

Getting Unstuck – Overcoming Common Mental Mistakes

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“Place the emphasis on improving, and winning will happen!”

Athletes will have periods in their development when their performance reaches a plateau, sometimes for extended periods of time. This is very frustrating and the performance stagnation becomes a familiar habit that negatively affects self-image and becomes more difficult to break over time. Athletes eventually leave the sport in frustration if the fundamental issues are not identified and resolved. By identifying and resolving these issues, the athlete's love of the sport is rekindled and their performance reaches new heights.

These issues, especially in less experienced athletes, may be physical (such as a fundamentally unstable position) or technical (such as poor holding or triggering technique). While these do impede the athlete's progress, they are usually somewhat easily identified and resolved. The really tough sticking points are mental and emotional. These are more challenging to identify and resolve and constitute the majority of performance stagnation issues in athletes at the intermediate level and above.

In October of 2001, Dr. Sean McCann, Director, USOC Sports Psychology, held a “lunch and learn” presentation at the Olympic Training Center for a number of coaches and athletes. It was most informative and useful, as are all of his presentations. We were happy to be able to hear him again at the shooting coach's conference that weekend, where he focused his talk specifically on shooting. This article is based directly on his presentation outline [McCann, 2001] and expands upon them.

Foundational Issues

Lack Of Self-Awareness – Can you honestly see your strengths and weaknesses (physical, technical, mental, emotional)? Where do you get your data? How current is it?

Awareness is the first step in problem resolution. A problem cannot be solved unless it is identified. Often, fundamental causal problems are overlooked because one is merely attempting to solve symptomatic issues (which appear to be “the problem”, but aren't) without working on the foundational problems themselves. Solving the actual problem will clear up the related symptomatic ones, or at least open the way to resolution of them.

Solution: Identify as many means of collecting data as possible, get the data, and get with experts to analyze the data. Data is only of value if it is accurate and if it changes behavior!

There are numerous sources of data available if one will seek them out. The observations of coaches, teammates, and opponents often prove insightful, as do those of a sport psychologist and sports

science researchers. Examine your competition results and trends. Look at performance patterns: Is the last record shot always weaker than average? Are the last several shots weaker than average? Is the first record shot overly dramatic? (...or traumatic!) Is the first string terrible? (And then, with the “pressure” off, the remaining strings are strong?) Are most shots delivered after 2 or 3 or 4 or more holds per shot, on every shot, even if earlier holds are excellent? Are all shots delivered only on the first hold, even if sub optimal? Are poor ten shot strings characterized by 7 or 8 great shots and 2 or 3 horrible shots? Or are ten shot strings usually just 10 mediocre shots? Are you tentative or aggressive? Do you have long holds? Do scores vary widely from string to string and/or from event to event?

What do physiological assessments show regarding strength, endurance, and other aspects of physical performance? What do psychological assessments show regarding attitude and adaptability to competition stress? What are your mental and emotional patterns in the face of competition stress? Do you have one bad shot and then sabotage your subsequent shots? (“Here we go again! I’m blowing another match!”)

Use video and computer technology, such as the Noptel trainer and video cameras to record and analyze training sessions for analysis as needed. Finally, when shooting, are you aware of what’s going on, or are you clueless? Note that focus and awareness are very different. Although one must quietly focus inward and allow the performance to unfold, one must still be aware of what is going on. Gather data, actually pay attention to it, analyze and understand it, and make appropriate changes.

Lack Of Consistency – This area has a number of diverse causes, any one of which can derail performance. Key among them are:

The “one time wonder” or “naturally talented” athlete starts out shooting very well and progresses rapidly... but only to a point. Often, they never progress beyond this point and often leave the sport after a relatively short career. “But they have so much talent! What happened?”

Solution: Get over yourself. Elite talent is more work than a genetic gift. Anyone can shoot a 10 or break a clay target. Many can shoot 85% very quickly. Moving to 95% and beyond UNDER PRESSURE takes more work than gift.

One of the best of the currently active rifle shooters in this country is proof of this. Frustrated for years by not winning the big events and seeing others who didn’t work as hard, or who had more “natural talent”, standing on the podium, she stuck with it and redoubled her efforts. Now often winning the biggest events, she dominates most competitions. Another athlete who proves this theory is Nancy Johnson. She, too, saw others consistently beat her. Encouraged by her coaches, she kept up her effort over a number of years. She came into her own in 1999 and 2000, culminating in winning the gold medal in women’s air rifle at the Olympics in Sydney, Australia.

One must be patient with one’s own development. Athletes who are “naturals” or fast learners must especially learn to do the hard work of really learning to shoot. The physical and technical parts come easily and the mental and emotional parts work well enough... at first. The “hard” work of top level shooting is training mentally and emotionally.

Expectations are another huge issue. It is easy to perform when “it doesn’t matter” and when there are no or low expectations, whether internally or externally driven. It is easy to act like “there’s nothing to lose” when there isn’t. When something is on the line, that is when things get interesting!

Solution: One must recognize that expectations, however large, are just another distraction. During the critical moments of firing the shot, expectations cannot and do not aid the performance, they only distract and impede.

Athletes must separate external outcome from internal performance – that is, separate things they cannot directly control from things they can. If you “try” to shoot a ten or break a clay target, you might. If you “just shoot” properly, you will shoot well, and do so more easily and reliably, even under pressure.

Athletes must also manage the expectations of coaches, parents, and friends. If this is an issue for you, have a frank talk with your coach, or your parent, or whoever the source of the expectations is. It may not do any good at the time (or so you might think), but at least you put them on notice and got them thinking about it. This can be a huge issue for teenagers when the parents have “invested so much money” and “it’s time for some return by winning”, or when the coach thinks that the way to winning is to focus on winning. Either way, this is the kiss of death. (Note to parents, coaches, and others: Even if we don’t say anything directly, our body language, facial expressions, and other comments betray our feelings and the kids DO read these signals quite clearly. What messages are you sending your athletes?) Yes, it ultimately comes down to winning, but we don’t get there by “trying harder” and being told or encouraged to win or “try harder”. Athletes don’t train hard to not win. They know all too well what’s at stake.

We improve, or win, or achieve whatever our goal is, by focusing on improving our game (all aspects of it), not by focusing on winning. This is a very critical point. However, this is not an excuse for lackadaisical training or competing.

Manage expectations, yours and those of others, and leave those expectations behind when you go to the firing line. Like any skill, this takes time to develop, but it will develop if you will work at it. At some point in your development, you will find yourself in a situation where expectations become a real issue for you. The larger and more important the competition is to you, such as a state championship, the more likely it is to become a factor for you. Not surprisingly, it is a huge factor at the Olympic level. Understand the role of expectations and learn the skills necessary to handle them.

Goals play a significant role in consistency as well. Lack of goals manifests itself in a number of ways, which eventually degrade performance and impede improvement.

Solution: Understand why goal setting works (direction, feedback, support). If you still can’t change your behavior, work with someone to help you. Don’t give up on this skill without understanding you are giving up on yourself.

The young rifle shooter mentioned earlier does not have a current, complete set of written goals, at least not that any coach has seen. Often “encouraged” to do so throughout her career, she is very private about her goals and does not keep a detailed, written list. Regardless, she does have very detailed goals that cover all aspects of goal setting (including short, medium, and long term time frames and task, performance, and outcome goals). Through occasionally sharing some of these goals with one or more of her coaches, it becomes clear that she uses goals as one of the things that help her constantly strive for improvement.

The issue here is not whether or not the goals are written. (Though having them in writing is a powerful way for most folks to formulate and use them. This athlete is the exception to the rule.) The key idea is that her goals are well thought out, detailed, constantly updated, and used to direct her training and competition activities and plans.

Goal setting is something you do for yourself, not for others. It is a mechanism that helps you evaluate and direct your activity and aids in motivation. Goal setting is a very important area and will likely be covered in depth in a future article.

Individual Personality Factors

Perfectionism – This factor stands in the way of performance. Instead of allowing yourself to perform, are you worried about making things perfect? Perfectionism can take different forms: positive perfectionism (wanting to be great) and negative perfectionism (not wanting to be bad).

Solution: Understand your own myths about perfectionism. Ask not if you can be mistake-free. Ask instead WHICH mistake you are willing to make. What's best... the mistake of holding too long or of being too aggressive? Fear of the latter will cause the former, as is commonly seen. Yet, being more aggressive is usually the correct course of action!

You must give yourself permission to make mistakes. Fear of making a mistake, that is, fear of not being perfect, stands in the way of your performance. One cannot "just shoot" while fearing the outcome. You cannot be perfect, you can only allow yourself to perform... and "perfection" will come.

Pessimism – One who believes that bad things will happen will always be correct... "bad" things do happen. This attitude poisons your shooting. You are creating an unconscious roadmap for failure. The moment something "bad" happens, such as a poor shot, the old pattern kicks in: "Darn, it's happening again".

Solution: Is your glass half full or half empty? Who cares! Just drink it! Optimism and resiliency are keys to success and to a long-term career in sport... and in life. A negative attitude does not affect an athlete or team or relationship or your own life; it infects them. Break the pattern and look to the positive.

Understand that pessimism cares more about being right than winning. Understand that learned helplessness drains motivation and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The hopeful athlete goes for it, and sometimes, but not always, she gets it.

Anxious Personality – Do you get anxious in competition? More importantly, how do you react? Do you cave in and let the bad performance happen to you and become a victim of it (prey response) or do you take the nervous energy and channel it into intense focus and determination to attack aggressively (predator response)?

Solution: You need to move from a prey response to a predator response. Understand your specific phobias: finals pressure, first record shot, last record shot, the first shot following a bad one,

or...? You need to develop a way to face your anxiety. You probably need to work with someone else (such as a sport psychologist or coach who is knowledgeable in this area) to develop an effective strategy. This topic will also be addressed in a future article.

Challenges Of Competitive Pressure

Meltdown – Do you have a mental thermostat? Can you bring your body and mind under control when the pressure is on? It isn't easy!

Solution: Practice your relaxation skills and USE them. Slow, deep breaths starting from the bottom of the lungs calm both the body and the mind. There is an amazing connection that is accessed through the breathing. Many athletes use this as a “secret weapon” to calm themselves when others are melting down.

Practice shooting while feeling outcome pressure. Use competitive games to get the adrenaline flowing and the heart pounding! This is important. It provides you with opportunities to learn how to apply coping and calming skills and provides confidence as you discover that it is possible to shoot well when things aren't “perfect”. More on this in the next section.

Practice shooting with movement. Detune your balance slightly... or a lot. Other times, offset your natural point of aim a tiny bit. Force yourself to only allow good shot performances; do not return to bad habits. Notice that, while more effort is required, that it is eventually possible to shoot quite well under such circumstances if you will allow yourself to do so. For the really adventurous, shoot while standing on a set of wobble blocks. It can be done quite well!

Choking – Often, competition scores will be significantly lower than training scores. This is most frustrating!

Solution: The single most effective “treatment” for choking is to train under pressure, as mentioned briefly in the previous section. Once you learn how to perform well in such situations, you will be almost immune from choking. The very next article in this series will discuss choking in great detail: its nature, the actual failure mechanism, “inoculation”, and other strategies for addressing the issue, as borne out by significant research.

Do you understand the power of your own language? Monitor and control your self-talk. Do you understand the power of your own images? Monitor and control your imagery. Develop a method of tracking thoughts and images. Work with someone to insert helpful words and images where harmful words and images are now residing.

Losing Faith – Confidence is a job. Do you take responsibility in this area? Your self-talk and self-image have a huge effect on your performance. If you have no faith in yourself, it holds back your progress and enjoyment of the sport, even diminishing the value of training.

Solution: Develop an “Achievement Log” that forces you to recognize how much work you do,

and how good you are. This could be a section in your shooting journal. (You are using one effectively... aren't you!)

Understand that just shooting 100 shots isn't always an achievement. It is less important that the shot is a deep 10 or a nice bust of a clay target than it is how you actually performed the shot and what your awareness told you about your performance. What did you learn today? How will you change your behavior to take advantage of the knowledge gained?

If you have already progressed to at least an intermediate level, never ask yourself if you are "good enough" to do this sport. In time, you will discover that you are no different than even the very best in the sport. They started off just like you did, full of doubt and limited knowledge, but filled with interest and excitement at learning a new game. Almost anyone can excel at this sport. It's mostly a matter of work!

Understand the difference between confidence and trash-talk. Quiet confidence, kept to oneself, is a powerful. Bragging aloud, even if it's true, is both rude and can backfire on you! One athlete asked this author about confidence and cockiness. After discussing the topics, we decided that confidence, even cockiness commensurate with the athlete's level of ability, was just fine if kept private. This athlete is very humble, even when winning a big match, and was at first a bit uncomfortable with the idea of being so cocky, yet had these feelings inside.

Channeled as quiet confidence, and coupled with external quiet in keeping with the athlete's own personality, the athlete was now free to go to the line with the idea that winning any match was well within reach, while still staying true to their own personality. When later asked the difference between a day when ten points were dropped and when only two points were dropped, the reply was: "It's really only a matter of how much confidence I bring to the line. It's almost that simple now." Years of quality training, and lots of it (more than most), have given this athlete a great deal of confidence.

Losing Focus – Focus is an aspect of the human existence that doesn't usually come easily. We tend to be easily distracted by the myriad sensory inputs available to us. We concern ourselves with ideas and thoughts of the past and future.

Solution: When distractions easily take your focus away from the task at hand, it is generally because you are concerned (thinking) about distractions, and/or your focus on your shooting is very weak. Learn to focus only on the actual shooting and you will discover that your distraction control has improved.

Stay in the present moment. This is a huge issue, especially at the Olympics. It is a powerful technique. Within the present moment, there is no external outcome, only the here and now. A powerful calm is often experienced in this state, even in such frenetic activities as motorcycle road racing, and certainly in the shooting sports.

You must have a competition plan. One cannot merely show up at a competition and expect to shoot well. Understand what you need to do well. How much preparation, how much sleep the night, and week, beforehand, when and why you will take breaks in the competition, how you will handle situations within the competition, how you will handle and recover from a "bad" shot, and so on, are all important considerations. As you grow and change as an athlete, your competition plan must change with you.

Challenges At The Top

There Is Something To Lose – When working toward winning an event, there IS something to lose. This is quite different than shooting with no expectation of winning.

Solution: Only a mature self-educated competitor can be a relaxed and aggressive athlete in a very tense environment. You must be willing to lose before you can confidently and reliably win. You must be mentally strong to medal in the Olympics. Sometimes this takes multiple Games, and it often takes long work with a sport psychologist.

Staying Motivated – Long hours, days, weeks, months, and years of training present a real motivational challenge.

Solution: Staying motivated will require an investment of time and energy. You cannot expect motivation to just show up. To have the time and energy, you need to keep your life simple, and be physically and mentally recovered from training and competition.

Use goal setting effectively. This helps in keeping yourself sharp even when “dull” wins most of the time. One must have “fire in the belly” or a passion for the next goal. This really works, if you will use it.

Use both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. “I want to be my best AND I want to beat them.”

Performance Plateaus – Many an athlete faces this challenge in their shooting career, usually many times. If not addressed, frustration will mount and the athlete may even leave the sport prematurely.

Solution: You must maintain a vigilant attitude for new weaknesses. You must know your opponents; know what it will take to win. You must be willing to get worse before getting better. You must have an open mind to new ideas and changes. You must have confidence in your new approach.

“How good do you want to be?” Although this question was copied verbatim from Dr. McCann’s notes, many of this author’s students already knew it by heart, having heard it many times in training sessions and conversations. When presented with a particularly challenging exercise in training, they often smile and say: “I know; ‘How good do I want to be!’” It’s true. Ask yourself the question. Do you have an answer?

On that note, do you want to merely raise the level of your own game? Or do you want to raise the level of the entire game? Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods are different for a reason. They work harder and they think differently. And they believe in themselves. Develop the courage to go against the grain. You will amaze yourself!

Conclusion

This author has been privileged to closely observe the Lassiter High School Trojan Marching Band (Marietta, GA), directed by Alfred Watkins, and the Moeller High School Crusaders football team (Cincinnati, OH), coached by Gerry Faust, both during their developmental and national championship years. In both cases, the coaches and band directors were highly trained, knew their craft, properly instructed their staffs and their students, set lofty and achievable goals, showed the way to reaching those goals, planned and executed long, frequent, and intense training sessions, used the proper training techniques of work and rest recovery, and placed the emphasis on having the athletes working only on learning skills, improving, and allowing themselves to do their best. Nothing more.

Notice that winning was not in the day to day equation. But they both dominated their competitions, had fun doing it, and did it with sportsmanship so good that their opponents and fans welcomed them and their fans. Nice guys and gals do finish first!

Place the emphasis on improving your game, and winning will take care of itself quite nicely.