

# ***Mental Aspects of Match Shooting***

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During the last ten years I have been beaten by some of the best pistol shots in the world--also by some of the worst. By now I think that I know as much as anybody does about how to lose a pistol match. My personal experience in this field has been supplemented by countless hours of post mortem discussion. I have listened to a thousand stories about how some luckless wretch blew a match which he already had in his pocket. In about 90% of these cases "Buck Fever" was the culprit.

The "Buck" is the bane of the pistol shooter's existence. In its most severe form it can drive an intelligent, phlegmatic man into a state of idiotic convulsion. You may have heard of the deer hunter who ironically worked his slide until he pumped all his ammunition out on the ground, and then snapped his empty gun at a big buck 30 yards away. Or maybe you heard about the pistol shooter who loaded his gun with empty .38 brass for his last string of rapid after shooting 15 straight tens.

These are extreme cases of course. Sometimes the pressure will show itself only in a breakdown of concentration--a slight unfocusing of the mind. The shooter won't realize that he is coming unglued until his group starts spreading and even then he may blame his ammunition, his gun, the wind or the light conditions, before he finally realizes that he is a little bit shook.

I would like to give you the solution to this problem--a plan of action which would enable you to whip the pressure once and for all. That is what I would like to give you. But the only thing I can give you is a few solutions and suggestions which may or may not work for you. I'm sorry I can't do any better, but in my opinion, neither you nor I nor anybody else will ever be able to whip the pressure completely and for good. The best we can do is to learn to minimize its effect and to anticipate its attacks. Sometimes we can sidestep these attacks, and other times we can contain them to a degree, but we will never be immune.

A man's own nervous temperament has a great deal to do with his ability to handle pressure. If he is so jittery that he leaps eight feet into the air when a cat steps on a rug behind him, then he shouldn't try to be a pistol shooter. He would have a better chance at fame and glory if he would sell his guns, buy a rug and a cat, and go after the Olympic high jump record.

You might ask at this point, "But what about old Tommy Tenring!" Tommy doesn't have a nerve in his body, he uses ice water for blood, he has tunnel vision, he can concentrate like a Hindu mystic, he measures eight inches between the eyes and he holds a Ph.D. in both physical education and psychology. "Tell me," you ask, "How can this guy get shook!"

The truth is that Tommy can shoot well enough when he is a little bit unglued to beat most of us on our best day. Also his attacks of pressure will come much less often and will be milder than yours and mine. But wait until he shoots 100 slow and 100 timed in the National Match course. He knows full well that nobody has ever fired an individual score of 300 X 300 in a registered match, and as he gets ready for the rapid fire stage the thought keeps gnawing away at his mind that he is only ten easy 25 yard tens away from being the

first man in history to do it. If he is not very careful to keep his imagination under control he will see a big neon sign above his target flashing out the headline-"Tenring goes clean in the National Match course." Tommy calls up all his powers of concentration and gets ready to fire the string. He does not drop his clip in the sand, he does not load up with five empties and he does not fire on the wrong target. But he does leak out two nines at six o'clock. His mental meanderings have taken their toll. The Buck has just cost him a new National record. He finds little consolation in the knowledge that he already holds the NMC record with 299-29X. He is furious with himself for being so spineless under pressure. But you and I look at his 298 on the scoreboard and say, "Wow, look at that. Not a nerve in his body, etc." If you are another Tommy Tenring, or have been close to it, all I can say to you is, "I wish I had your problems and you were writing this." But if you have the same troubles that I do, you may be interested in some of the things that have helped me. If you try them a few times, and they don't work for you, then by all means forget them.

First of all, the most human thing to do is to look around for something which requires no training or mental effort on our part. I am talking about such things as alcohol, tranquilizers, or dope. I do not recommend any of these. You can hear plenty of stories around a pistol range about how old so-and-so shot thus-and-such when he was full of beer. If you are tempted to try it yourself, first find out how the pistol shooter makes out in the grand aggregate. You can then make your own decision.

I have seen a man get so steady from alcohol that he couldn't find his shooting box which was twenty feet away in plain view. I know a man who got so tranquil from tranquilizers that he considered it a bit funny every time he shot a six. I heard about a man who smoked a marihuana cigarette before rapid fire because he had heard that it would make the time seem to pass slowly. He said that the time passed slowly enough, but that he couldn't lift his gun.

There are several things that I try to remember to do that have helped me a lot. One of these is to be completely ready. I like to have my sights blacked and adjusted and a couple of clips loaded before I walk up to the firing line. Being ready is important in slow fire, more important in timed fire and absolutely critical in rapid fire. Very few things will unglue me quicker than to start a string of rapid when I am not quite ready. Like most everyone else I have a little routine I go through before the targets come around. I watch the bullseye when the targets are turned away to find some reference point to aim in on. I get my feet placed. get a good grip on the gun, aim in on the reference point. control my breathing just the way I want it, and watch the sights very carefully for alignment. Then when the targets start around I am completely ready to start mashing the trigger. If I am busy loading a clip or blacking my sights and forget to find an aiming point, it bothers me. If I let my routine get behind the commands it bothers me more and if I don't have my mind geared to rapid fire, I am in real trouble even though I went through the routine exactly right.

If you also have trouble getting your mind geared to rapid fire, I recommend that you try something that has helped me a lot. I prefer to do this on the line just before firing the match. Hold a stop watch in your left hand and go through a string of rapid in your mind. Try to picture everything exactly as you want it to happen, with the preliminary commands from the range officer, with your own target, and with the gun that you are using that day. When the imaginary target comes around. start your stop watch and go through the entire string in your mind including the recoil and recovery from each shot and the sight

alignment and trigger squeeze for the next one. Pay particular attention to your rhythm as you go along. After the last shot stop your watch and see how many seconds you used. Repeat the string if necessary until you hit a satisfactory time which you can set to your liking. I like between 9 and 10 seconds. By doing this you have the right rhythm in your mind and you will start the match with confidence that you know how long it takes ten seconds to tick off. Confidence and rhythm won't necessarily give you 20 tens, but they will sure save you from a lot of wild shots. Probably the most common use of the stop watch is to time slow fire strings. If you have ever been worried about time on a windy day and hastily cranked off two bad shots because you expected the cease fire any second, and if the cease fire command came a full two minutes after two beautiful 30 second lulls, then nobody has to tell you that a stop watch is important. You don't need a watch to get off ten shots in ten minutes, but with a watch you won't worry about time. This is important because worrying will unfocus your mind and open up your group. With a watch you can space your shots better. If your hold is a little shaky, you know you have time to take it down and start over. It gives you more confidence, and confidence is conducive to better scores. On my better days when they are going pretty good I use the stop watch to time my rest periods between shots. This can help you fight off the buck when you have a real good string going. Make up your mind before you start how much time you will rest between shots; you can revise it later if you need to. When you fire one, check the watch. Try to stick to your self-assigned rest periods to the second. I sometimes time my breathing the same way while I am resting, trying to make it come out right for the next shot. This keeps your mind busy, and you are less likely to start sweating your score. It also introduces another element of precision into your routine which may improve your ability to think positive thoughts about what you are doing.

Our mind has a tendency to relax before the shot breaks. We stand there working hard on a shot and the old subconscious is screeching "shoot it, so you can relax." The best way to overcome this is to follow through. This is very important. I would write follow through on the blackboard a thousand times if that would make me remember to do it on every shot. I am talking about a mental follow through which keeps all the attention on the business at hand until the bullet is safely in the ten ring. Bad shots are very often caused by a slight relaxing of the attention just as the shot goes off. This is usually accompanied by a spasmodic jerk of the trigger finger when the subconscious gives us its mental elbow in the ribs to "shoot it and get it over with."

One of the most effective procedures for me to follow when I am having this trouble is to tell myself that I am dry firing and that, on this particular shot, I will be very careful to keep the sights aligned before, during and after the fall of the hammer. Then during the trigger squeeze I work up a mental picture of the hammer falling and the sights remaining in perfect alignment after the hammer has fallen. This is what I mean by mental follow through. The idea is to continue working at keeping the sights aligned even while the bullet is traveling toward the target. It is the best insurance you can get against relaxing your attention too soon. They say that intense concentration is just the old story of mind over matter. The brain must have complete control of the body and its actions. I think in my case it would be easier if I had a larger brain and a smaller body.

Unless someone kept score at a match we would never know who won. My advice is to let the statistical officer do the worrying about who is winning. When you finish a match, check your score card and make sure that every individual shot has been recorded correctly and

that the totals are correct. Then sign your card, turn it in and forget it. One of the surest ways to put the monkey on your back is to walk up to the line knowing that you need a certain score in order to win the aggregate, to set a new record, to beat old Tommy Tenring for the first time in your life, or to do anything else that you want very much to do. If the doctors could feed us a pill which would make us forget how to count or add, our aggregate scores would surely improve.

But then we would still have the problem of the well meaning friend who says, "Boy, you have got it made. All you need on this last ten shots of rapid is 98 and you will have a new aggregate record. The way you are going today you can't possibly miss." I have promised myself that if this ever happens to me again, I will take out my pocket knife, open the dullest blade, and slowly whittle off his head. This should clear the air and ease the tension so that shooting the 98 will be easy. It is possible, however, that by the time I clean up the gore, dispose of the body, and have a long talk with the police, I may wish that I had gone ahead and shot the 10-10-9-8-7 on the last string, like I did the last time it happened to me.

There are many mental gymnastics which you might employ to keep the neon sign from starting to flash out the glad tidings of your sensational victory when you are only halfway through the match. You might try naming all the New England states with their capitals, or some similar stunt. I sometimes conjugate Spanish verbs. I have to be careful with this one though. It's pretty easy for me to get confused trying to figure out the preterite form of some obscure radical changing verb, and the stop watch can easily get ahead of my shot string.

If you will work hard on ideas such as these, concentrating on the ones that seem to help, you will find that you will gradually begin to control the pressure better. It goes without saying, however, that no amount of mental power can make you shoot any better than you know how to shoot. Lots of regular practice under match conditions will not only improve your ability, but as your practice scores improve, you will have more confidence in yourself.

The ability to withstand the pressure of competition will then enable you to shoot your good scores in matches. When you get into a tight situation, you will lose your points, a few at a time, and not by the handful. Then one happy day, the other shooters will start pointing to your scores and saying, "Wow, look at that, not a nerve in his body!"