

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

The Conflicted Athlete

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**“I am so frustrated I want to quit!
Yet I love this so much that I cannot quit!”**

It is human nature to enjoy doing the things we are good at doing, and to avoid doing the things we are not good at doing. How many athletes practice their favorite event or activity, even though they are already perfect at doing so, and avoid working on the aspects of their game that are the weakest? No wonder they never get better!

This same effect influences whether we stick with a sport or leave. Once frustration and disappointment overcome enjoyment, the athlete is likely to leave. Yet, too many athletes quit in the face of a plateau or other obstacle without appropriately changing their approach, mindset, coaching, or other aspect of their activity in order to remove the obstacle. Others leave after making many random changes, which made the departure more likely, rather than solving the problem with well thought out changes.

Is this always the case? Is there anything one can do? No and yes, in that order!

The Plateau

“I am so frustrated that sometimes I just hate to shoot. I always seemed to get better, and now I have been stuck with the same scores and performances for the past two years. I should just quit but for some reason I can't bring myself to make the decision.” The athlete's frustration and pain were obvious in her words and facial expressions. A coach at the clinic responded, “Let me guess; despite being so frustrated that you want to quit, you cannot quit because you remember how much you used to love to shoot, cannot bear the thought of leaving that behind, and wish you could recapture that feeling?” Her eyes grew wide in amazement and she said, “Oh, yes! That is it exactly!” The coach continued, “What if we could identify the reasons for the plateau and for your frustrations, identify the causes and work to resolve them, and make shooting fun again?” Her face lit up as she excitedly asked, “We can do that?!”

For the next few months, the athlete and coach worked together to stock her toolkit with sharp tools using robust techniques that can withstand the pressure of competition. (Many techniques that seem to work well in training are “fragile” and break down in competition.) She was already very well trained in her technical aspects of shooting, so she and the coach decided on only a few smaller adjustments. Their primary technical focus was on building a robust shot process.

The major changes they worked on together were in her outlook and mental approach to the game. Soon, she could not wait to get to the range again, and went on to a very successful college shooting career.

In this case, the shooter truly appeared to be on the verge of leaving the sport. Because someone was able to help her discover that this did not have to be the case, and then traveled on the journey with her and helped her discover the skills she needed, she was able to rekindle her joy of the sport and improve her performances and scores. Different athletes have different

needs. The coach must be attuned to the athlete in order to be effective. Luckily, that was the case in this instance.

Dark Moments and Hard Work

Our culture is results driven and we like to do well. When faced with repeated “failures” in competition, our internal motivation diminishes. Coaches and athletes alike must be aware and monitor the “fun factor” as part of the athlete’s development. At the same time, we must also realize that it is not always going to be fun and that there will be many “dark moments” when the athlete suffers through a long plateau or other downturn. Sometimes, these “dark moments” can last a very long time.

While interviewing Jason Turner a few weeks after his medal winning performance in Beijing, when the topic of “dark moments” came up, it was obvious in his voice that he, like all great athletes had experienced times of deep frustration and doubt. Indeed, he indicated that the “moments” sometimes lasted much longer! Yet he found a way to keep going. Article 40 “On Stepping Up” discusses his story and this topic in greater detail.

Doing well at something certainly is fun and motivating. The danger is that when one is a “natural” at first, they often may not develop the mental toughness to work “hard” when their learning curve starts to level off. Those who do not start as a “natural” have to work at their game before they ever gain the excitement of doing really well. Their expectation about the effort required is higher. Later, when the going gets tough, they have already developed the skills needed to keep going through the tough times. This is the “hard” part of the hard work of becoming a champion.

As a result of these dynamics, the young J3 shooter with the top scores may not necessarily be the one with the top scores in high school, college, or beyond. There are exceptions of course, among the truly motivated. The athlete who is struggling along with “average” skills, if able to tough it out and remain motivated, is actually a bit more likely to be on top in later years.

Many years ago, a 13 year old set a national J3 record at the national Junior Olympics after only a short time in the sport. Many predictions were made at the time about what this athlete would accomplish... and sadly, none came true.

There is hope for athletes who stick it out, even through the “dark moments” of self-doubt and frustrating results. Certainly, Jason Turner provides an example of how the medal goes to the one with perseverance.

Another example is Nancy Johnson. She worked and worked, made the National Team, worked more and... could not win the big matches. She worked harder than most... and still could not win the biggest matches. She became frustrated, and her coach Dan Durben assured her that if she would just keep going despite the frustrations, that she would prevail over those who were not working as hard. Sure enough, Nancy’s hard work paid off, she started winning the biggest matches, and then she moved up several spots in the biggest air rifle final of her life to claim the Olympic gold medal in Sydney.

Goals and Real Goals

Another cause of internal conflict is a difference between the athlete's stated goals and the real goals they wish to achieve. One need not be an aspiring junior or elite athlete to experience this effect.

At the USA Shooting Nationals, the old man came to enjoy the competition and camaraderie. Although he knew how to train well, his responsibilities had prevented him from doing any serious training for over two years. Still, he wanted to support the event, see his friends, and enjoy shooting. Accordingly, he adjusted his goals and expectations – or so he thought!

After each event concluded, a young man who is working hard and is making a name for himself came to see the old guy. They compared notes and encouragement about their shooting. The young man quickly realized that old guy was struggling with something. They talked each day through the week, and the younger shooter helped the older shooter discover something... while he had told himself that he had adjusted his goals and expectations... he still wished he shot at the higher levels he had achieved earlier when training regularly. Outcome based expectations cause lots of conflict if out of tune! After that, their conversations were even more enjoyable than they already were, as were the rest of the many competitions that week. The student had become the teacher!

Expectations, the dreaded “E” word, are often too high and often based on wishes rather than realities. Be honest with yourself. Happy is the athlete who understands and applies this insight. Otherwise, another conflicted athlete suffers.

Coach-Dad-Itis

Sometimes the internal conflict has external roots. One of the most common examples of this is “Coach-Dad-Itis.” When a parent, whether actually coaching their child or not, aggressively drives their child concerning outcome, the child develops a great deal of internal conflict.

This topic was explored in article 21 of this series using the example of a father and his daughter, along with the daughter's ideas on the topic. However, the concept applies universally to moms as well, to all sports parents even though they are not the child's actual coach, and – even though the article was about a daughter – it applies equally if the athlete is a son.

After the article was published, a younger friend of mine who coached a junior program at the time told me how in their club the worst parent in this regard noticed that the article mentioned a daughter and said the article didn't apply to him because his athlete child was a son. Sorry, dad, that article should have been about you!

When a parent is overbearing on their child or is “merely” overenthusiastic, the child may eventually wonder if they are shooting for themselves or for their parent. Or they will become frustrated at their parent's constant “disappointment” in them. This is debilitating to the athlete's performance. Either way, the athlete becomes de-motivated, just as surely as if they had hit a long plateau.

Clearing Conflict

Ultimately, the conflicted athlete is the one who must clear the conflict. Certainly a coach, friend, fellow athlete, or other person may lend perspective, as in some of the examples above. Regardless, it is then in the athlete's hands. Understand the sources of the conflict, and

then address them. Yes, it sounds so simple – too simple. Learning to work with the difficulties of conflict strengthens and empowers the athlete to meet even larger challenges.

The important thing is to start – and keep going.

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)