

# **Staying Focused Despite Match Pressure**

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*"The truly great shooters pay little or no attention at all to their competition, or anything else for that matter. For them, the contest takes place inside their head. The real struggle is to get in the zone. When they find it, the rest just seems to happen. It's as if the world around them melts, the distractions disappear and the universe is reduced to the few simple elements of eyes, hands, gun and target."*

- Gabby Hulgan (1996 NSSA World Skeet Champion)

You have confidence in your equipment. Your practice sessions yield satisfactory scores. Now the challenge is to simply execute what you know that you are fully capable of doing when it really counts. It sounds easy enough, but unfortunately, our minds don't always cooperate. Feeling nervous about having a great performance is certainly natural. However, when that feeling turns to panic because you think that you are the only shooter on the line feeling this pressure, your mind has defeated you. You will not be able to focus on the task at hand. Rest assured, every competitor feels this pressure to execute to the best of his ability. The challenge for you is to channel this same pressure constructively and to not let it overwhelm you.

Your mind is the control tower for all your physiological reactions. If your hands start shaking, your palms get sweaty, you can't think straight because you "feel nervous," it is probably because you're thinking of the situation negatively instead of as an opportunity for success. Dr. Bob Rotella, a specialist in sports psychology, offers six steps to help deal with pressure, anxiety and nervousness:

1. Think good, pleasant, soothing thoughts rather than worrisome or negative thoughts.
2. Keep your mind on the present, on the shot you're going to execute right now. Think about what you want to happen. Remember, anxieties are always about what just happened or what might happen, so stay in the present.
3. Assume the best is going to happen, rather than anticipating the worst. You wouldn't go to work every day thinking you were about to be fired, so why try to shoot with that type of mental approach?
4. Use the power of perception to dwell on your strengths.
5. Feel as if you were destined to have good things happen to you rather than as if you were born to have bad things happen.
6. When you start to feel tension, stop and take deep, slow breaths.

Frankly, I think performing through nervousness is what sport is all about. Sport is supposed to teach you how to deal with your mind and emotions. Ultimately, when you're in a situation that makes you nervous, you need to remind yourself that this is right where you want to be - this is YOUR DREAM COME TRUE.

Dr. Debbie Crews, a sports psychologist from Arizona State, has done a lot of work on mental training and testing in sports, and gave a presentation at the 1997 Shooting Coaches College at the Olympic Training Center. Her topic: athletes who choke under pressure. She feels that her results are applicable to shooters, as well as golfers, with whom she

specializes. Her research shows that when an athlete needs to perform a highly-skilled action, it must be the subconscious that does it, not the conscious, and our minds must be relaxed and in the subconscious mode to do it. The left and right sides of the brain must be in harmony (balanced activity) and there must be no conscious self-talk or activity 1-3 seconds before the action takes place.

Establishing a routine is possibly the greatest combat against a lack of *initial* mental focus. Going through the motions of a pre-established and familiar plan can get your "mental wheels" moving in the proper direction. If necessary, a written checklist can serve as a tool to assist in "getting your head screwed on right." Now that all of your equipment is in place and you are at ease, the stage is set for a great performance. The first string of slow fire begins. You raise the pistol and flawlessly execute the fundamentals, confidently firing a ten. Now the challenge is to stay focused. You *can* and *will* succeed, each and every time. Remember the *little red engine* that could?