

# ***The Art of Shooting Under Pressure***

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*Dr. Åke Lundeberg is a German physician specializing in psychotherapy and also trained as a violin teacher. He works full time giving courses in the art of performing under pressure. A paper he delivered in York England in March of 1997 during a conference on "Health and the Artist" superbly detailed and analyzed the condition of stage fright in orchestral musicians. By taking the liberty of doing a little editing of his paper, I have painstakingly translated his thoughts to apply to the experiences of the competitive pistol shooter. That translation is what follows...*

## **Negative Pressure**

Anxiety is likely to occur whenever you must perform well in some endeavor of great importance to you in the presence other people, whose judgement you fear. Murphy's law is at work: Anything that can go wrong will do so, but much more and much worse than you ever thought possible.

*Thinking about the possible disastrous outcome of your performance and its consequences is the core of match pressure.*

It has been known for a long time that the best way to deal with match pressure is to concentrate completely on the plan of shot execution. True, but alas, easier said than done. About 300 BC Chuang Tzu said that "an archer competing for a precious golden prize shoots as if he were blind." His concentration is on the reward and the consequences of missing it, instead of the shooting itself.

I have developed a specific method of concentrating on shot execution and routine. This kind of concentration does in fact happen intuitively whenever a shooter is in the groove, i.e. when the shot execution simply flows effortlessly with intense concentration. But intuition all too often fails to function while you are under negative pressure. I teach a way to use consciousness, so that you can always know that you are in fact concentrating on shot execution rather than the possible disaster.

## **Common Misconceptions about Match Pressure**

***A great shooter has an inborn confidence and needs not feel any match pressure.***

This certainly appears to be true. Great shooters rarely show negative feelings, which is not the same thing as saying that they never have such feelings. The higher your classification, the greater the fall can be. However, great shooters are generally very good at managing match pressure.

***All it takes is confidence***

Of course, confidence helps. But there is no such thing as 100% genuine confidence. Most great shooters report that they at times are troubled with self-doubts.

### ***If you have a reliable technique, you will not suffer from match pressure***

There are many reports of the opposite, shooters of great technical ability, who have suffered severely. But, of course you can get anxious knowing that your technique is not in shape.

## **The Art of Shooting Under Pressure**

Most shooters feel negative pressure at times. The art of performing under pressure is a technique that you can learn and develop. The goal is to cope with pressure in a way that allows your true shooting potential to be unfolded. You can learn effective techniques for this purpose. Nevertheless, there are no short cuts in the shooting sports. You need to work with the area of nerve control continuously. Placing the plan of shot execution on center stage is a great foundation for coping with pressure.

I used to believe that match pressure symptoms are caused by all kinds of frustrating experience in the past. While there might be some truth in that, it is evident that some shooters while performing superbly on the firing line, they can have deep personal troubles including lots of bad experiences in the past. In contrast many sympathetic and mature persons can experience very negative pressure on the line. The conclusion is that the art of shooting under pressure is largely a technique. And such a technique can be taught and learned. The crucial questions are thus: What do you actually do before and during a match? How is your consciousness organized?

There are basically three ways of reacting to match pressure:

1. Everything goes better, the shooter feels elated and his/her concentration and execution is enhanced.
2. Performance suffers from various symptoms, such as fears, panic, body parts shaking, loss of concentration, etc.
3. The shooter becomes apathetic and may still shoot competently but not at his/her best.

The first reaction is, of course, the ideal one. The other reactions lead to achievements below the true potential of the shooter, because mind and body get occupied with other things than shot execution itself. When you do experience negative pressure, Murphy's law is at rule: Anything that can go wrong will do so, but much more and much worse than you thought possible. Say you are to walk across a plank located between two cathedral towers. The task as such, i.e. the technique of walking is very easy indeed. But Murphy's law will take over. Your brain will be flooded with pictures of coffins, undertakers, broken limbs, etc, and these pictures will govern your behavior, making it likely that you will indeed fall. Murphy's law is very persistent. Say you have experienced a match pressure symptom such as a shaking forearm or a lack of concentration and you shot far below your potential. The experience was frightening and you will try to avoid it at all cost in the future. Then what happens? In the case of a shaking forearm, you hope intensely that your arm will not get that tremor again. But the primitive part of the brain regulating these fear reactions does not understand the words no or not. It thinks in pictures. The picture communicated will be that of a trembling arm! The brain thus receives a command to make the arm shake again. It works like ***"Do not think of the color red!"*** Red is precisely what you think about,

possibly trying to paint it over with other colors. The art of shooting under pressure is all about reversing Murphy's law. For a great range performance, two things are needed, an excited state of alertness (fed by your desire to excel) and a relaxed state inside of that. You might call it the **"eye of the storm"** or **"peace of mind in an eager body."**

## **Reversing Murphy's Law**

Whether you feel pressure or are downright bored, you give energy to things other than shot execution. The remedy is thus to make sure that you devote yourself entirely to the plan of shot execution. Body and soul are different aspects of one unity, mental fears and physical tensions coexist, alertness and relaxation of mind and body are needed, getting into the shot plan is the best remedy of match pressure.

## **Relaxation and Attitude Training**

Our attitudes deep down will largely influence our performances. Therefore it is effective to work with negative attitudes to performance (we all have them more or less). Shooters can utilize relaxation procedures including the use of a relaxation trigger, that is a mental image that displaces negative thought. This trigger can be used before shooting and also on the firing line. The excited state of mind and body will then mix with the relaxation that the trigger represents, helping to achieve the desired mixed state of both tension and relaxation called the eye of the storm. Furthermore the shooter is taught to control thought processes whenever needed before performance and on the line. Thinking constructively will not exactly erase all negative feelings, but rather limit their effects. It is more a question of living creatively with an appetite for success, because if there is no hunger at all, performance is likely to suffer and become over-relaxed and indolent.

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