

**On the Firing Line** (Thirty First in a series)

## **Attitude Is Everything**

©2006 JP O'Connor, Kirsten Weiss

**You cannot control what has already happened;  
You can control how you react.**

The previous two installments of this series have scratched the surface of advanced techniques for shot delivery that are robust and stand up in the heat of competition. Most anyone can learn to shoot a gun, swing a golf club, or draw and release an archer's bow. Learning how to do these things in competition is quite another story. Even with the most robust and well-practiced techniques, one must also have the appropriate mental and emotional skills and attitudes in order to thrive in competition.

One of the best illustrations of the importance of this concept is described in an essay "Attitude Is Everything" that Kirsten Weiss wrote upon her return from the World Shooting Championships in Zagreb, Croatia in July 2006. She has graciously agreed to share her essay with us in this article.

-----

Gliding through the sea on her surfboard, Bethany Hamilton searched for the next wave she would ride to shore. Without warning, a shark came up and bit off her arm, sending shock, fear, and panic piercing into everyone around her – but not Bethany. Bethany looked at her friends and wondered why they were upset. She was aware of the problem, but remained unbelievably calm, swam to shore and got help.

Why was Bethany so calm in the face of such a horrific situation?

A similar situation occurred in the Amazon jungle. A doctor was approached by a boy for help. His arm was partially amputated and yet he climbed and crawled through miles of jungle to get to the doctor without a trace of panic. In this situation, the doctor immediately went to give the boy a shot of Novocain and the boy screamed from the prick of the needle. Why hadn't he screamed over the much larger injury that almost certainly gave him more pain?

Our brains are amazing. In a panic situation, where we are injured, it shifts into survival mode. After the initial pain, our brain already knows that our body is hurt and needs attention. To let the pain continue would only hinder our ability to seek help or help ourselves. The reason why the little boy was so aware of the tiny pain from the needle was because it was a new sort of pain. His brain was alerting him once again to be aware that something wasn't quite right.

Now take a different situation.

You are at World Championships. You have been training very hard for this. You are into standing and are shooting decently. Things are going fairly smoothly. BAM! The screen flashes: 6! You are shocked! You think, "I haven't done a shot like that in a very long time, and I do it in World Championships?"

How do you respond?

Or take another situation, much less dramatic but equally as significant. Again, you are on the line at World Championships, but this time it is in the prone competition. You are

shooting your shots one by one, it's not too bad, but you're aware of something. You have this low underlying buzz, like a mosquito flying around your head whispering, "Something's not right." But you can't put your finger on it for almost the whole match. Then you put your finger on it – literally. Your trigger is malfunctioning and has been intermittently the entire match. It is not over yet. You have 19 shots left. What do you do?

As shooters, we experience situations, both mentally and emotionally challenging, and there is no automatic "survival mode" that our brains can just kick into with ease. In both these situations it is critically important how we handle them. That makes all the difference between a good performance and one that we might as well not even have shot. When we shoot a bad shot, we may very well feel like we have just been attacked by a shark, caught off our guard, and not sure what the next move should be. Do we let panic set in? Do we embrace the adrenaline and let our body race as much as our mind? Do our minds immediately flood with negative thoughts, seeking to blame something. The heat, the range, ourselves...

Or is the problem less pronounced. The match isn't going as you thought it might. You try everything you know, but the needle prick of less-than-perfect shots is telling you to be aware that something isn't right. You check everything you know to check, and still the problem stays. Your time is running out, you have to keep going. What happens to you at this point? Do you get frustrated and mentally give up, throwing shots indiscriminately down range? If and when you realize the culprit, what is your next move?

The previous two shooting situations happened to me while I shot in the World Championships this summer. Both were unexpected, but not improbable or unforeseeable.

Going into a match it is good to have a thorough plan, but not a rigid one. This means that you should think about situations that could occur in the match both good and bad, and what your plan will be in those cases. Your plan should be like a tree. If you just have one rigid stump of a plan, if something goes wrong you have nowhere to go. You should have a main plan, with specific alternate plans branching off in case you need them.

But, the most important thing is how you handle initial disappointment or even panic. If you let it overcome you, then no plan in the world will save you. During my matches, I knew this was critical and I'm not one to easily let negative talk or panic take over. I kept talking positively and trusting myself, and knew that one simple shot did not define me. In prone, I became aware of the trigger problem, knew I couldn't have it fixed and finish the match in time, figured out how I could work with the trigger to finish the match and decided that I'd finish strongly. 19 shots left. 19 shots fired. 19 tens recorded.

The bottom line is: Let nothing shake you. You can not control what has already happened, but you can control how you react to it. Don't let the past define you. You are defined by your future.

You know what Bethany Hamilton is doing right now? She is surfing. With one arm, she has adapted and surfs without fear of the past. Did she foresee that the shark would bite her? Of course not. Was it improbable? No, sharks occasionally bite surfers. But when it happened, it was certainly unexpected! Yet, Bethany followed an alternate plan, and she keeps surfing, even training for competitions. Maybe she will win a championship one day; she definitely has the attitude for it.

-----

Two thirds of the way through her prone competition, fate handed Kirsten a perfect excuse to have a poor performance. After all, everyone knows how important the release of the shot is and how critical a role the trigger plays in that part of the performance. Yet, when her trigger malfunction finally manifested itself at World Championships, she got over her initial shock and fear. Instead of giving up (even though she had the perfect excuse to do so), she dug deeply and took control of her emotions. Nineteen tens in a row is not a bad finish in any situation! After the competition, her trigger was replaced so she had to adapt to a new feel for her three position competition, which she did quite well.

In competition isn't the only place where Kirsten's attitude serves her well. She works very hard at her game, constantly striving to improve her techniques – physical, technical, mental, and emotional. She will not settle for just “good enough” in her shooting.

Just before leaving for the world championships, Kirsten was working hard to become even better at handling pressure situations. One evening, she settled into the standing position to shoot 50 meter smallbore outdoors, sensed and tuned her balance, sensed and tuned her natural point of aim, optimized them to all work together, did some dry firing, then shot some sighter or “warm-up” shots. Then her ammunition was taken away.

One cartridge was brought to her and she was told, “Shoot an X!” (This is the small ring inside the ten ring.) She gave a funny look and then went to work. When she reported that the shot was not an X, but that it was a ten, there was no comment given to her, another cartridge was brought to her, and she was again told: “Shoot an X!” This went on for a number of shots, with her frustration and adrenaline rising with each missed X. She collected herself and started getting a number X shots while still collecting a few tens. Finally her ammunition was brought back to her and she was told to “Just shoot until you have a total of 5 tens.” Seven or eight shots later, she had her 5 tens.

When asked for her observations, one of her comments was quite insightful. “When I had to shoot X ring shots on each and every shot, my mistakes were tens. When I was told to shoot some tens and the number of shots didn't matter I felt the pressure come off... and my mistakes were nines.” You could almost see the light bulb go off in her head! We accept nines! Even our attitude about what is “good enough” has a profound effect on our shooting. (Note: This drill, only partially described here, was very demanding and could only be done because the athlete is advanced and could handle the intense pressure because the task, while difficult, was possible for her. If using this type of technique with other athletes, it must be appropriately scaled to their level of development. The goal here is to place the athlete in an intense situation and allow them to learn that they can perform well in such situations. If the task is too difficult for the athlete, the result is demoralization, not learning.)

Later, on her own, Kirsten imposed a similar drill on her self. She was shooting smallbore prone and demanded 10.7 or better from herself. (An X is only a 10.3 or better.) After shooting a few 10.7 shots in a row, she kidded herself good naturedly about “only” shooting the “minimum” of 10.7 that she was demanding of herself. So she decided to go for a 10.8 or better... and the very next shot was a 10.8! Regardless of whether she made the scores or not in those drills, the key point is that she challenged herself, felt the pressure of a desired outcome, and learned how to deal with those feelings to calmly perform even better. Kirsten is one of those athletes who understands how to train and raise her game to ever higher levels. Her attitude is what makes this possible.

Attitude is everything. It affects how we learn, or even if we learn at all, and how we compete. Take charge, take responsibility, and take it on! Enjoy!

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Kirsten Weiss for sharing her wonderful essay and stories.

---

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)