

Shooting Fundamentals
by
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MENTAL TRAINING FOR SHOOTING SUCCESS

Champions from every sport continually look for ways to improve their skills and for ways to pack more training time into each day. The same is true of world-class biathletes and competitive shooters. Many champion shooters prepare themselves for match pressure through a training method, which can be conducted both on and off the shooting range. This little understood, but powerful technique, is called by many names; mental practice, mental rehearsal, visualization or mental imagery.

Eastern European sports scientists, coaches and athletes studied and used the mental aspects of training earlier than the western nations and they found it to work. Athletes' ability to create mental images of themselves performing at optimal levels was the single most powerful tool in the Soviet mental training arsenal according to Dr. Charles Garfield in his indispensable book, Peak Performance.

U.S. national level shooters started studying and using mental training during the early 1980s. Biathletes were exposed to the science in the mid-1980s and today mental training techniques are used at every level and in every arena of athletic endeavor.

But mental training alone cannot solve shooting problems. Tom Redhead, British National Pistol Coach, says, "Mental training can open many doors and do many positive things. What it cannot do, however, is grant you shooting skills if you do not possess them. Mental training is not a substitute for technical shooting training, its primary purpose is to enable you to achieve your potential in a match." You achieve that potential by creating a mental program that keeps out unwanted thoughts and focuses the mind on the exact elements that create success in shooting and in rapid, smooth range procedure for the biathlete.

During the 1988 Winter Olympic Biathlon events, I had time to watch an athlete who had previously medalled in one of the 1987 World Championship races. He was expected to do great things in the Olympics, however, his poor shooting performance under the Olympic race pressure outweighed his excellent skiing. Consistently in both prone and standing he would hit the first two shots, pause, and then usually miss all of the next three. In standing each subsequent shot would be further from the center of the target, his frustration was evident as each shot and each race slipped away. This athlete in practice could hit 5 for 5 regularly. What went wrong? I had a theory.

One evening at supper after all the biathlon races were over and we had time to enjoy the rest of the Olympic events, the biathlete joined me at a dining table in the Olympic Village. I never give advice to another coaches' athlete unless specifically asked, but when he starting talking about his performance in the races, I asked him if he would answer a couple of questions for me.

First, I asked what was on his mind when shooting. He thought a moment and replied, "I think about the wind, the other racers beside me, the crowd, the television cameras, and how I don't want to shoot bad shots here in front of everyone." Aha! He was thinking about all the wrong things and not focusing in the right things. My theory might be proved so I asked one more question.

Did he have a mental program, something like an automatic computer program that he ran through his mind while shooting? He responded, "no". I was surprised, as I knew his team was having regular lectures on mental training. He had not applied the good techniques he had been hearing.

All world class biathletes and shooters must prepare for the excitement and pressure of competition. They must be prepared to think only of the positive things that they want to accomplish while shooting. Nothing else can be allowed to take away their concentration. They must focus only on firing the perfect shot.

I believe if he had been occupying his mind with positive mental commands during his shooting he would not have had time to think of other distractions and he would have been successful in his race for the Olympic medal. Next issue I'll write about creating the mental program for training and for competition. It can be the winner's edge. THE THINGS YOU THINK ABOUT, WRITE ABOUT, AND TALK ABOUT ARE THE THINGS THAT WILL HAPPEN.

Richard Domey, Ph.D. is a former National Guard biathlete and 16 year member of the U.S. All Guard International Shooting Team. He was a member of seven U.S. National Championship winning rifle teams and five national record setting teams. He coached biathlon at the XV Winter Olympics and was an active shooting coach at the U.S. Olympic Training Center, Colorado Springs. His book, "Mental Training for Shooting Success" is used by the Canadian National Pistol Team and is sold worldwide. It has been translated into four languages by the International Shooting Union for distribution to Olympic federations.