed without her being concerned with it. (As a "one-time' shooter, there was no need or benefit to discussing the topic at that time. Of course, with an athlete in training I would have had a discussion to allow the athlete to learn from the situation.) Watch the athlete carefully, notice what the symptoms are, find the root cause, and fix it. Don't just "try" things.

Becoming an Olympic champion requires constant learning, refinement, and improvement. Coaching athletes on the journey toward that goal requires the same. The very best athletes and coaches all seem to regard themselves as students of the game and are in constant "learning" mode to improve

and refine their knowledge and skills.

In this sport and in this country (and possibly in other sports and countries), when many athletes make a national team, or especially an Olympic team, they effectively stop listening to others and often stop learning. They don't think this is the case and would protest; yet the evidence is clear in their approach. Even national team coaches have commented on this phenomenon. Other athletes realize that they have just taken one more step toward their goals and work even harder to learn, refine, and improve. These are the ones that are open to input and are willing and unafraid to work on the subtle details. They are the ones that win the big events!