

On the Firing Line (Forty-third in a series)

Not Really Athletes

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“Sorry, was that supposed to be funny?”

When traveling to the US Olympic Training Center (OTC) in Colorado Springs, the journey often involves taking a ride on the OTC shuttle bus from the airport. The driver always asks where you are going and which sport you are involved with. Shooting participants are taken directly to the USA Shooting building so that arms and ammunition may be secured.

Many years ago, on my first trip to the OTC, the bus driver, upon hearing we were with Shooting, decided to tell us one of the old OTC jokes. “What does ‘NRA’ stand for?” he asked. Before anyone could respond, he answered, “Not Really Athletes!” I thought to myself “Sorry, was that supposed to be funny?” (Since then I have never heard the joke on the bus again, and the drivers are universally friendly and helpful, even at 5:00 am.)

As an aside, for the benefit of those who may not know, the National Rifle Association (NRA) served as the designated National Governing Body (NGB) for Olympic Shooting in the USA prior to the formation of USA Shooting. It was during the NRA era that the shooting building was built on the OTC campus. Thus the joke’s reference to NRA.

Behind many jokes, there is often an element of truth. What, if anything, is the truth and/or the perception behind this joke, and does it have any merit? The answers are eye opening.

Athletics

Many sports require incredible amounts of physical exertion: football, baseball, basketball, soccer, hockey, tennis, running, speed skating, and many, many other sports fall into this category. It is easy for folks who understand those sports to look at shooting and say, “How hard can it be to stand still? That isn’t athletics at all!” By most measures, they are right – there is far less explosive energy, motion, and movement than in the other sports mentioned. If they would bother to look at our sport for a moment, and few do so, they would discover that there is a different type of athleticism involved.

Think about how many times one lifts their firearm in a competition or a long training session. Although the amount of weight lifted may be small, the repetition count rapidly fatigues anyone who has not trained in that manner. Most weight room work involves much heavier loads and far fewer repetitions. Standing very still requires a great deal of energy over the long duration required.

Highly experienced athletes who include appropriate physical training in their regular routine know that being physically fit makes it much easier to stand for long hours, assume difficult positions (kneeling with the rifle comes to mind), improves balance, makes the many repetitions of lifting seem effortless, and makes it easier to remain mentally tough.

There are great physical demands placed on the shooter, though these demands are quite different than those in many other sports. Thus, in a different way, athletics do play a significant role in our sport. The bus driver’s joke is based on a misperception, at least on this part of the

topic. Before we get too self-congratulatory, however, we need to explore another aspect of the joke.

Athletes

When I refer to shooters as athletes in conversation, I often get funny looks – even from shooters. Part of the reason is the misperception just discussed above. The other part of the reason is because so few shooters, even among the most serious shooters, actually think, act, train, and compete like athletes.

Most shooters do not train; they go through the motions in practice. They do not work out; they think they do not need to do physical training. They do not truly partner with a good coach; they think they can do it on their own. They do not seek interaction with a good sports psychologist on a regular basis; they only do so when having a performance problem, if even then. (“Perish the thought... let some stranger get in my head!?”)

While these words may seem harsh, one only has to go outside our sport for comparison. Many former high school athletes, who never played sports in college and who were otherwise “average” very often understand things that are far less commonly understood in advanced shooting circles.

Read most any of the myriad of books written by great athletes and coaches, such as by Lance Armstrong, Pat Summit, or Lou Holtz, and one quickly realizes the truth. More often than not, we really are not athletes. The best piece of coaching advice I ever received came from one of my mentors. “Go outside the country for shooting resources, and go outside the sport for sports psychology resources.” Following that advice payed off handsomely.

One could spend a lifetime reading, studying, and training with the writings of Heinz Reinkemeier. One could spend another lifetime doing the same with the writings of Dan Millman, Barry Green, Tim Galway, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Fred Shoemaker, among many others, not to mention the excellent sports psychology textbooks available today. Please do not say that these books have nothing to do with shooting. They are all about shooting. For example, one of our very best current female rifle shooters gleaned quite a bit of useful information from a book on the mental aspects of baseball!

Anyone can point out problems or criticize; solutions are preferred. What does one do to become an athlete?

To be an athlete, one must be honest with oneself. Brutally honest at times.

One must make decisions about what one is, and is not, willing to do and to give up, and set appropriate goals. Properly constructed and maintained, goal sets are quite motivating and exciting.

One must be willing to spend the time and energy needed to build a training plan with the coach. Oh, you do not need a coach? True athletes know how to benefit from a good coach. Several articles in this series, including number 25 “Believe”, illustrate examples where athletes utilized their coach to enhance their performance. (Coaches: do we approach our work as if we were an athlete, or only as a casual shooter? That choice has significant impact on our abilities and our value to serious shooting athletes.)

Do you go to competitions tired and dreading the challenge? Or do you go with a sense of “hunger” for, and relish, the challenge? Your training plan has a great deal to do with how you feel going into a competition.

Do you “love to shoot finals” or, as is often heard, do you “hate finals?” One must actually train “under pressure” in order to gain the skills and confidence needed to dominate in finals. There are some shooting athletes who understand this – and they live for finals. Their hard work and “intensity training” prepares them for the challenge.

Serious shooting athletes understand the value and competitive edge they gain from regular, and appropriately structured, physical training. Did you know that the foundation of mental toughness is being in good physical shape? Did you know that one’s balance is dramatically enhanced by being in good physical shape? Good physical tone also enhances one’s hold or swing. These are but a few good reasons to do some work in the gym or other venue.

Speaking of mental toughness, the topic of sports psychology often elicits a variety of responses; often negative. Sports psychology has almost nothing to do with clinical psychology. Rather than attempting to find and resolve problems as in clinical psychology, sports psychology focuses on building mental and emotional skills to enhance an athlete’s ability to thrive and excel in the heat of competition. There is no “head-shrink” work involved!

Athletes who regularly work with a good sports psychologist (often one that is deeply and directly involved with sport and athletes, not merely working academically out of the books), or with a coach who is well versed in the field, find a completely new world of perspective and ability. Though built on a good physical foundation, mental toughness is ultimately a set of attitudes and skills gained through incorporating sports psychology as an integral part of one’s training. The concept of “intensity” training is based wholly on sports psychology principles, as proven through formal research.

A critical part of becoming a true athlete is having or developing an open mind. This is closely related to the “brutally honest” topic above. Having an open mind does not mean mindlessly adopting every little tip or trick that one encounters from all the people who “just want to help.” It does mean, however, that one is open to new ideas and perspectives and develops the critical thinking skills needed to understand what is and is not useful.

On whole, as athletes go, we do not measure up as often as the average participant in many of the sports mentioned earlier. So, the old joke hits a bit close to home. To be sure, we have a number of great exceptions. It sure is fun to watch them shoot... and win!

Final Thoughts

It is possible for a few shooters to reach their loftiest goals through nothing more than regularly being “knee deep in brass” as the old saying goes. Indeed, most of us would benefit from quite a bit more, and more regular, training, so long as it is quality training. Although this is one path, most need more, as discussed in this article. Above all, be honest with yourself. It is ok to be a recreational shooter. Or a collegiate shooter and nothing beyond. Regardless of the level you wish to reach, or the amount of shooting you wish to do, be honest with yourself and others. Enjoy the sport and embrace the athlete’s attitude and joy of training and competing.

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)