

On the Firing Line (Thirteenth in a series)

More Subtleties

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Continuing our theme from last month, we explore more examples of “fine tuning” an athlete’s performance – another example with aperture size (we don’t pay enough attention to this one!) and then a bit into the mental and emotional parts of the game.

A young member of the National Team had trigger control that was legendary – for all the wrong reasons. In fact, at the 2001 Coach’s College a computer plot recording of her “control” as recorded in late 2000 was shown (without giving her name) as an example of really bad trigger control. This is not a criticism of the athlete... she had never been taught how to resolve the problem. Earlier that year, Wanda Jewell had told me that this athlete “really needs to work on her trigger control” and Tim Conrad mentioned that her front aperture was “way” too small. Based on my observations with the first time shooter (mentioned in the previous installment of this series) and other experiments, the connection seemed clear to me – at least as a first hypothesis. After speaking with the athlete on the phone, the evidence (hold times, follow through, low confidence in shots, etc.) supported the hypothesis. She was taken through an experiment procedure (shooting on blank cards, both white and then black, then at a target while using no front aperture, then with a huge aperture, and successively through smaller apertures) and asked to be aware of whether or not there were any differences in her shot delivery and, if so, what the differences were. Notice that she wasn’t told what to expect since it would affect the outcome. That discussion came after she had performed the experiment.

After her next training session, an email arrived with the subject “Bigger is Better”. She noticed that, as the apertures became smaller, her hold time went up, her follow through started to shorten and then disappear, her confidence in the shot delivery plummeted, her hold seemed worse, and... lo and behold... she noticed that her “trigger problem” came back. (Some athletes also get “flutter finger” at this point.) It seems that, upon reflection, she realized that the “problem” had suddenly vanished in the early parts of the experiment! She chose a larger aperture that day! We then discussed the results, what the effects were, and why things turned out as they had. Additionally, after explaining the results of this to Dan Durben, he and I designed an experiment that has now been given trial runs with rather dramatic results.

As mentioned last month: Watch the athlete carefully (or, in this case, learn a lot and analyze), notice what the symptoms are, listen carefully, ask leading questions, find the root cause, and fix it. Of course, trigger control is affected by a number of other factors and this athlete is making very good progress as other causes of poor trigger control and reduced confidence are identified and resolved.

How “carefully” should one watch? Look at when the first stage of the trigger is taken up, what happens with the trigger finger after the shot breaks, determine if the athlete blinks and when (anticipation or reaction – different causes and solutions), watch the movement pattern and timing of the hold and follow-through. Recently, I surprised an advanced high school athlete by describing to her what was going on with her hold and sight movement. I had been watching her front sight as if I were shooting the rifle so I could “see” the same things she was observing. This gave me insight into what she was seeing and therefore the effect of that visual input on her thoughts and feelings during the shot process. It made it much easier for us to analyze and adjust what she was doing mentally. Subtle details make the difference. They aren’t just picky nits!

Recently, I discovered myself having conversations with three collegiate shooters (including the one mentioned above) and a high school shooter along a roughly common theme. Some of them were having a hard time with shooting not being “fun anymore” and expressed frustration with their scores. In one case, the athlete and her coach were both frustrated by being unable to find anything to “fix” in her technical or physical game. In another, the athlete was feeling pressure to produce because her scores

weren't too much higher than the walk-on shooters were posting and she had been on a plateau for many, many months.

In each case, we explored the athlete's feelings and attitudes (mostly by asking them open ended questions and then just listening and analyzing) and, among other things, discovered an emphasis on outcome... score... to the detriment of a focus on performance. It's a silly game we have... we determine the winner by adding up the score... yet focusing on score ensures that it will be low! Of course, every sport is like that – that's the true test! Additionally, too often we hear the “Don'ts” with a long litany of things we are not to think about. So what do we think about? We worry about “not thinking about the things we aren't supposed to think about”!

We discussed the differences between outcome (over which the athlete has limited or no control) and performance (which the athlete totally controls). If the athlete will turn their mental focus inward, be aware of balance, inner position, natural position, and movement rhythms, and exist only in the present moment through that mental focus, the shot process becomes rather effortless. Once they understand that they cannot produce a score... only a performance... and shift their mental focus accordingly, they will find that the score will take care of itself quite nicely! We give the athlete something positive to focus on, thus filling the void left by the “Don'ts”. These conversations were much more in depth of course, but a bit of the approach is evident here.

Because of the rapport between athlete and coach in each case, and a willingness on the part of both to invest significant time and effort in the important yet subtle details, “hard” problems often are much easier to solve.

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