

CONCENTRATION

Have you ever said to yourself, "I can't concentrate" or "I can't focus" or "I can't get into the match" or any such negative statements? If the answer is yes, then your problem is that you've never actually trained CONCENTRATION. Top athletes know that concentration is a crucial skill which is vulnerable to a multitude of potentially distracting factors. So they train this skill the same as all other skills involved in their sport.

Unfortunately, in pistol shooting, this skill is largely overlooked and considered to be part of the actual technique of executing a shot as in "looking at the sights". In my experience, I found concentration to be arguably the most important of the psychological skills in shooting, because without good concentration, no amount of skill, Fitness or motivation is going to get you to perform at your peak. Many athletes use the term "focus" to describe concentration and I think this describes exactly what you need to do, that is, to focus on the job at hand. If you can improve your ability to focus on the important things then you will immediately increase your chance for a good performance.

FOCUS can mean concentrating on . . .

- your grip
- your body positioning
- your technique/body "feel"
- your rhythm
- your future

WHAT IS GOOD FOCUS?

Focus differs in different sports. For example in sports like motor racing, tennis, distance running and football codes, athletes may learn to maintain concentration some times up to 30 minutes or over. In sports like archery, cricket, golf and some athletics events (100m sprint) they only need to maintain acute concentration for short periods of time. In shooting, a match can take a long period but we only need to focus our concentration for relatively brief periods of time. By now you have realised what category we fall in, but what you also might have realised is that in shooting, an important skill is to develop the ability to shift your focus when necessary. This comes from regular (good quality) practice and competition experience.

We can all focus but when some of us get into unusual, tight or even boring situations we lose our focus and can't get it back again.

"Good concentration is very much a product of effectively applying goal setting, energy control and performance segmenting skills. Therefore understanding these concepts is the foundation for establishing a focused and flexible state of mind" Grohom Winter, Psychologist.

Your goals can help or hinder your capacity to focus. When you set your goal to win and don't plan some of the actions needed to achieve that goal, then you risk losing your focus in competition. A shooter, for example, who wants to win and is not able to focus on shooting each shot according to a set plan, is very likely to perform poorly.

We see many shooters, and some of the top ones at that, who find they do well until their over-concern with winning or losing distracts them from the task at hand hence, "Losing it" and putting in a bad series or becoming unable to re-focus after a bad couple of shots and do not recover until it is probably too late. In my opinion this would be a typical case where the shooter, although he may have come to the competition thinking he or she is ready because he/she has done a lot of training before hand, committed the very common sin of not training in segmenting their plan of the competition and setting specific goals for each of the segments in order to be able to maintain his/her focus on each of the segments until the end of the competition.

Here then are a few tips for introducing and enhancing concentration.

TRAINING:

1. In general, athletes can mentally prepare themselves better for training if they know in advance what the session will entail and what the goals for the session are. However, introducing an element of spontaneity and surprise into your training sessions also encourages flexibility and interest; aim for a balance of both.
2. It is important to vary training sessions to avoid repetitiveness and boredom. Boredom can lead to a lack of concentration.
3. Divide the session into various time and activity segments and set different goals for each segment.
4. Regularly ask yourself questions about the session, what you are really working on and what you want to achieve. This helps you to direct your attention to the task at hand.
5. Register in your diary all your result goals and segment goals for every training session and if you achieve them, reward yourself.
6. Design training sessions where you can apply 80% intensity for the first 15-20 minutes and then increase up to "90% effort" in the last 10 minutes. This will help lift your concentration. Remember, intensity can relate to concentration as well as to physical effort.

COMPETITION:

1. Whenever possible familiarise yourself with the different venues and conditions. For example: If competing interstate, as soon as you arrive spend some time familiarising yourself with the venue, such as bays, spectators areas, score boards etc. Imagine yourself shooting on the Range with the spectator area full of people and the other shooters next to you (even the opposition). This will help you feel at home in the venue and therefore allow you to concentrate at the task at hand come competition time.
2. Simulate training sessions' demands and ensure that goal settings are as simple and as achievable as in training sessions.
3. Use performance planning and segmenting to enhance "task focus" and block out distractions during the event.
4. Ensure that you don't have too much information; one or two key points which the performance hinges around are enough. Prior to and during competition, athletes seem to benefit from having things that they have learnt and practiced at training reinforced rather than introducing new information.
5. Concentration may not always just happen; but this does not mean that the competition is lost. Keep it simple and train your concentration in the lead up period to the competition. This will stack the odds in favour of you being focused when it really counts.
6. Develop key words or triggers which serve as reminders of technique, intensity of concentration and state of mind. Developing your own methods to this will make you able to use them more effectively in competition. Use key words or triggers to maintain or regain lost concentration.

So remember, if you are serious about your shooting, *THEN* get serious about training concentration. I hope I am able to help some of you with this article, and if more information is needed I am always willing to help you. You can get in touch with me through the coaching director.

Some key points to remember about concentration:- Concentration is changeable, can be trained (Internal, external, broad, narrow) and is important to be able to shift focus.

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