

On the Firing Line (Thirty Fourth in a series)

Mental Flexibility

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**“Insanity: Doing the same thing over and over
and expecting a different outcome”**

Athletes and coaches work long, hard hours training in their chosen sport. They invest huge amounts of time, money, and energy striving for the seemingly elusive top prize. Too often, this effort is slow, frustrating, and the athlete falls far short of the ultimate goal or leaves the sport before realizing their potential. Only a few participants seem to rise above the crowd. Why is this?

The majority of coaches and athletes who truly excel exhibit mental flexibility in their planning and work. They adapt their thinking and their actions as needed in order to reach their training and competition goals.

Eugenio Monti of Italy was a budding world-class skier as a young man when a bad injury ended his career in that sport. Rather than give up his dreams of world and Olympic competition, he switched to a very different sport, the bobsled. While this took mental flexibility on his part, it is not the biggest example that he provides on this topic. Eugenio became a world class bobsled pilot. He was a true sportsman and to this day is known as one of the greatest sports of all time. He is also known as one of the best bobsled pilots of all time. It turns out that his key “secrets to success” was nothing more than mental flexibility.

The fastest way down a bobsled track is on the optimal line. This is the line that provides the shortest route and the greatest speed in order to result in the shortest time. Most bobsled pilots spend the entire run down the hill attempting to hold the sled on that line and, when it wavers, working to get back on the optimal line as quickly as possible. When making corrections, most pilots attempt to do so with sudden corrections and scrub off lots of speed.

Eugenio “took what the hill gave” and calmly guided his sled through the course with gentle corrections. Thus, he did not scrub off lots of speed with sudden corrections. Rather than work to stay inflexibly on “the” optimal line, he realized that there was a “new” optimal line based on his position at any given moment. His mental flexibility allowed him to make corrections that were calmer, smoother, and smaller. He was not fighting the sled, and the sled was not fighting the hill. He merely guided the sled on the new optimal line that existed at that moment.

Upon hearing this story, one young athlete realized it was like going off course when using a GPS unit to navigate on public roads. The unit detects a deviation from the original “optimal line” or route, and recalculates a new optimal route instead of forcing the driver to go back immediately to the original route.

This same young athlete recently observed an example and a counter-example in his own training and competition. Upon arriving at a particular national competition, he and his teammates discovered that the competition would be conducted in a manner different than any other they had ever attended and deviated from any method covered in the rules. This particular athlete was so upset that his club coach had to stop a group meeting and remind him that he could either remain inflexible in his thinking and affect himself and the entire team, or he could

be flexible, adapt his thinking and methods to the match conditions as they existed, and enjoy a successful competition. Despite some initial grumbling, to his credit, the athlete did quickly adapt and performed quite well.

That lesson allowed him to make a big change in his game a few weeks later. One of the “great debates” in international pistol shooting technique is where to aim. There are at least 4 different methods: center hold, bottom of the black hold, thin line of white hold, and deep in the white hold. As a specialist in air pistol and free pistol, both of which demand great precision, and being quite analytical, the athlete had long ago decided that the thin line of white was “best” since he could be the most “precise” in his aiming. His private training coach, who prefers the deep in the white hold, did not insist on a change when the two started working together a year earlier. They discussed the different methods, the pros and cons of each, and agreed not to initially make a change.

A couple of weeks after competing in two national competitions, including the one mentioned above, the athlete noticed a number of subtle, yet critical errors in his technique. Based on ongoing discussions with his training coach, the athlete realized the errors were due, in part, to the aiming method he was using and that the deep in the white hold might alleviate all those issues. It took a great deal of mental flexibility for this athlete to experiment with a hold method that seemed so “wrong” and seemed to provide little if any precision. Despite his initial discomfort, the athlete discovered that the new method provided him with long strings of very precise shots that were “easy” to shoot. The technique also held up quite well during intensity training.

About 2 weeks later, the athlete’s younger sister made exactly the same discovery and embraced the change. She reported that the shots were so “easy” and fun and her groups were significantly tighter. Once she learned to trust the technique, she was confident and performed well in intensity training.

The examples of where to aim with pistol were chosen for this article because the typical reaction to the deep in the white hold is quite negative. Athletes “try” the method and find it quite discomforting because of the lack of “precision” or other related feelings. They reject the method after a quick trial. Of course, where to aim is only one piece of a much larger puzzle of pieces that one must assemble into an overall technique and process. It is dangerous to “try” something without understanding how it does or does not fit in to the athlete’s overall approach. Without mental flexibility, one gets hopelessly mired into making minor tweaks and trying “tips and hints” instead of stepping back and truly assessing their whole approach.

There is no question that top athletes spend a lot of time in training. One must be so familiar with the process of performing that it is beyond routine. All too often, practice sessions reinforce weak technique and processes. It is critically important that coaches and athletes make sure the basics are very robust and that practice sessions always require solid basics as a foundation. This requires flexible thinking and openness for evaluation and change when and where needed.

Flexible thinking sometimes needs to extend to “rules” that are “never” to be broken. One “rule” that is often repeated, and for good reason, is “Never make major changes just before a big competition.” In almost all cases, this is excellent advice. Most coaches and athletes can recall a time that an athlete tried something before a big competition, had a great result in training (due to honeymoon effect) and crashed at the competition. Therefore, one should never break the rule. Or so we are taught.

Many years ago, a young athlete was introduced to and chose to work with a new training coach. After listening carefully to the athlete and assessing her situation, the training coach and athlete came to a radical conclusion after only two weeks of work together. Her standing position needed to be completely overhauled and changed... three weeks before a major national competition. Despite the fact that everyone “knows” this is wrong, coach and athlete agreed that the then current position technique would not work at all, so there was nothing to lose since she was unlikely to advance beyond her then current “club” level of shooting with the old position. Additionally, the position would soon cause physical injury to the athlete, which cannot be tolerated.

After exploring a new strategy for the standing position, the next decision was whether to use it right away or wait until after the competition. Their plan was for her to train with the new position for a week, then assess and decide. Then train another week and decide again. Then stick with that choice for the last week. The athlete loved the new position and decided to stick with it. She won the first of five consecutive junior national championships, along with a number of other junior, open, and international medals, over the next few years. Her flexible thinking and ability to go against “conventional wisdom” allowed her to accelerate her training and her shooting career at a very young age.

In the psychological literature on people who become experts, one of the key attributes was a “rage to master” their field. Experts, and experts in training, constantly push the envelope of their knowledge and abilities. They constantly strive to go outside their comfort zone to learn more. This can only happen with people who learn to be flexible in their thinking. Conforming rarely yields spectacular results.

At the same time, coaches and athletes so often will point to an exception, such as the one above, and use it as an excuse to go against the grain even when the situation has not been carefully assessed and a plan carefully formulated. With or without flexible thinking, there is no substitute for hard work – whether physical or mental.

Learn the basics. Really learn them. Understand how they work and why. Understand how they work together and why. Then one can discern genuine opportunities for improvement. Flexible thinking does not mean do whatever one feels like. Flexible thinking means being open to new possibilities and ideas as they appear based on solid foundational work.

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.

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(Biographical information as of October 2009)