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“The purpose of shooting... is entirely up to you!”

When we get stuck on a plateau in our shooting, or otherwise find ourselves in a situation where the results are not as expected, the search for an “answer” begins. Sometimes the answer is nothing more than taking a break or having a chat with a trusted training partner or coach. Other times the answer requires more study and work. An earlier article in this series, “Getting Unstuck”, provides many examples of the kinds of topics that may lead to answers. Still other times, nothing seems to work.

We need to stop, step back, and look at shooting from a much broader perspective than our day-to-day “problem solving” approach provides us. On our journey of shooting and self-discovery, we sometimes need to take what at first appears to be a detour along the way. Interesting possibilities lie ahead of us! We will take such a walk now, and explore a few loosely related ideas.

Initial Questions

Why do you shoot? – Why do you spend so much time and effort? What is it that you really want from it? Common answers given in response to the fundamental question include: Have fun. Be with friends. Meet people. The challenge. Joy of learning and accomplishment. Develop self-confidence. Competition. Something to enjoy for a lifetime. Winning is fun. Develop concentration.

These are only a sampling of the answers one typically hears from athletes. They enjoy the sport, enjoy the journey, enjoy the experiences, and enjoy the self-growth. Hold those thoughts for a moment while we move on to another fundamental question.

What do you want out of your training? – What do you expect from your training, from attending camps and clinics, and from working with your coaches? Common answers include: Improve my score. Learn the game better. Visually pick up the clay target faster. Fix my prone/standing/kneeling position. Learn how to move the shotgun more smoothly to and through the target. Learn more about shooting .22 or air. Handle the pressure. Shoot good finals. Improve my hold, or trigger control, or follow through, or all three. Make better shots. Be more consistent. This list barely scratches the surface.

Have you noticed how vastly different the two sets of answers are? That brings us to our last initial question.

Why the big difference? – It seems that we spend all our training time and effort on things that have nothing to do with why we shoot in the first place. How often do we say or hear, “If I can just (fix or improve something), then I can be really good.” or words to that effect? This is 100% backwards! To be sure, the technical details are critical. However, our fixation on “solving” them prevents us from paying attention to aspects of the game that are at least as important. Let’s get some perspective on this and then explore what we might do about it.

Perspective

Open your mind – Focus on why you shoot and what you want from your experience in the sport. It is not exclusively about all that technical stuff. Those are just little pieces of the puzzle. Don’t overlook the larger pieces in our head and heart that lead to real performance. This is the key to actually mastering all that technical stuff. Any number of athletes can shoot well... when they are alone in training. Why is it that they can’t shoot well in competition? Often, it is because their focus is only on the little pieces of the puzzle.

Getting our mind and heart and thought process in the right mode makes the technical stuff so much easier. Yes, a paradox: Pay attention to the mind and heart... and the technical actually works better? Yes, it does. What is the dynamic that causes this?

Three main components of the sporting experience – One way to look at what a person experiences in sport is to examine the various aspects of that experience. These generally fall into three main areas. Performance, Enjoyment, Learning. These are the things that generally describe what we experience in sport. However, our day-to-day activity in the sport often does not match this reality.

The training disconnect – Training usually only focuses on the performance aspect. Actually, it

often focuses on the Outcome part of the Performance. We exclude most of what Performance is, and all of what Enjoyment and Learning bring to us. Yet, “Why” we shoot is all about Enjoyment and Learning, not the Outcome! Look again at the answers to the very first question! This “disconnect” carries over into our competition.

Where the time is spent in competition – Think about how much time it takes to release a shot. We will be very generous and assume that the final critical moments take as much as 5 seconds for a typical 10 meter or 50 meter rifle or pistol event. Multiply 5 seconds by the number of shots in the course of fire and compare that to the total time limit. For shotgun, running target, and most 25 meter events, use 2.5 seconds and do the same calculation.

In a 60 shot free pistol event, the time limit is 120 minutes. At 5 seconds each, the “critical moments” take 5 minutes. That means that about 95% of the event time is spent NOT shooting. Yet we focus 95% to 100% of our training on only 5% of the competition.

Clearly, release of the shot is the most critical moment of the shooting and deserves significant training time. But not to the near or total exclusion of other at least equally important aspects of ultimate performance. It is what goes on in the 95% of the competition – the time when we are not shooting – that actually determines how well we will shoot. It is this aspect that resolves choking and other issues that otherwise cause competition scores to be lower than in training.

Possibilities – Consider the possibilities. Instead of fearing the next “bad” shot, consider the possibility that you just might uncork a really good one! It is possible! Why limit yourself? It may not be probable, but it is possible. It is also possible, and quite likely, that you will shoot a good shot. Free yourself from fretting over perfection or fear of bad shots. These are a key to turning things around.

Open your mind and heart to the possibilities. Then, all the technical stuff will fall into place much more easily. Not by magic certainly, but with much less effort, delay, and pain.

Final Questions

What’s the worst that can happen in competition? – Possible answers include: Lose. Embarrass myself/coach/parents/friends. Let the team down. Others will think less of me. These and other feelings are commonly felt. Truly, though, how long will these feelings last? Only for a short while... everyone forgets. Who cares!

What’s the best that could happen in competition? – Possible answers include: Win. Set a record. Shoot a personal best. Impress others. Help the team. Again, these and other feelings are commonly felt. How long do these good feelings last? Only for a short while... everyone forgets. Who cares!

What do you really want from competition? – After wading through all the typical answers, we sometimes get down to the REAL answer. What we really want is to shoot a match without fear, to play the game with total freedom and abandon, like a young child. The worst that could happen isn’t really so bad, and it is fleeting, so forget it. The best that could happen isn’t really so good, and it is fleeting, so forget it. The sense of accomplishment from a great performance – regardless of outcome – is exhilarating and permanent.

Winning isn’t everything. It is fun, to be sure, but it isn’t everything. Otherwise, why are blowout games so boring? Why are close contests so exciting? It is the close contest that, win or lose, provides a great sense of accomplishment.

Freedom

Released from fear, one is free to “just shoot” and experience the soaring feelings of “effortless” shooting. It is fun. It is seemingly so “easy”, even during the “hard” parts. The performance is astounding to the athlete and the resultant outcome is astonishing to everyone. The athlete feels a deeper and more satisfying sense of self. Spirits soar!

Much is written about the “Zen” or “zone” or “flow” or “subconscious” shot. While that is a topic of later articles, it is something that only comes to athletes who consider the possibilities and allow themselves to shoot with childlike enjoyment. I sometimes describe these shots as being “automagical” since, from the point of view of an actively controlling mind, they seem to happen without active control

on the athlete's part... automatically and almost as if by magic.

Here are the thoughts of a female high school athlete after having played the game with total abandon and experiencing the "zone" in her shooting.

"The automagical shots were amazing. It just happened, like breathing, or my heart beating. And there was no need to check the scope, I've never been more sure in my life that I had a deep ten. Wow..."

I went out to shoot smallbore standing for the first time in ages, and with the exception of me not focusing on watching my follow through, things went better this time than ever before. My hold was steady, I used all those techniques you showed us, balance checks, the three steps, four steps, all of it, and it felt great. I've never been more confident before!

I shot a 98 and 96 on a set of air targets last night, but on my 98, the two nines were sooooo close!!! pluggable... I lost them because I thought about it. I tried to control the chain of occurrences instead of just letting it happen."

She went on to experience these feelings in competition and enjoyed her shooting like she had as a beginner. You can, too. The first step is to make up your mind that thought patterns do affect shooting and that you will start now in a new direction.