

Learning How to Win

By Bret Erickson, National Shotgun Coach

There are basically three phases in a shooting career. The first is learning to break targets; the second is learning how to win; and the third is learning how to deal with winning. There are many talented individuals competing in our sport today, yet we consistently see the same group of people at the top in our major competitions. Why is this? When coaching in the shooting sports, the first thing coaches and athletes work on is how to break targets. This fundamental

athletes and coaches have to work with. I see a lot of focus on sports psychology, but sometimes this is mistakenly put in front of shooting. The basis of all shooting sports is the confidence it takes to break targets, and that is gained through experience on the range and in competition. Moreover, a strong mental game is fueled by the shooter's confidence and ability to break every target thrown. This is all developed in phase one. Make no mistake; I am not taking away from the importance of sports psychology. It is a

think that a shooter with a good mental game does not get distracted. When in reality, distractions can happen to even the best. A shooter with a strong mental game could very possibly have more distractions because of the pressure and expectation of winning; yet it is the ability to deal with the distractions, learn how to acknowledge the distraction and still break the target that distinguishes the elite.

Young shooters need to realize that virtually everything a coach teaches you is

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is our system of measurement for determining the winners—those who break the most targets. That's the baseline of success in the sport.

With good equipment, good coaching and lots of time on the range, virtually everyone will get better and become more proficient at breaking targets. So, why can't we all win if we can all break a target? Herein lies the second phase, learning how to win, which is much more difficult to teach and much more demanding as an athlete to learn. We hear so many topics on sports psychology, having a good mental game, focus, distractions, etc.; in a nutshell, just being mentally strong. All are big factors in learning how to win, dealing with distractions on the line, dealing with winning and dealing with pressure. Pressure is nothing more than the fear of failure.

Here at the Olympic Training Center (OTC) we have sports psychologists on staff and many of the other athletes, including the U.S. Army team, use sports psychologists. Sports psychology is probably one of the largest, untapped resources that



major tool that can help us all be winners. I suggest that you don't put the cart before the horse. Sports psychology is a huge asset to the shooting sports, but before you seek the assistance of a sports psychologist you must have the proficiency to be able to break all the targets. There is a huge difference between fundamental misses or misses caused by under-trained, under-skilled shooters and mental distractions.

That is where the sports psychology comes in and is a great help. I think the biggest misnomer that I hear is people

all in the process of building not only the ability to break targets, but also a mental game. All the things a good coach teaches a young shooter, such as solid fundamentals, pre-shot routine, shooting one target at a time, etc., are all building blocks for a strong mental game and tools that we use to regulate the controllable factors.

There are parts of the game that we cannot control and we should not focus on

these. We need to focus on the things that we can control in a match. In the process of learning how to win as opposed to learning how to break targets we take all these tools, including our sports psychology, pre-shot routine, and fundamentals, and put them to the test in a match. There is a belief that if it takes 98 out of 100 to win a match, then you should stay at home and practice until you can break 98, and you are guaranteed a win. This seldom ever works. Many fail to take into account the distractions and pressure of the match that aren't present in training

conditions. Therein lies the secret to learning how to win. Once we put ourselves in a position to win a match, the pressures and distractions compound and become difficult to control. We feel everyone is watching us and basically have a fear of failure.

I had a coach many years ago tell me “put yourself in position to win.” When you go out for that last round or advance into the final you will make mistakes. Learn from them. Your palms are sweating, your heartbeat is racing, you get panicky and things change. Remember these feelings, because after you mess up, you need to get back on the horse, shoot the next match and put yourself in that same position. In the simplest terms, you learn how to deal with it or it beats you. The best way to mimic these positions and feel the pressure to learn how to win is to shoot in small local matches.



Kim Rhode has felt the pressure of four Olympic Games and produced a medal in each. She has countless National Championship titles, a plethora of World Cup medals and more. In addition to the fundamentals it takes to consistently break targets, Kim is mentally equipped to win.

The competition might not be as stiff, but you still feel the pressure of having to win. Unfortunately, a lot of USA Shooting members shoot only two or three matches a year—USAS Nationals, Fall Selection and Spring Selection. As a young junior coming up through the ranks, these are very difficult

to win. Go to the small matches, feel the pressure, learn how to win so that you are better able to deal with the pressure and are better equipped to make a USA Shooting National Team when you go to these very important competitions.

Once we put the whole package together and become not only a physically good shooter but a mentally strong shooter, then we reach the third phase of our shooting career, which is dealing with winning. For some this could be even more difficult than the first two. Some of us put the winning aside and go out and do the best we can and continue to win. Others feel the pressure and the weight of the world on their shoulders. They feel everyone

watching and believe they are expected to win, which increases the pressure and fear of failure. In turn, this makes it more difficult to win. Hopefully everyone will have the opportunity to feel this pressure.

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