

Sitting On Your... Laurels

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The Need To Win

Chuang Tzu

When an archer is shooting for nothing,
He has all his skill.
If he shoots for a brass buckle,
He is already nervous.
If he shoots for a prize of gold,
He goes blind,
Or sees two targets.
He is out of his mind!
His skill has not changed.
But the prize divides him.
He cares.
He thinks more of winning,
Than of the shooting.
And the need to win,
Drains him of his power.

“How good do you want to be?”

A commonly seen phenomenon is athletes achieving competition scores that are significantly lower than their practice scores. Sometimes these are transient occurrences due to illness, jet lag, fatigue, or emotional upset due to external life influences and events. In many cases, it is a common pattern and there are fundamental reasons why the athlete repeatedly has lower scores in competition than in training. In a few cases, the phenomenon only occurs in major competitions such as Olympic Trials or World Cup competitions.

Two of the previous articles in this series discussed choking from a scientific standpoint and then provided ideas and strategies at a tactical level to “inoculate” the athlete from the problem. Two subsequent articles explored deeper issues. This article looks at things a tiny bit more strategically. Doing so also causes us to revisit training themes from some of the much earlier articles in the series and look at them from a different perspective.

The vast majority of practice time in our sport is spent shooting a course of fire. That is, shooting the same number of shots under the same program as in a competition. Typically, the score is tallied up. If it is “better than average” the day is considered to be a good one. If the score is “lower than average” then the day is considered a failure. Nothing more. A number of coaches and athletes realize there is a lot more to shooting than just firing downrange and they actually do something about it.

NCAA rifle teams are one microcosm of the sport and provide many representative examples of varying ways of training.

Some coaches have their athletes fire full or partial courses of fire for score during most of their practice time each week. Scores are carefully tracked and if there is any dip at all, the athlete is questioned about “What is wrong?” since “progress” consists solely of scores going up. The athletes are given little or no time to direct their own training or experiment with new techniques, nor is any freedom given to “tear down” and rebuild to a better technique since any dip in score is not tolerated. And perish the thought that an athlete might consult with a former and trusted outside coach or training partner.

Many teams have practice programs that, though possibly very different in form, are no different in substance to that described here.

Contrasting this, in some programs the athletes are encouraged to take responsibility for their training, work with their coach on plans, strategies, and techniques for improvement, and are afforded the freedom to do real training instead of mere course of fire practice. At least one NCAA team also makes extensive use of intensity training through competitive "games". The heat is on when the cost of losing is having to sweep brass or hang targets for a teammate instead of having them doing it for you! Through this friendly, though intense, competition, each athlete becomes better able to perform under the stress of outcome-based pressure.

This dichotomy is seen in high school and club teams, and in individual athletes. A few teams, coaches, and athletes are willing to challenge themselves, have open minds to explore new ideas, and actually work hard at their training. It pays off. Some who do not understand this still achieve some success at times, but do not know how to sustain it.

For example, a team of teenage athletes that has won three straight team championships thinks they have it all figured out. Their first championship was earned the old fashioned way... hard work. Led by a couple of athletes who were mature, dedicated, and hard working, the team truly earned their success that first time. Although they won their second and third championships fair and square, and are to be congratulated for being able to win three in a row, how they won their second and third championships provides some insight into their future if a mid-course correction is not made.

The latter two crowns were not so much earned or won by this team, as much as other teams lost them. In that second year, two members of the team most likely to win made some poor choices at the last minute in preparation for the event and performed very poorly. The subject team turned in a decent performance and prevailed... by only a very slim margin. The third year, a different team was providing strong competition. Unfortunately, one of the athletes was not able to complete the season. The subject team won again with an adequate performance, though other teams weren't too far behind. Again, these are fair and honest wins, for which they are to be congratulated. Yet, they want to merely "keep doing what worked in the past." And this is unlikely to bring them continued success. Do you suppose that an Olympic champion, in planning to return and win again 4 years later, plans only to "keep doing what worked in the past" and nothing more. Not on your life!

In point of fact, "what worked" for that team is gone. More correctly, "they" are gone due to age. If the athletes and coaches don't step up to fill the void by going back to the ideals of the previous athletes, the team will not be able to sustain their record on a long-term basis. Here is why. The previous athletes trained rather than practiced. They challenged themselves and each other. They worked hard on their game. They led by example and action. But now they are gone. The team and individual practice now is very much like so many others... lots of shooting for score and not enough real training. Intensity training is seen as pointless games. With one exception, the experienced athletes now on the team are not training, leading, and encouraging the younger team members the way they themselves were brought up by the now departed athletes. So, the team is no longer "doing what worked" in the past." They just think they are, and are instead depending on raw talent and luck.

A newer team has watched this and has decided that through real training, they can easily capture the win from the old-time champion team. Although we can sometimes win by luck, it won't last. Which team won the following year? We already know the answer: the new team won. No surprise. The prediction was made almost a year before, and it came true.

Shotgun competition and training are no different; also providing contrasting examples.

Many athletes go out on the field and shoot a round or two of the competition program, take a break, read or play cards or whatever, and then go back out and do another round or two. If it is windy, they don't like to practice and will not do it if given the choice. After all, it's hard and the scores go down. (Perish the thought! It is all about score isn't it?) Other athletes will mix up their training and will shoot in the wind every chance they get. The added stress and experience makes them much stronger and more skilled competitors. In addition to shooting full rounds, they will go to a particular station and work on that one station, and no other, to find, diagnose, and resolve a problem they are having. Do you

or your coaches know which targets on which stations you miss the most? Do you know why? Do you actually go out to do station work and specifically work on them... to the point of shooting a full box or more of shells on one station and target if that is what it takes? Do you do intensity training? At the Athens World Cup in 2004 and again at the Olympics, the conditions were quite windy. Guess which athletes did best?

None of these examples are meant to criticize any discipline, group, or team. Rather, each provides contrasting examples, both negative and positive, to lend insight into the differences that set some programs and athletes apart from all the rest. If your aspirations include winning international medals, merely making a national team and sitting back to rest on your... laurels... isn't going to get you to the podium. The same is true at a national, state, or local level.

There is another critical factor at work. When a team wins a championship, when an athlete wins an event or makes a national team, when a particular level of success is achieved, it is natural to "protect" that level of performance and be unwilling to change anything. Yet, higher levels of achievement require and demand continuous study, refinement, and evolution of the athlete's game. This doesn't mean just physical or technical aspects. At ever higher levels, the subtle parts of the mental and emotional aspects become ever more important. Yet the majority of athletes do not address these things often enough, if at all. They often think they have "arrived" or that they have it "all figured out now" and are no longer acting as true students of the game.

This is borne out by looking at World Cup results the last two or three years and at the Olympic Trials results. While there have been brilliant performances by some, there have also been any number of breakdowns. These may seem to be harsh words, though they are not meant that way. Whether they have reached their goals or not, there are many athletes who truly do work "smart and hard" as the saying goes. However, without honest assessment, there cannot be genuine improvement.

The higher one's level of achievement, the more one needs to become a student of the game, the more open-minded one must become, the more one must adapt to and adopt new and additional techniques (and know when and how to do so), and the more one must explore and master the mental and emotional aspects of the higher levels of the game. This is counter to one's natural inclination and thus stands in the way of much potential success.

What decisions are you making for your own training and success? It is up to you, and you alone, to decide. What actions are you taking? What changes in behavior, in technique, in your approach, thought patterns, and feelings, are you making? What resources are you seeking out and reading, or listening to, or talking with? Wanting to improve is one thing. Doing it is quite another. Merely doing the same things over and over is not going to take you to your goals.

Don't tell me it is all about trigger control or some other technical aspect at the Olympic Trials, school or club championships, World Cups, nationals, the Olympics, or anywhere the athlete deeply cares about the outcome. Sure, the foundation must be there and must be solid. At those levels, technique is only the start. At those levels, it is all about what is going on deep inside your head and your heart... and very little else. The Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, among others, clearly understood this. Do we as coaches and athletes also understand this, or do we ignore it, in our approach to training and competing?

Those who step up in training, not just go through the motions of practice, and not just physically and technically, but also mentally and emotionally, these are the ones who typically win the medals.

Many are called, but few are chosen. And yet, you alone are the one who decides if you are "chosen" or not. Yes, only you.

Ultimately, it comes down to this: "How good do you want to be? I mean it, how good do you really want to be?"

No, don't tell me. Show me.

On second thought, don't tell or show me.

Show yourself!