

MIND CONTROL

Alistair Whittingham looks at ways to keep your head in the game and technique tight



When I speak to athletes, irrespective of their sports, the idea of what factors they control within a performance comes up again and again. There are things that are within the athlete's scope to control, but strangely enough they often seem to ignore these and concentrate on things that should either be taken care of by the skill itself, technique, or trust in their performance. Things that are within the athlete's control include the time taken to perform the task, the level and specificity of effort that they apply throughout a competitive day, and the holistic outcome of what they are trying to achieve.

Let's take those in order; firstly, controlling the temporal (time) aspect of the performance. It never ceases to surprise me how few archers actually have access to a stopwatch when on the shooting line. At the very least this is a vital security blanket in order for an archer to alleviate angst over how long is left to shoot a series of arrows. It is also a very useful training tool, as consistency of time taken to shoot an end of arrows is a good indicator of the proficiency of the archer. World-class archers, whether shooting in competition or practice, are temporally consistent. This consistency of time taken ties up with their kinesthetic consistency, so the use of a stop watch or timing system, both in practice and in competition, is a good indicator of the level of performance. This leads into a drill used on national squads which can be loosely termed 'speed shooting'. Within speed shooting

many individuals find that they are able to perform surprisingly better when put under time constraints, as long as they have a level of trust in their ability. This, somewhat erroneously, leads some coaches to over-emphasise the use of speed shooting in a practice scenario. Each individual has an ability to shoot a series of arrows within a comfortable time, if they were to decrease this time they may find an increase in performance up to a point where performance would fail. To this end, speed shooting is an excellent drill to indicate the ideal amount of time to take over a series of arrows in order to perform at the technically cleanest level.

Second on the list is the idea of controlling the level of work throughout a competition, a crucial part of understanding how to manage a performance. This management includes taking into account anxiety at the start of the competition (or at the start of a distance), the duration of the performance, and identifies times when the mind will wander or physical strength will wane. Managing or controlling the performance will allow the athlete to regulate their efforts to get the best results. Let us take an indoor competition of five-dozen arrows: if this is managed correctly there are certain parts of this five-dozen that require unique strategies. The first two scoring ends are crucial in order for the archer to settle down and be comfortable with what they are doing, so by the end of these first two ends "one wants to be shooting the way one wants to shoot". The priority here is attaining the

Plan to deal with anxiety of expectation via good practice techniques: practise in such a way that it emulates the competition scenario closely

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feeling of control over performance so that the individual can go on to achieve a good total or 'holistic' outcome. It may be that an archer will learn not to expect these first two ends to be as good as they would expect in practice, or in the middle of the score, and be happy to 'drop' some points as long as they feel they are shooting well at the conclusion of these six arrows. This allows the archer to build themselves up into a competitive score. Once they are through, let's say, the first dozen they will be comfortable in how they are performing and to a certain degree 'take their foot off the gas' mentally due to the reduced anxiety that this control gives them in order to be able to coast through the next two-dozen with good results. Towards the latter half of the five-dozen score, a different kind of anxiety may appear; one of expectation.

Sooner or later an archer will come up against leader boards which make methods of avoidance of position or score attained impossible and pointless. It is important, therefore, that the archer has a plan to deal with this anxiety of expectation. We all suffer from it, and it is at this point that good practice techniques – practice that emulates the competitive scenario – will set the individual in good stead to have enough mental resources to deal with this anxiety.

One thing that impinges upon a reduced use of processing resources and technically clean performance is individuals themselves spotting the arrows

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they have shot during an end. In spotting an arrow in the middle of a series of shots, one moves the emphasis from the use of a well-learned, trusted, skill to a high level of cognitive processing. This processing of arrow position, and what that means to the archer, makes it very difficult to return back to the non-cognitive state that is seen in elite performers of a closed skill. For this reason many archers at an elite level have people spotting for them, as the ability to process information aurally requires less cognitive processing than visually. Similarly the information that is given to the archer by the spotter will be concise and non-judgmental, in some cases it may simply be "good shot". If spotting of arrows must be done by the archer then they must stick to a regime, for example: spotting the first arrow of every end and then allowing the rest of the end to be shot as a series and reduce disruption to psychological resources.

The archer must also have a plan for dealing with the disruption caused by a bad shot during an end of arrows. Many people are taught from the beginning of their archery careers that they can do nothing about the arrow that has been shot

Controlling the level of work throughout a competition is crucial in managing performance

It's impossible to control the weather, so an athlete must come to terms with shooting in all types of conditions



and should therefore ignore it. This advice, although understandable, is not particularly useful. If an individual perceives that they have made a mistake, they need to deal with those thoughts. It cannot be put off or ignored, as its importance will magnify and nag at the individual. This has been seen in those in the performing arts who are actively taught when practising and even in live performances to deal with errors. If time is permitting within a series of shots, the individual must metaphorically step away from a bad shot; step away and deal with it. This does not mean over-analysis of where the faults came from or what they were. The most effective method of dealing with errors in a short space of time is a system called '360° degrees of dealing'. Having made an error, the individual must picture themselves turning through a circle of 360° broken down into four stages. The first 90° is a simple emotional outburst. The second 90° is a superficial look at what the error was. The next 90° is a reassessment of the archer's personal shot plan, it being ideal to keep this plan at seven points or less. The final 90° is to take them back, metaphorically to pointing at the target, ready to shoot the next arrow and is a reaffirmation of the trust they have in their skill and the belief in their abilities. This need only take seconds and in this way an individual has actively dealt with and laid to rest the error that they made.

This leads us on to the idea of an athlete needing to come to terms with things that they have no control over and must therefore adapt themselves to. This includes the weather, the venue, illness and nebulous anxiety, such as national representation. You cannot remove or hide from these factors; all that one can do is come to terms with them. It's important in practice to think about how these factors will affect performance during competition. On winning a major world

championship, an athlete was once asked how it felt during the closing stages of the competition and they explained that it was pretty much how they expected it to be. The reporter asked what they meant by this and the athlete explained that they had "lived" this moment thousands of times before in practice. They had tailored their practice in order to emulate winning by imagining what the crowd would be like, what the weather would be like and how they would feel. They had made the experience as real as they could and then used this to plan and to get an idea of what fears and anxieties they would face, how they would control this and deal with what they were unable to control.

I have purposely not touched upon the level of control that the athlete has over their skill and technique. Within a closed skill such as archery, the level of cognitive control exerted by the athlete should be minimal. To this end, difficult as it may seem, the tougher the scenario the less an individual must try to control their technique to succeed. This skill, which is practiced for thousands of hours, is a well-honed automatic skill and the greatest leap of faith that the archer must make is to trust this skill; to trust it implicitly when they are faced with increased anxiety or stresses. It is crucial that practice has emulated competition to such a degree that the individual is able to trust their skill, this means that they perform in an automatic and well-rehearsed manner that does not deviate in any situation, returning us to the idea of the timing (temporal aspect) of the performance being vital. If the archer trusts their skill and technique this leaves them resources left over to deal with anxiety due to the stress of the competition, expectation, the weather, the venue and they will also take great confidence in the fact that they trust their skill.

