

The Psychology of Routine

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Don Nygord has been shooting for over 30 years and for the last 21 straight years has been a member of the US Shooting Team competing in Olympic style pistol shooting all over the world. He has been National Champion 16 times, has been on the 1984 and 1988 Olympic Teams, and was World Champion in Air Pistol with a score only two points off the World Record at that time. He is the current holder of the US Free Pistol record at 574 - a record that has stood for 14 years now! - and has held over 40 other National Records. The following essay is a result of this experience and is offered to help both the new and the experienced shooter improve their performance.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SHOOTING

There are some serious contradictions in the messages we get whenever the subjects of "How to acquire shooting skills", "How to perform at matches", and "What were the results of your last match performance" are discussed. These contradictions occur at all levels of the game, from the guys at the club to the National Team. Almost everybody that has been shooting for any length of time and not living on a desert island has heard "don't think about your score ..." when shooting in a match. Right, sure. Unless you are brain dead, *of course* you think about your score! We used to joke that the Russians (who were whuppin' us) all had received pre frontal lobotomies because they seemed so stoic in victory or defeat - no expressions of anxiety or joy. This was not true, of course, but we speculated that this procedure would probably improve your match performance, but you wouldn't care! The principal expressed in "don't think about your score while shooting ..." is sound enough. Actually, the whole idea is "To acquire great skills, one **MUST** think about every aspect of execution, and do so all of the time. But to achieve great **PERFORMANCE**, one must *not* "think" at all!!" What this means is that you must be extremely analytical and cognitive in the effort of learning and perfecting the skill of shooting in order to come up with a good technique. But, when actually performing, you must let the mind/body combination operate on the subconscious level, and so do what it was trained to do **without** the interference of the conscious mind. And, all effort and focus is to be on execution of the act of firing a shot or a series in perfect conformance with the model you derived from all that cognition and rehearsal - not what the results of this execution might yield.

O.K. So you do this, or try to at least. What is the first thing the guys (or the National Coach) asks when you come off of the line? **DO** they ask, "How many times did you correctly execute your model technique?" Most likely not. Surely they say, "What score did you get?" And, they haven't yet put on a match where the medals are awarded on a percentage of perfect executions, nor do they publish the names of the shooters and the number of excellent executions in the match bulletin. No-sir-ee, they publish the *scores*. So live with it. Forget the silliness of "Don't think about your scores" but **DO** realize how one accomplishes skill versus how one achieves high performance (which of course equals high scores). Also recognize that *everyone* at every level experiences increased "arousal" (a word much preferred over fear, anxiety, dread, etc.) when in a serious competition. What most of the

top performers have is the confidence that the work they did in learning the skill of shooting will carry them through in spite of (or even *because* of) this extra arousal. And, because the same adrenalin rush that makes your mouth dry and your palms sweaty also increases your visual acuity, tactile sense, and cognition speed - darned if you might not just end up with a personal best!

Having a **plan**, i.e. "I am going to execute correctly as much as possible" and *knowing* what that is will put you ahead of 90% of the pack before the first shot is fired!

MAKING CHANGES TO YOUR ROUTINE

Many times I am asked, "What should I change so I can do better?" We know that change is necessary to go from one state or level to another, but how and when and what do you change if you want to "improve"? One man asked me how to hold his gun "still". He was disappointed when I told him this was not where he should be putting his effort! What he really wanted, of course, was better performance (scores). His analysis of what change would bring him the most improvement was faulty in thinking that his "stillness" or hold was the biggest problem he had. (Of course, we all know what *really* is the biggest problem, don't we?)

I am an inveterate changer myself. I believe this has helped me considerably in my career (although some of the coaches the US team has had were made crazy by this!) All my changes, though, were **SYSTEMATIC**. This means I analyzed the current situation, decided on which element would yield the most performance gain if changed, made the change I thought would be for the best, set up a test of efficacy, set a timetable for implementation and then **RECORDED** everything I could think of: All of the above (the change, the why, the how, the goal for the change, the schedule, etc.) and finally I documented **ALL** the results (scores). Warning!! All changes have side effects: In our eagerness to change something that seems to be an obstacle, sometimes we get negative, unintended results. One of my students decided that he would stop drinking his 8 cups of coffee a day for the duration of the National Championships. This surely would make him less "nervous" and he would do better. The only problem was the intense withdrawal headaches from the sudden cessation of caffeine! Moral: If the change will affect your physical state, make it early enough to allow for acclimation. Another example of this was the student who started weight training in the middle of the shooting season. His body was getting stronger, but his fine muscle control, needed for good performance, was shot! (Pun intended.) This also applies to changes to your equipment: A different gun, adding weights to the gun, a different grip, etc. Make these kinds of changes early enough to allow for adaption by the time the "big match" must be shot. More subtle changes like trigger weight, trigger position, shooting glass lenses, rhythm of firing, etc. can be made without so much concern about adaptive time, but should be planned, adhered to for a predetermined period and **DOCUMENTED** - then correlated with the results obtained. Only this way can you make an objective evaluation of the value of the change and decide whether to keep the new conditions or go back to "zero" and start again. Of course, sometimes the change is either so good or so bad it is obvious immediately that should either keep it or drop it! Either way, you've learned something you didn't know before and that is progress. And, the smarter we become, the better we perform. So change away - wisely!

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