

Developing Life Skills Through Shooting

By Robert Mitchell, Chief Executive Officer

Participating in organized sports provides many valuable benefits to people of all ages. Sports have been a mainstay of elementary and high school programs for as long as we can remember, and even with today's financial shortfalls and budget deficits, school sporting activities continue to thrive.

The most obvious benefit of participating in sports is learning the fundamentals of teamwork. We may not recognize teamwork being associated with an individual sport such as shooting, but shooters, similar to athletes in other sports, are dependent upon coaches and teammates to provide a learning environment as well as success at the club level.

Like all sports, shooting develops self-discipline. Discipline is necessary to fire one shot after another with consistent and proper technique. While many shooters develop a shot plan or routine, it takes self-discipline to execute that routine consistently on every shot, and particularly in the presence of distractions or the pressure of high-level competition.

While all sports require concentration, I believe that shooting requires the utmost focus each time pressure is applied to the trigger or the shooter steps onto the station. It is well known that as young shooters' skills improve, their performance in the classroom improves as well. I attribute the increased ability to stay on track and focus with intense concentration as a reason for this correlation.

Sport participation also develops confidence. The process of improving skills, shooting more tens and hitting more targets puts a smile on the shooter's face and adds another block to the foundation of confidence, which carries over to our daily lives developing the "I can do this" attitude.

While many non-sport extracurricular activities offer benefits, it is through sports that young athletes learn the importance of commitment as a key ingredient to success. Those who reach a pinnacle in an avocation or occupation have an undying commitment to their effort. We have all heard the phrase that "Quitters never win and winners never quit." Success in sport, as in the classroom, workplace or family requires a dedicated commitment to that effort. Commitment may start by showing up at the range for every available practice session, and even foregoing "fun" or social opportunities to practice and/or compete, and later to life decisions regarding college as well as career and relationship decisions. Those who earn their place on the awards podium make a full commitment to their sport.

One of the best rifle shooters of all time, Lones Wigger, is known for telling his wife when he was an aspiring shooter after having his first child that, "If it comes to putting food on the table or going to a rifle match, I am going to the competition." I have known Lones for almost 40 years and I can state without

question that he was totally serious. And yet, commitment to sport and family do not have to be exclusive as evidenced by the fact that Lones and Mary Kay Wigger celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary last year.

Hand-in-hand with commitment is the attribute of perseverance. Some may argue that commitment and perseverance are one in the same. Perseverance compliments but goes a step farther. Shooting is an excellent example of a sport involving learned skills. It is not necessarily those who are successful at an early stage who go on to win Olympic medals, rather it is those that dedicate themselves, commit and persevere through years of hard work who achieve success. It is perseverance that carries the committed athlete through from month to month and year to year as well as through the most challenging times of disappointments and setbacks. Through an athlete's career there are

many difficult challenges where it is much easier to accept lesser objectives or even leave the sport. The true champion perseveres through those tough times, staying focused and finding a way to the awards podium.

Some life skills are better learned through individual rather than team sports. Personally responsibility is one of those positive traits. When shooters quit

making excuses and take accountability for their actions including failures, they open the door to a higher level of performance. We have all experienced the shooter who upon leaving the range immediately offers justification for his or her poor performance. On the other end of the spectrum, we have witnessed the successful shooter who upon having either a good or poor performance identifies where and how improvements can be made and focuses on implementing the proper technique, assuming full responsibility for every shot fired.

Another personal attribute more oriented to sports such as shooting is the ability to analyze and solve problems. From the start of a competition to the last shot, shooters are constantly faced with challenges and decisions. Whether it is dealing with the effects of wind and weather, an unexplained shot or loss of confidence, the shooter must quickly make an analysis and take corrective action. Proper application of this mental exercise is vital to winning performances. Elite shooters can often recognize when their mental or technical execution is deteriorating and take action to get back on track before bad shots or missed targets occur.

I hope you can relate your own personal experiences to these topics and recognize as well as promote to others the positive personal attributes that shooting develops. The shooting sport is truly one where we "Make Champions in Sport and in Life!"

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