

## The Subconscious Shot - Hit or Myth?

*Surely the Holy Grail for pistol shooters is to understand and be able to produce the subconscious shot release. But does anyone ever really get there? Do we ever get more than a flash of insight, a hint of how our mind can control our performance without prompting on an active level? Is it something we should aspire to, or are we barking up the wrong tree? I'm sure from a coaching perspective this talk is akin to heresy. But we are not coaches, we are shooters. We need a practical solution to the problem, a paint-by-numbers plan to provide a quality shot process every time. We don't need to immerse ourselves in a world of theoretical psychobabble that we really don't understand, and if we could, would be about as much sense as a race car driver struggling to understand the technical aspects of his turbocharger.*

I could contend that the subconscious shot, that wonderful, magical break as the sights sit exactly in the center of the aiming area, the shot that you just know has punched through the middle of the x-ring without even looking, is just a fluke and is bound to happen every once in a while just from the law of averages. Why do we assume that for that shot we were more responsible for the outcome than for the 7 that preceded it? Why are we convinced that our subconscious worked for that shot and was out to lunch for the not-so-exciting shots?

I guess my main reason for cynicism stems from a physics problem. In my experience the main culprit for poor shot result is a trigger release that alters the alignment of the gun, ever so slightly, but of course this has a far more dramatic effect on the path of the bullet by the time it reaches the target. You jerk the trigger, you pull the shot away from the center of the target. And by making a definite decision to make the shot break, that minute physical movement can wreck the smooth release of the shot. Is there any earthly reason why we should assume that if that same movement is initiated by the subconscious, that the result will not also be affected? Okay, so the same rules for reaction time don't hold, the subconscious works with a fraction of the lag time, but the physical movement must still be made to make the shot break. Unless you can tell me you can make the sear release by mind control I find the concept fairly dubious.

### Linking Physical Tasks

It is not my intent to fly in the face of convention. I am not claiming that all the coaches are wrong in contending that shooters can attain a mental state that allows them to perform at a higher level than normal. I seriously doubt, however, that a little entity in the back of the brain is responsible for "automagical" shot release. The "zone" as it's so often called is many different things to many different shooters. My own experience I can only describe as being the ability to link two separate physical tasks and create a new one. Those tasks being to take up a gradual but steady increase of trigger pressure that actually steers the front sight and holds it exactly in its position within the rear notch. Sight control and trigger movement become one physical action in your mind. If there is anything mentally difficult about this it's not allowing the target to become a distraction, or anything else for that matter.

Our capacity for thought becomes one of our greatest enemies. For this reason we need to attain a different level of consciousness, not so much to be more aware of what we are doing, but to be more channeled toward two simple tasks that must be performed as one. And not only is thought something to be avoided, emotion can also destroy what we work so hard to achieve.

Complacency can take the edge off performance. As can anger, dwelling on a poor shot, or allowing yourself to be distracted by a neighboring shooter. Fear of failure. Any number of mishaps can occur. This is normal human behavior. This is what makes shooting so difficult, the de-humanising yourself for a period of a couple of hours to create a thing, a work of technical excellence in motion.

### The Slippery Slope

I believe that by glorifying that lucky shot, the one where the sight picture lines up perfectly as the shot breaks, as the ideal (that MUST have been caused by the subconscious), we reinforce the need for perfection in every other shot. We hunt for it, we do everything we possibly can to make every shot a perfect ten. In doing so we overhold, we abort, we gnash our teeth in frustration until we finally make a conscious stab at the trigger. All for the sake of making a better shot.

To play the game smarter we have to accept our own limitations. We have a certain hold, and the best we can hope for is to have our shots fall within that area. If we can release our shots with perfect trigger control, that is having a surprise shot release every time, not only will all shots be within a much smaller than normal area, a high percentage will have broken while the pistol was crossing the target center. As we become more skilled in our hold, the score will increase accordingly.

Maybe the secret is to take away the importance of the actual shot. Instead of considering the release of the shot as the actual

task, we lessen the significance of the shot and make it an almost incidental byproduct of a process. This process being the combination of physical movements linked together with mental adhesive that results in a trigger release that also controls line of sight. The process continues until such a time that heightened awareness has passed – so that it may or may not have concluded in the firing of a shot. An *unconscious* shot.

I don't profess to have all the answers. Honestly I don't think there is one path to enlightenment in this sport. If you've managed to get this far through my flight of fancy I hope I've given some food for thought about the way this game is played. I've gone full circle over the past 27 years, from a beginner learning the physical basics to an intermediate searching for secrets to a high level performer experiencing spiritual highs through single minded focus. These days I think the whole process is too complex, and we're our own worst enemies. If we can keep the shot process simple, and find a way to turn off most of the circuits in that supercomputer in our heads, we'll all be thumping the center out of our bulls.