

**On the Firing Line** (Forty-first in a series)

**P-R-N-D**

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**“How it works we do not know;  
Though we sure do love to make it go!”**

The human brain and mind are quite amazing and wonderful. The brain (physical) and mind (psychological) are so complex that, even after generations of study, we are constantly learning more about how they operate. While we refer here to a simplistic boundary between the physical and the psychological, even that classification is subject to discussion.

Despite the lack of a complete and universally accepted model for how our brain and mind work, significant knowledge is available that aids us in the areas of clinical psychology, developing expertise, and performance psychology, among others. As athletes and coaches, we are especially interested in the latter two areas.

It is often not required to understand exactly how the mind works in order to understand what it does in various situations. An analogy is helpful in understanding this assertion. Most modern automobiles in this country have an automatic transmission. While most of us may have little or no understanding of how an automatic transmission works, we clearly understand what it does and are able to use it with little effort.

By now, alert readers have discerned the meaning of this article's title! Regardless of the make or model of automobile, setting the transmission's control lever to P, R, N, D, or other settings is clearly understood in terms of what the transmission will do, even if we are ignorant of how it does what we have asked.

It is no different in the use of the brain and mind in sport or other performance. While we may disagree on, or have no knowledge of, the internal mechanisms of how they work (e.g. conscious, subconscious, unconscious, and any number of other concepts), we can study the actual results of what they do in differing situations. Applied sports psychology places emphasis on the “what” rather than the internal “how” of the operation of the brain and mind as the athlete trains or competes. Thus, while the quote at the beginning of this article could apply to the automatic transmission, also applies to the human mind. Ask any athlete who has experienced flow or other performance far beyond their expectations!

It turns out that the biggest challenge in unleashing and utilizing the power of the mind for performance, and learning to perform, is not our understanding of the mind. Instead, the obstacle is staring back at us from the mirror! The Interfering Self insists in ruling all activity and, as discussed two articles ago, it is incapable of performing as we wish and it prevents us from utilizing the resources available to us in our learning and training.

Frequently we hear: “That athlete/coach can't possibly help me reach (a given level of performance) since he/she has never competed at that level.” Nothing could be further from the truth. This is the Interfering Self, specifically the Ego, taking charge. After all, the Ego, that is “I”, knows all, so another person cannot possibly help because they are deemed inferior.

Open-minded athletes are able to learn from others without feeling inferior. Indeed, the most helpful teacher often turns out to be someone with a very different set of experiences. These athletes, while working to enhance their performance, also work to reduce their internal interference.

Have you ever had a shot that seemed to go off “by itself”, often before you felt you were ready? Have you noticed where those shots end up most of the time? While a few do end up in the white, or in the backstop, the vast majority end up in the black – dead center. How is this possible? After all, the Interfering Self was not “in control” of the shot, so how could it possibly end up in the center? (That is the Ego talking!) In thinking about the Two Selves (the Performing Self and the Interfering Self) and the Three Levels of Performance, one realizes that those shots are generally at Level Three – Full Automation. For some reason, for that shot, the Interfering Self was distracted or not paying attention to “taking control”, and the Performing Self was – finally – free to perform as only it can. The result is astounding. And repeatable.

Many coaches and athletes say that these shots are mistakes and must be avoided at all costs. After all, one must be “in control” they say. This mires the athlete in the Level Two – Partial Automation performance mode. While many athletes are quite successful in this mode, their results are variable and rarely sustainable, even with high levels of work and training.

Other coaches and athletes, intrigued by these “by itself” shots, do not ignore them. Understanding the Three Levels of Performance, and the Two Selves, they explore deeper. Even then, when the number of unexplainable “flyers” increases, coupled with the Ego’s sense of lack of “control”, many step back from their exploration and revert.

A brave few realize that any change in technique, even if “only” mental, often results in temporary decrease in results while the new process is assimilated and solidified. Parts of their training may even revert to Level One – Active Learning & Control. Having confidence, and ignoring the criticism of unknowing naysayers, they soon discover that the “flyers” start to decrease in frequency and severity before disappearing altogether. This is not theory, having been observed in actual training and competition over a period of time.

In fairness, one must look at alternate points of view. One athlete provides a very interesting perspective on this topic. Abhinav Bindra set a junior men’s air rifle world record as a teenager when he won a World Cup with a score of 597. Among other things, he described having been in the “zone of forgetfulness”, which is a way of describing being “mindless”, “just shooting”, or letting the Performing Self take over and experiencing Level Three performance.

Abhinav had learned how to get the Interfering Self to step back and allow the Performing Self to take over. At the time, he was training a great deal, so his confidence was high and he had trained to the point that it was difficult not to follow his shot process. Later, his ability to manage the Two Selves showed when he competed in the smallbore rifle 3x40 event for the very first time in his life. We watched him post a very good score in that match... a World Cup no less.

Despite these successes, Abhinav noticed that at times one could not achieve the same levels of confidence and automation when forced to dramatically reduce the quantity of training or when facing tougher pressures. He then worked on how one could reliably “manufacture a shot” when full automation could not be achieved. While this creeps a tiny bit back toward Level Two, the issue was one of striking an appropriate and delicate balance so that the Ego would not be tempted to take “control” and completely revert to Level Two. Regardless of the actual psychological mechanisms (how), this model worked for him (what) so that he was more adaptable to varying situations in his career. The specific details of his shot process, especially at the critical moments, are such that he has almost everything automated and lets the process control itself for the most part, even when “manufacturing” the shot.

Of course, one of the dangers is that, upon reading the previous paragraph, one’s Ego says, “See, if it’s good enough for Abhinav, it’s good enough for me so I don’t need to worry

about that stupid Level Three stuff!” without truly understanding. Of course, lack of understanding is not a problem either, since the Ego already “knows everything” any way!

We get wrapped up in the technical aspects of our shooting, positions, balance, natural point of aim, trigger adjustments, gun adjustments, where and how to aim, what makes a good shot process, and on and on. We ignore what is going on in our head and our heart. Hopefully, the concepts presented two articles ago provide insight into what is happening and what is needed in training.

The previous article provided insight into one of the critical elements of an athlete’s journey of growth to be able to meet any challenge. Not one word was about physical or technical aspects of shooting or performance. The article also told a bit of the story of two very successful shooters. It is highly unlikely that Matt Emmons will say that his two most famous shots are due to physical or technical aspects of his game, or that those aspects are the only critical components of all his world class shots and performances. In Jason Turner’s story, one of the major events in his journey of growth took place at the 2007 Pan Am games. Again, the insight he gained there was not physical or technical. True, both athletes have solid physical and technical games. Those aspects are obviously necessary. Not so obviously, those aspects are not sufficient on their own without the incorporation of the mental and emotional aspects.

The Interfering Self hurts our performance, and it even stands in the way of our learning and training. The best coach in the world is helplessly ineffective in the face of an intransigent athlete. Similarly, the best athlete in the world is helplessly debilitated by an oblivious coach. It takes clear, well informed communication between coach and athlete, and a “rage to master”, that is a constant journey of learning, on the part of both.

Careful and methodical study of the previous two articles will provide many opportunities for enhancing one’s journey of learning and achieving. This article, by design, is much less detailed and intended to stimulate renewed thought in these areas.

Self-awareness and open mindedness are powerful tools that open many doors.

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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).

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(Biographical information as of October 2009)