

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

Not Shooting Not Tens

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**“The fastest way to raise your score:
Do not shoot bad shots.”**

Those who prefer a positive approach to life, and athletics, may be jarred by all the “negativism” in the title and quote above. Yet, by approaching the familiar “Shoot Tens” and “Shoot Good Shots” from the opposite direction, we discover an interesting perspective.

Though it is obvious that we want to “Shoot Tens” and “Shoot Good Shots” it is not so obvious why we do not always succeed. In striving for the “good” we often fail to spend a moment to understand the “bad” in order to learn from the mistake. Never should we “forget about” a bad shot as is often taught. Instead ignore the outcome and learn from the performance (or “doing”) error. This theme, learning from mistakes, is very important and appears in a number of previous articles, especially number 5, “Eights Are Your Friend.” True, forget the “bad” outcome. However, understand why (“what I did”) and move on.

In the precision rifle and pistol events, a variation of the lead quote is “The fastest way to raise your score is to reject the bad shots.” How many times do we hold on target and agonize over whether we should shoot or not? It happens so often one might call it an epidemic! There should never be any thought, hesitation, or decision about rejecting.

Either the shot process is unfolding properly, and it continues without interruption, or it is not unfolding properly and we reject instantly with no hesitation. If there is the slightest hint of hesitation or doubt, the shot must be rejected immediately.

Watch a really good shooter: sometimes they will reject a shot so early in the process that they had barely begun. As many a top athlete has said, “You can’t make them pretty. They are either there or they are not.”

In the shotgun events and rapid-fire phases of pistol, athletes do not have the luxury (or dilemma!) of rejecting shots.

Any good international shotgun shooter will gladly tell a precision shooter how wickedly fast the clay targets move across the field – and how the slightest hint of hesitation, whether in body, mind, or spirit, will result in a clean miss instead of a nice bust. The same goes for the rapid-fire pistol shooters. When the CRO says “Start!” your options are few: shoot well or else!

How then, does one not shoot “bad” shots when there is no opportunity for rejecting shots? The answer provides the essence of good shooting, even for the precision shooters.

When one has no option for shot rejection, one must truly prepare and commit to the shot. It sounds so simple as to be trite or useless. Quite the opposite is true.

First, we need to understand the difference between “involved” and “committed” as concepts. Do you remember the story of the bacon and eggs breakfast? The chicken is merely involved. The pig, on the other hand, is fully committed! Happily, we may commit to our shots and not be killed. Conversely, athletes who are merely involved with their shots or their shooting are “killed” by the outcome. Many an athlete has joked “Be the pig!”

Second, we need to understand what it means to be committed to a shot instead of being merely involved.

Involvement looks and sounds like this: “I hope this one turns out better.” “I think I am ready... here we go.” “Is my hold good enough?” “Should I reject?” “Hurry up and get this over with.” “I can’t see where the targets are going today. How am I going to hit this next target?”

Involvement takes many forms including not caring, going through the motions, taking a defeatist attitude (article number 22 “Predator or Prey”), focusing on the past, taking “control” in order to “guarantee” the outcome, future and non-shooting thoughts, focusing on fear of failure, timidity, and similar mindsets.

Commitment is quite different and often looks and sounds like this: “I am so ready for this shot (or series). I can’t wait!” “Just Be. Here. Now.” “Present Moment!” “I am ok no matter what happens.” “I own this shot (or series).” “I am up for the challenge!”

Commitment also takes many forms, including decisiveness, aggressiveness (in appropriate measure), self-confidence, laser focus at the appropriate moments, being in the Present Moment, trusting the process and allowing oneself to give up perceived “control” that never existed anyway, and similar mindsets.

Precision shooters often think they are ready and committed to the shot. Shotgun and rapid-fire pistol shooters learn quickly they had better commit. Exposing precision shooters to the “do it now” events is a real eye-opener for them!

A particular trigger technique developed for precision shooters provides insight, and a most useful tactic – especially under pressure, for developing commitment. First we explain the technique, discuss some alternatives, and then explore the ramifications and insights.

Four steps to prepare the trigger:

1. Mind Ready – Focused on this shot now. All other thoughts and distractions have been allowed to run and are now gone. “Be here now!”
2. Heart Ready – Committed to this shot process. There is no outcome or trying. There is only doing. “I am ok no matter what happens!”
3. Stage 1 – Take up the first stage of a two stage trigger, or touch the trigger on a one stage trigger.
4. Stage 2 – Add and maintain a significant amount of pressure on the trigger. (When asked about this step in particular, Abhinav Bindra – 2006 World Champ and 2008 Olympic Champ – instantly replied “Oh, that is critical.”)

The first two steps must take place before the rifle or pistol comes off the bench or stand. The latter two steps must take place before the moment when the shooter is looking through/at the sights and the sights are on the area of aim. This is the scary part for many precision shooters! Hold that thought for a moment while we discuss objections/alternatives to the above.

Many shooters “pulse” their finger on the trigger. This tends to work in rhythm with what is happening in their hold. In extreme cases, this takes the form of “flutter finger” followed by a sharp snapping shot release. Although performed by some top shooters, it is often not as robust a technique. In most cases it indicates some tentativeness or hesitation on the part of the shooter. While many shots will eventually hit the ten, others, even after much training, are still ill timed.

Other shooters start adding pressure and never stop adding pressure until the shot is released. This is often taught in pistol where the hold can appear to be rather large. At a certain stage of their development, the shooter will discover that they are making bigger mistakes in snapping the trigger while trying to catch the ten than they are if they just accept the hold and squeeze until the shot goes off. Indeed, over time, the deeper parts of the mind will help synchronize some of the shots. Still, many take place outside the ten. Having improved with this technique, they are reluctant to change.

With those perspectives, what is going on with the “Four Steps” trigger preparation technique?

When first told of the technique, many shooters are fearful. Some even feel the blood drain from their head! They are concerned about missing the target completely, and later are still concerned with having an early shot. Underlying this fear is the root of the issue. When one completes Step 3, the shooter and trigger are both in a state of rest. The shooter then must overcome mental and physical inertia to get things going. When Step 4 is completed... “Things are going to happen!” The shooter and trigger are no longer at rest. Indeed, the shooter is now in a very dynamic state, both physically and mentally. This is exactly what we want while on aim. When used as an important part of a broader program of shot process construction – this is but one small piece – the technique provides solid results. Unlike many techniques that work well in practice, it stands up under intense pressure.

What happens when this technique is introduced, and how do we prepare shooters to adopt this method?

First, the trigger must already be adjusted such that the athlete can discern the difference in weight between the first and second stages, or the let off weight of the single stage trigger. On a rifle, it does no good to have the first stage weight at 80 grams for example, and the total let off weight at 100 grams. True, the athlete can learn to discern the difference of 20 grams, though the technique will fail miserably when the athlete cannot feel the difference under match pressure. We have watched this happen many times at all levels. One young shooter insisted on having her trigger much heavier than is “normal” in shooting circles. She loved this technique and was able to shoot very well under intense pressure and always pounded the center in finals.

Second, the shooters must sit down, close their eyes (this is critical), and truly learn their trigger. (This is done in such a way that all muzzles are pointed downrange, all ammunition is put away, and a range officer is monitoring for safety.) The drill is: 1) touch the trigger, 2) take up the first stage fully and feel the “stop” against the second stage, 3) gently add pressure but not enough to make the trigger go off. At first, one hears all kinds of trigger clicks! Soon, the shooters learn to “add and maintain” what we call “a fistful of trigger” without having the trigger go off. They then discover that they can then make the trigger go off just by thinking.

Third, the shooters actually dry fire and then live fire. They discover that if they complete Step 4, the shots are “effortless” and often very deep. Some of them also make the most powerful discovery of all. They think they have properly completed Steps 1 & 2, perform Steps 3 & 4, arrive on their area of aim... and discover that they are not ready! They cannot shoot because their mind is not ready! This forces them to go back to Steps 1 & 2 and really learn how to commit to the shot before arriving on the target. Now we are really ready to shoot – and shoot well. Accomplished shotgun and rapid-fire pistol shooters smile knowingly!

Quickly, often in the very first session, shooters discover the gun seems to go off by itself and the outcome is a seemingly effortless deep ten. As mentioned above, the “Four Steps” for trigger preparation are but one small piece of a much larger shot process construction. Topics such as position, balance, a new way to think about and check NPA, a new way to think about the “hold” concept, outcome vs. performance, and many other related areas, are all critical elements.

For those working on “auto-magical shots” this is a critical part of the technique. Soon the deeper parts of the mind, if allowed, take over and deliver incredibly deep and consistent shots. The so-called “flyers” are due to the active thought part of the mind attempting to take over again. Soon the flyers disappear if the shooter is patient with the process. Few are.

Very recently, a very good pistol shooter (who has adopted the program) and this author held a clinic for a group of accomplished junior rifle shooters and their coaches. Over the course of a day and a half, they learned the full program and were quite excited by how “easy” it was to shoot well, by how “bullet proof” they were under intense pressure, and by their results. One shooter had 99-99-98-100 in standing air rifle during very pressure packed intensity training drills. This result was no surprise to the teachers. We have seen this technique yield excellent results on a consistent basis, when applied as part of a full shot process and shooting process program.

It was at this recent clinic that one of the local coaches commented that one way to look at shooting well is to learn to “Not shoot not tens.” With thanks, and apologies, the phrase became the title of this article.

Stop messing around. Stop being afraid of the outcome. Get over yourself: nobody is going to be upset if you miss a shot. Learn from it. Above all, commit to the shot and make the shot. You will have a lot more fun and do quite well.

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)