

On the Firing Line (Fortieth in a series)

On Stepping Up

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“It’s the Olympics. If you aren’t nervous, you aren’t human!”

We interrupt our “regularly schedule programming” for a look at the recently concluded Beijing Olympics. The next installment of this series will follow up the previous article to continue the discussion of learning and of ultimate performance. Insights gained because of the recently concluded Olympics, and discussed in this article, provide ideas that are closely related to that discussion.

The US Olympic Shooting Team made many headlines at this Olympics. The six medals earned are the most won since the boycotted 1984 Olympics, additional athletes earned spots in their finals (placing the USA in contention for an additional 6 medals), and one athlete’s unusual story of adversity saw another chapter written. It was also fun to watch our “adopted team member” from the Czech Republic add to her Olympics medal count. Congratulations to all of our athletes on the team for their hard work and accomplishments.

Matt Emmons – Humility and Positive Thinking

The quote at the beginning of this article is from the open letter that Matt Emmons distributed right after the 2008 Olympics. It is insightful on a number of levels. First, if someone is not feeling some nervousness or excitement just before a competition, they are probably nowhere near a proper mental activation (arousal) level for optimal performance – or they need emergency medical aid! It also illustrates the point that the Olympics are not just another competition in the minds of most people. After all, it is held only once every four years and is the focus of intense interest and desire. As an example of the difference in the Olympics, although those of us who have known Abhinav Bindra of India for many years were very excited for him when he became World Champion in 2006, we were even more excited for him when he became Olympics Champion in 2008.

Matt’s story in Athens and Beijing has had more news and commentary written and filmed than probably any other shooting event in years, so there is no need to recount the story here. Both of Matt’s open letters can be found on the Target Talk discussion forum with some searching, and both provide very interesting insight into how he views his Olympics experiences. Does he wish he had two more medals? Of course! Is he all broken up over the two missed opportunities? Not at all. Disappointed, but not debilitated. Not even close. Instead of focusing on the outcome, he focuses on the performance, and that focus carries through even to those famous two shots. What people forget is how strong the previous 129 shots were. It takes 130 good shots to win, of course, and Matt assesses those two, just as good athletes do of all their performances, and plans for the future.

Matt was kind enough to share additional thoughts in response to an email inquiry I sent him about his prone match and that fateful shot in the three position match.

“Thanks, from both of us, for the congratulations. Greatly appreciated! No kidding, that prone match was the best match of my life. Even though I didn't win, I'm so proud of it. That was perfection with those conditions.”

Notice that his focus is on the performance, not on the outcome? That is a characteristic of great athletes. Long after people forget where he placed or even that he won a medal in that prone match, he will always have the feelings of his performance. Those feelings will carry him forward to the next challenge.

Naturally, the topic of the three position match was next. Matt's comments:

“Ok, to be perfectly honest with you, I was a little more nervous on the last shot, but by no means out of control. Seriously. I had a plan for that final. I've been looking forward to that final for a long time because I knew if I did anything remotely close to normal, I'd be in there. I was following that plan. My visualization was good, I was able to keep my emotions under control and I was shooting good shots. I knew the 10th shot would be challenging and I wasn't going to fool myself and think that my arousal level wouldn't rise. I thought it would and I had a plan of how to deal with that. I knew how the crowd reacted to the shots, so I was prepared for that. I was doing fine with the crowd noise. It was really nothing more than noise in the background for me.

“In retrospect, I guess the last shot was a little faster than the others. I was told that it went off about 10 to 12 seconds faster than the others. So, had the shot made it down to the bull and I could have held, that would have been about 5 to 7 seconds faster. I was told my first 9 shots were like clockwork as far as when they went off. It's something I'm aware of now, but regardless, I'm still very confident that had that shot made it to the bull, it would have been good. I remember that when I looked through the sights as I was coming down into the target, I got a sense of confidence. My body felt solid and I was ready for it. Like I said, as I was getting on the bull and getting on the first stage, it just went off. It surprised me. And that's it.”

Notice that Matt had prepared for that final and had a plan... even to the point of looking forward to it. His other comments in his email, and those from his open letter, are all positive. Those who know Matt are not surprised. Like any great athlete, he remains positive, toughs out the dark moments, and strives to meet the next challenge.

Jason Turner – The Journey

Jason Turner earned a medal as well. His medal was in the men's air pistol competition. The pistol discipline in this country has not established a dominant presence at the Olympics for some time, to say the least, so his medal is quite exciting! When asked about his trip to China, he said “I had a blast!”

Jason shared some insights about how he learned to perform in major competitions. His story is quite typical, starting shooting many years ago, then getting serious about 14 years ago, training, learning, and competing. His journey is quite lengthy, lengthier than most athletes are willing to endure. Yet he persevered and stuck to his goals and dreams and enjoys the journey.

He attributes his success to “hard work and patience” through the years. At times, he would shoot well, and enjoy it. At others, his performances would falter. Rather than quit in disgust or pass them off as “just another bad day”, he examined those times to gain insight into why the performances were not up to par. These insights allowed him to improve. Otherwise, he would have only a memory of a bad performance and nothing learned from it.

Suffering through those many dark moments – and days – of frustration, yet maintaining perspective, motivation, and learning, is an example of one of the hardest parts of “hard” work... and patience. When he talked about those “dark moments”, there was no doubt that it was not easy at times to stay the course. Anyone can keep motivation going when all is going well. The best learn how to keep it going in the tough times.

Jason shared very interesting insights about his two Olympics events, and a couple of prior events that helped him gain the perspective needed to perform well.

In the 2004 Athens Olympics, Jason was squadded next to one of the “big names” in men’s pistol. That added a bit of extra kick to his nervousness of being in his first Olympics. Like Matt said in the quote above this article, if you aren’t nervous...! That experience, along with competition in numerous World Cup events through the years helped Jason learn that he could compete with anyone and that gave him confidence to continue and to perform even better.

One watershed event in Jason’s development as a top athlete took place at the 2007 Pan American Games. Jason loves free pistol, relishes the intense challenge it provides, works hard at it, and identifies more with free pistol than with air pistol. He was shooting very, very well in international competition and came into the Pan Ams with high expectations. Uh, oh... there is that “E” word again! Sure enough, his first 20 record shots were horrible. I am not being mean or critical here. Jason said he put all kinds of pressure on himself and said the shots were not at all good. He could easily have given up, “mailed in” the rest of the match, and posted a low score. Instead, he stopped. He relaxed and reflected on what was happening and what needed to happen – especially with his thoughts. Then he refocused on what he needed to do and how he needed to do it. His last 40 shots were well above his average at the time.

This experience helped him truly understand the significance of his thoughts. Yes, something that is seemingly as insignificant as what he thought had a major impact on his score. This is true for all athletes – even the ones who deny it. He understood this, reoriented his thoughts, and the performance was transformed.

In Beijing, Jason was entered in both air pistol and free pistol. Jason had started shooting strong air pistol scores a few months earlier, and had made the team, but had limited expectations. As a result, he said that he relaxed, found his optimal mode in order to “just focus” and “just do”, and came away with an Olympics medal. Note that he did not put his mental focus on past mistakes or future desires. He stayed in the Present Moment as much as possible and went about his business of “just shoot” the match.

In free pistol, Jason shot several points off his average, despite shooting very strong scores for the entire quadrennial and being very consistent for about a year and a half leading up to the Olympics. Although many of his shots were very strong, he had too many that scored 8. He feels that he had a bit of loss of focus right at the critical moment of the shots. Notice how the slightest change in focus, visually away from the front sight or mentally from the Present Moment, have a profound effect on the performance.

Jason is another athlete who quietly goes about his business in a positive manner, with a focus on performance as the path to outcome.

Nervousness & Stepping Up

How does one learn to “step up” to such a lofty level of pressure and competition? It turns out the key is to understand that it is not at all about stepping up to a higher level! Yes, that’s right. Instead, one must understand the challenge they wish to achieve, understand what is

needed to meet the challenge, understand how to learn, then do the hard work and have patience in the dark moments, and dare to strive. Meet that challenge, then set the next one. Repeat. Over and over.

Almost anyone can learn to shoot. It all comes down to mental toughness. Remember speed skater Dan Jansen? He was a master of technique and tactics. Yet, he fell in every Olympic event he entered. No medals. Finally, in his very last race, he won his gold. The difference was the work he and his coaches did to toughen him mentally so that his perception of his abilities and of the challenges was properly balanced. This allowed proper focus. Ultimately, mental toughness is nothing more than a solid recipe of experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and appropriate focus gained through proper training and competition.

This idea of “there are no levels” has developed in my mind over time. I didn’t invent it – rather discovering it for myself is but one example of the steps in my own journey of learning through reading, listening to my mentors, coaching athletes, and my own training. To explain the concept of no levels and more fully explain the alternative of challenge cycles, the following paragraphs are slightly edited (to clarify and correct typos) from an email on this topic to one of my mentors.

Dear Doc Z...

I have noticed with many athletes that the first time (or first few times in some cases) they enter a competition at a new (higher) level, they falter. Then they learn that the other athletes are no different, that they themselves can perform with them, come to terms with the new level, and learn to perform well. The paradigm is that of "stepping up" to a new level. At first, thinking of them as levels seems an intuitive and obvious way of thinking about the issue. People will often say "You have no idea the pressure at the Olympics!"

In thinking about how to break that “try-fail first” cycle, I thought about one of the critical elements that must be in place to facilitate "flow" and how that element might apply to the situation above. The element of interest is that the challenge must be well balanced with the ability to meet the challenge. That is, the challenge must require effort, yet be attainable. If the two mismatch very much, the athlete is either discouraged ("I can't") or bored ("It's too easy") and therefore "flow" cannot be achieved and/or the performance is sub-par.

In my thinking about this element, some years ago I came to the conclusion that it wasn't whether the two (challenge and ability) were well balanced, but whether or not the athlete's perception of the two was well balanced. Since then, I have successfully assisted athletes in adjusting their perceptions in such a way that they achieved "flow" and/or performed consistently at levels far exceeding their previous belief pattern. This is not a mental trick nor giving of empty platitudes. It is helping the athlete understand and believe in their actual capabilities based on proper training and hard work.

While one can look at the larger or more important competition as being up one or more levels, that is done from a fixed, external reference. If we shift the reference to that of the athlete's internal point of view (the one point of view that actually matters), the concept of levels can go away. Simplistically, a challenge is either easy, attainable with proper effort and focus, or seemingly impossible in the mind of the athlete. It matters not where that challenge falls on an externally referenced scale.

Younger students have commented to me that the state high school championship was harder and more nerve wracking for them than national championships. (The former event had well balanced challenge/ability factors, the latter event was beyond their level of achievement at the time so they didn't get the nerves of trying to win.) This lent insight. More interestingly,

students have also commented that they found it easier to "step up" to a higher level when we had worked together to properly prepare them, as compared to earlier in their career when they didn't feel mentally prepared. This is the perception adjustments at work. They commented on how they had "stepped up" to very high levels without undue strain or trauma, and on a very consistent basis.

With that background, we come to the point. Rather than thinking about each new level as a new and higher level that one must learn to "cope" with, one might think about it as a continuous cycle of challenge, learn, achieve. Each time we increase the challenge, it is merely a matter of proper training (physical, technical, mental, emotional – all in proper proportion) and work to meet the new challenge. "I have increased the challenge before and then eventually met it, and done that several times, so I can do it again and again until I can meet any challenge." As one repeats that cycle, one gains ever more confidence in their ability to repeat the cycle. In effect, they become stronger as the challenge grows, rather than feeling like they have to start all over again for the next level.

That was the main body of my email. Along with a few words of encouragement, my mentor's emailed response was "A most well thought out and on target (no pun) piece of writing. It is indeed the perception of the event and not its status on some external scale that matters. Working on an internal cycle of challenge, learn, achieve acknowledges this reality and returns more control to the athlete." This comment is from a gentleman who has a PhD in psychology, and has worked professionally for decades in high performance enhancement in the fields of athletics, academics, and military combat. For the past 15 plus years he has directed a performance enhancement laboratory in all those fields for a very well know university, including coaching work with numerous Olympic medalists in a wide variety of sports.

Notice that he mentioned an athlete's sense of control. Athletes who feel in control have a lot of fun – and are very hard to defeat!

Stepping up is easy once we understand there is no stepping up – merely a new challenge to be learned and met, just as with previous challenges. Yes, some challenges require more training, thought, patience, and effort than others do, yet the principle is unvarying.

Ultimately, challenges are too hard only if we tell ourselves they are too hard.

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It takes guts to "put yourself out there" on the world stage. It also takes guts to allow your private thoughts and mistakes to be discussed publicly, such as in this article, so that others may learn. Jason's and Matt's willingness to do all those things provides us all with interesting lessons learned about times that do not go as planned and about how to meet the challenge. Congratulations on your Olympics gentlemen! Both of you represent the USA very well, both on and off the field of play.

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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Based in the Atlanta, Ga., area, JP O’Connor (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)