

**On the Firing Line** (Twenty-seventh in a series)

## **Fear and Risk**

©2006 JP O'Connor

### **Dare not, Achieve not.**

People don't like mistakes. We aren't kind to people who make mistakes. Mistakes embarrass us and keep us from reaching our goals – or so we think. We worry about making mistakes and we try not to make them.

Certainly in competition we strive mightily to avoid mistakes. In fact, too often we become so obsessed with not making mistakes that we lose sight of our true objective. Instead, we live in fear of the next bad shots. We are always “Two shots away from being crazy.” It should be no surprise then, when our score plummets even though we shot so well in training. We often try to “Play it safe.”

Based on these thoughts, we might conclude that mistakes are bad. This may come as a surprise to you: **MISTAKES ARE GOOD!** Not always, certainly, but in most situations where we avoid mistakes at all costs, we would be better served with a different attitude.

No, this doesn't mean that we should go out of our way to make mistakes, nor should we hope to make lots of mistakes in competition. Rather, mistakes are good when they are used to provide insight into our performance and lead us to improvement. As we grow to understand this, we free ourselves from the fear of mistakes. This frees us to “just do” our chosen sport in a manner that is more enjoyable and which facilitates a much higher level of performance.

One aspect of this line of thinking involves “Eights are your friend.” If we become aware of what led to the mistake, we have given our self an opportunity to actually learn and change and reduce the chances of making that same mistake again. More importantly, we have not been negatively self critical and further heightened our fear of failure. “Mistakes are normal and I can learn from them if I will allow my self to do so. They are **NOT** a reflection of my self worth!”

Another aspect involves the debilitating effects of fear. We have all seen automobile drivers that were so timid as to be dangerous to themselves and others. We may have experienced moments when were frozen by fear or at least were not able to perform our best due to fear. What is it that we fear? In competition, we fear nothing more than making a mistake.

Is it possible to enter a burning building to search for people – without fear? Is it possible to force one's self up a stairway of a burning building while pushing back a wall of flame with the water stream – without fear? Is it possible to go over the edge of an overhanging cliff 150 feet above the valley below held only by one small rope – without fear? Is it possible to ride a motorcycle at 190 mph on a racetrack or 140 mph on a small country road – without fear? The answer to each of these questions is a resounding “Yes!” In each of these endeavors, the inherent danger brings an amazing level of focus and clarity of thought into the mix. How does one learn to do these things without fear? The answer is deceptively simple. One must learn the activity so well that there is no concern or expectation that mistakes will occur. Although we learn how to release the shot, we don't really learn the sport to the degree that we truly understand what is going on with our performance and why we get different outcomes. Thus, we fear mistakes instead of just shooting... and accepting and learning from the few mistakes that are made.

In our sport, there is no danger of physical harm from missing the center of the target with our shot. Lacking this physical danger, and lacking the overwhelming sensory inputs of the examples above, we are not forced by survival instincts into the clarity of focus and thought that we need. Nor are we forced to learn the activity so deeply that we truly understand its subtle dynamics. Instead, most participants learn to a much shallower level and allow fear of much different kinds of “danger” to engulf us. What kind of fear? Embarrassment! The fear we carry leads us to exactly the result we fear. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One aspect of fear that isn’t as obvious is the fear of not being in control. Those who learn our sport to the deepest levels (and they are in the minority) come to understand intuitively that ultimate level shooting demands that the “active thought, take control, pay attention” part of our mind must completely relinquish active control of the shooting. There are many top athletes and coaches who will disagree vehemently with this statement. Yet human physiology and psychology show the statement to be true. Although many athletes do achieve great success using active control, this is a path that is far longer and more difficult. We are taught to “pay attention” and “take charge” and control our actions. Time and again, at the beginning level, at the Olympic level, and everywhere in between, athletes have “taken control” and failed miserably. The earlier articles on choking provide insight into this mechanism. Those who learn to “give up” active control find themselves performing on an entirely different plane.

In major competition, we act as if a mistake has the same consequences as a mistake made inside a burning building. Unlike the firefighter, we have not trained our self to the degree that we truly and deeply understand the situation and therefore have very little to fear from it. We don’t understand “flow”; we don’t understand why we get seemingly random bad shots; we don’t understand why some days are better than others. Therefore we are filled with fear. It doesn’t have to be this way.

We begin in training. Here, the coach and athlete can create a safe environment where the athlete feels free to experiment and do seemingly outlandish things. (Always shooting for score and being critical of any score drop is emphatically not a safe training environment! It only increases fear.) Naturally, many of the experiments will show what not to do. Interestingly, many of them will lend insight to positive changes or refinements that otherwise would have been overlooked. The athlete cannot “break” their game doing this. Merely returning to what was done before allows them to return to what they were comfortable with doing originally. The athlete learns to experiment, then return to what they did before if the experiment shows no benefit. The athlete also learns to incorporate the results of successful experiments.

Once the athlete experiences this, they become more receptive to experimentation and they realize that the larger groups and lower scores are only a very short term consequence that rapidly changes to even tighter groups and higher scores than before. Be careful not to fall into the “fix it” mentality of the Culture of Shooters. Instead, use awareness and creativity and, after proper consideration, be willing to risk doing something different.

The real challenge comes in competition. Here, we care very much about the outcome. Our natural inclination is to abandon the lessons learned in training and take control and be careful all over again. We must be aware that we are doing this, make up our mind to not accept it, and then decide to go about our business in ways that we have learned actually work. Again, this starts in training. Intensity training is critical to this process. The athlete cares deeply about the outcome and/or is placed in a situation where they are very likely to be careful or play it safe. If they follow their natural inclinations and old habits, they will take control and fail. In time, the athlete learns that they can perform well when their heart is pounding and there is time pressure

and someone else is about to beat them if they falter. The best intensity training produces very high levels of internally generated pressure. At first, incredible failures are often seen. Yet, the athlete gains insight, alters their mindset, and performs better the next time. The athlete eventually learns how to “compartmentalize” or block out the internal fears and concerns and discovers that they are now free to “just do” as they always wanted to. Athletes discover that their favorite training activities are the hardest intensity drills! They enter competition with high levels of confidence and competence.

Fear of the unknown disappears when we eliminate the unknown. There is nothing mysterious or fleeting about being “in the zone” or in the “flow state” of performance. There is nothing random about rock solid steadiness and balance on a given day. There is nothing mysterious about obtaining a world class hold. There is no deep secret to smooth shot release. There is nothing mysterious about shooting deep ten after deep ten in a carefree manner. Yet we tell ourselves these things are difficult or unknown and fight ourselves and build our fears. True, many of these things seem mysterious or difficult, and many are not blatantly obvious as we read books on the sport, yet the information and techniques are available. Our fear of change and failure –and our fear of being different – block our way.

In the words of Franklin Roosevelt, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

---

The “On The Firing Line” series is published by the national governing bodies for Olympic shooting in Japan and the USA, and has been adapted for archery as “On the Shooting Line” published by USA Archery. Olympic Coach Magazine, the National Association of Soccer Coaches, and others have referenced selected articles. The entire series is available online at [www.pilkguns.com](http://www.pilkguns.com).

Permission is granted to distribute FREE copies for non-profit educational purposes provided the article is kept unedited in its entirety with all notices, copyright, and other information contained in the document. Any other use requires advance, specific, written permission from the author. The author may be contacted at [jpoc@acm.org](mailto:jpoc@acm.org).

*Based in the Atlanta, Ga., area, JP O’Connor ([jpoc@acm.org](mailto:jpoc@acm.org) and <http://www.america.net/~jpoc/>) is involved in rifle and pistol target shooting as a competitor, is a former Assistant National Coach – USA Paralympics Shooting Team, is a Level 3 coach, serves on the National Coach Development Staff, and coaches the rifle and pistol teams at North Georgia College & State University. He enjoys working with a number of pistol and rifle athletes from around the country, ranging from beginners to the highly advanced, in clinics and one-on-one private coaching, all on a volunteer basis. He also works with musicians and athletes in a variety of sports.*

(Biographical information as of October 2009)