

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

Knee Deep In Brass

©2009 JP O'Connor

**“Amateurs practice to get it right;
Champions train until they cannot do it wrong.”**

There is an old saying that in order to become a very good shooter, one must be “knee deep in brass” on a frequent and regular basis. In other words, one must do a lot of shooting. This may come as a shock to regular readers of this series of articles: I completely agree.

As most coaches will assert, one must have quality practice not just the quantity. In this article series, we spend the vast majority of the time exploring self-talk, confidence, attitude, training, competition techniques, and any number of additional topics drawn from applied sports psychology. Those topics are critically important – and often overlooked by many athletes and coaches. Yet, they are useless without a solid foundation of technical training.

Interestingly, even those who do not embrace the value of applied sports psychology and who believe only in training, training, and more training, often do not do enough training! Recreational shooters are limited in their training time and have no choice. Athletes who are serious about reaching the top levels of the sport need to utilize applied sports psychology – and do a great deal of training.

Training Effect

Shooters in multi-day competitions, especially those of 4 or more days duration, often notice a “training effect” over the course of the competitions. As long as their stamina holds out, they find that they shoot better as the days go by. This is especially true at competitions such as the weeklong USA Shooting National Championships and at the various NRA championships held each summer at Camp Perry. One of the best examples is in NRA conventional prone. Some of these competitions involve 160 record shots a day for four days. Including sighting shots for each stage, an athlete will use over 800 rounds of ammunition and more typically closer to 900, 1,000, or more over the four days. For those who are only able to train infrequently, this is an intense “training” period and an improvement is often noted.

There are some athletes who understand the value of volume training. They notice that through the volume, awareness builds and they are able to discern and refine ever-finer aspects of their shooting technique. They become adept at handling different situations that come up in training and competition. Some of the very best shooters of all time, while not studying applied sports psychology, became their own experts in the field through their shooting. Many athletes are very poor teachers and coaches, whether technically or mentally, yet have come to hold an incredible understanding of what they need to do themselves to shoot well.

Volume Works

Lones Wigger provides an interesting example of a top shooting athlete. Certainly one of the best rifle shooters ever, Lones worked very hard at his game. Equipment had to be working properly and adjustments refined. He learned and refined his tactics as well. How? Lots of

shooting. While it is unlikely that he will sit with anyone and discuss the finer points of applied sports psychology, it is almost as unlikely that you will beat him in a competition!

In addition to the preparation and volume in his training, one of the critical elements in his own words is “Shoot in every darned match you can!” He knew that technical training alone was not enough. He built up confidence and a well-stocked tool kit of tactics and techniques in the crucible of competition. Yet, he also knew that this would come only through volume and intensity of training – and a high volume of competition.

Familiarity and Automation

Training with significant volume on a frequent and regular basis builds familiarity to a degree that we seldom experience. Tasks become automated to such a degree that it is difficult to do them incorrectly. Under pressure, we tend to do that which is most familiar. What do we want to do on the last shot of the big match where we feel the pressure? More importantly, what will we do? The answer to the latter is that we will do what we have done most often in training.

In the precision rifle and pistol events, one of the fastest ways to raise one’s score is to reject the shots that do not unfold properly. As one learns to reject, a debate often rages while on aim: “Should I reject this shot or is it ok?” Of course, that kind of thinking is fatal to a good performance! Through volume training, one becomes so familiar with what it feels like for a shot to unfold properly, that shot rejection becomes an automatic response to even the slightest awareness of something being off plan. There is no thought or judgment. Note that this familiarity is both physical and mental. It only comes through volume training.

Conversely, in the shotgun and rapid-fire phases of the 25 meter pistol events, one does not have the luxury of rejecting shots that do not unfold properly. The only option is to have one’s body and mind so familiar with the routine that there is almost no chance of error. When the target launches, one must swing the shotgun now, and properly, in order to get a nice bust shot after shot.

Training to this degree is also of benefit to the precision rifle and pistol shooter, since it reduces the number of rejections, thus saving critical energy and time. This also frees the body and mind to handle deeper tasks since there is no internal distraction over mundane details that should be trusted. An example of automating and trusting the details illustrates the benefits.

Automation Works

Tom Suswal is a very good smallbore prone shooter and provides a good example of a shooter who understands both quantity and quality in training. He trains as much as possible consistent with family, work, and other obligations. He does so frequently and regularly. His self-directed training sessions are planned, focused, and provide him with quality training. He has a great deal of competition experience and many lessons-learned stock his tool kit. When he is working his game, he is among the very best.

One year, during the second day of the iron sight matches at Camp Perry for the prone competition, Olympian Jack Foster watched Tom clean a 20 shot match stage in very, very tricky conditions. Tom ended up with a perfect 1600 and high X count (inner tens) on a very difficult and windy day, and was among the very top finishers at the end of the four days of competition. Afterward, they talked, and Jack commented that Tom was apparently sensing when his conditions were about to return, adjusting sights if needed, and was always ready to shoot immediately when the conditions changed back to the prevailing mode.

Discussing this incident and concept with Tom recently, he shared “I seem to have developed a feeling when things are about to change for the bad and/or the good. Many times I would be waiting out a condition, and even though it was not changing I started to prepare to shoot as I felt it was ready to revert back to my condition. I cleared my mind, breathed, settled and started to squeeze, and at that point the condition came back, I shot, and got an X.” He went on to comment that this is not something you teach a beginner, and I agree. One must take care of all the “basics” first.

Many shooters are unaware of condition changes until after they actually happen. Because Tom had trained so much and so well, almost all the aspects of the shooting took care of themselves. All he had to do was remain aware, and he could sense impending condition changes. Thus, he was less likely to get caught in a switch and shoot a wide shot. Instead, he always stopped, made sight adjustments if needed, and was ready to shoot again quickly when the desired conditions returned. Prone shooters know that conditions are everything. Thus, Tom’s ability to anticipate and instantly know how to respond is priceless. No delay, no debate, no hesitation. This would not be possible if he were still thinking about the details of actually delivering the shot. Tom developed these skills through a great deal of training and competition over the years.

Final Thoughts

The paraphrased quote at the beginning of this article speaks volumes. At first, we strive to learn how to do something. Then we think to ourselves “I’ve got it!” Finally, we wonder why we still fail so often in competition.

Just because we can do something properly some of the time, especially in training, does not mean we can do it consistently, on demand, under pressure. We do what is most familiar under pressure. We must work well past being able to do something correctly to excel. We must work to the point that the proper physical and mental technique becomes the most familiar method.

Training volume is but one component of a holistic plan. Very recently, a young athlete commented that they “hate finals” – just before starting an important final! Despite being very well practiced, and despite having a great deal of practice volume, the athlete is still developing and has not yet developed the requisite mind-set and techniques for performing under pressure. Regular training with finals, triple shot finals, and a variety of intensity training, among many other things, would benefit this shooter – and many other shooters. It is the combination of physical and mental skills that make the difference. “Work smart and work hard!” Both in balance.

Mere volume will not assure success. A well balanced program and plan work wonders. Even some of our very best shooting athletes would benefit from an evaluation of their balance in this regard.

Now, let’s go shooting!

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.

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.

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)