

Shooting IS a Physical Sport

By SFC Theresa DeWitt, 1996 Olympian

What do these individuals have in common: Peyton Manning, Vincent Hancock, Michael Phelps, Glenn Eller, Tiger Woods, Kim Rhode, Lance Armstrong and Lance Bade? They are all athletes. By definition, an athlete is “a person trained to compete in contests involving physical agility, stamina or strength; a trained competitor in a sport, exercise or game requiring physical skill.”

Though shooting may be considered an unconventional sport, most competitors would agree that consistent winning performances definitely require a certain amount of physical skill. But it is not a physical skill that relates to running, jumping or throwing. According to Dr. Robert DuVall, director of SportsMedicine of Atlanta (SMA), the “shooting sports represent the essence of fine motor control in sports...few other sports require the refined motor skill and precision of shooting. Likewise, few other sports necessitate the combined physical and emotional aptitudes that are required for sport shooting success.”

So while the shooting sports do not engage large muscle groups like swimming would, the “fine motor control” and “precision” necessary for hitting our targets does demand a certain level of fitness from smaller muscle groups. For example, the core stabilizers and the rotator cuff muscles may become sore after a lengthy break from lifting and swinging a shotgun during the competition season. In essence, our bodies become part of our competitive equipment. If we consciously choose to purchase the best shotguns we can afford to shoot, take pains to keep them functioning and tweak them mercilessly in an attempt to fine-tune just a little bit more, why then don't we put the same training focus and effort on our physical bodies?

That's not to say that you have to be on Lance Armstrong's training plan or that you have to spend six hours a day in the gym or be doing “two-a-days.” Daily exercise is “medicine” though. A simple, sport-specific strength training or flexibility regimen can enhance overall health and reduce the occurrence of illness and injury in addition to improving performance.

Stretching is an important component of any athlete's training program. It reduces muscle tension, prevents injuries and prepares the body for activity. However, there is a right way and a wrong way to stretch muscles. SMA advises that the right way is a “relaxed, sustained stretch with your attention focused on the muscles being stretched.” The wrong way is a “bouncing motion” or stretching to the point of pain. Remember that stretching, when done correctly, is not painful. Pain is an indicator that something is wrong! SMA offers these stretching fundamentals:

1. Slowly move to a position of gentle pulling in the muscle.
2. Hold this position – DO NOT BOUNCE - until the gentle pulling decreases.
3. Progress further into this position until a gentle pull is felt again.
4. Repeat the sequence, also contracting the opposing muscle group for greater relaxation.
5. Proper form (and feeling the pull in the muscle rather than in the joint) assures stretching and minimal overstretching.
6. Stretching in order from “top-down” (neck, shoulders, back, arms, torso, legs) ensures all muscle groups get targeted. Remember to breathe throughout.

Do not stretch a cold muscle: warm up first with 3-5 minutes of

jogging in place, jumping jacks or walking. This raises your core body temperature enough to get your muscles ready for activity. Examples of good stretches for shooters:

1. Neck stretch – Lean your head sideways toward your left shoulder as your left hand pulls your right arm down and behind your back. Hold 30 seconds, repeat on right side.
2. Pectoralis stretch - Place your shoulder against a door frame or stationary object. Turn your body away from your shoulder, feeling a stretch between your shoulder and chest. Do this slowly and under control. Hold 30-60 seconds, repeat on opposite side.
3. Lower back stretch – From a long leg sitting position, lean forward from the waist and lock arms around the back of legs just above the knees. Pull upward without locking arms and hold for a count of 5.

Other sport-specific stretches can be found at www.SportsMedicineofAtlanta.com along with sport-specific exercises designed to strengthen those muscle groups used for shooting. It's just as important, too, to strengthen the opposing muscle groups. In other words, raising and swinging a shotgun on a regular basis develops the pectoral muscles in the chest, but tends to neglect the latissimus dorsi in the upper back. This causes an imbalance and lack of symmetry between these synergistic muscle groups. Evidence of this can be seen in a lot of shotgun shooters: when standing in a natural posture, the shoulders tend to curl forward because the pectoral muscles are stronger than the muscles in the upper back.

An effective exercise to counteract this imbalance is the Seated Row:



1. Begin seated with upright posture, back flat – DO NOT lean forward.
2. Pull handle back toward lower chest, your back should remain straight – DO NOT lean backward.
3. Focus on squeezing your shoulder blades together first and then pulling with your arms.
4. Return to start position.
5. Repeat with 10-12 repetitions for 3 sets.

The Bent Over Row is also an excellent back exercise:



1. Begin supported on a bench as in the first picture, with a flat back.
2. Pull weight up to chest, keeping your elbow in, without rotating your shoulders.
3. Focus on squeezing your shoulder blade in first, then pulling

with your arm

4. Return to start position.
5. Repeat with 10-12 repetitions for 3 sets.

Complementing the benefits of daily exercise is maintaining adequate hydration. Water is an important nutrient for athletes. It comprises 60 percent of our total body weight and 70 percent of our muscle fiber. Consider the fact that your vision depends on the tiny muscles of the eye contracting and relaxing as necessary for visual acuity (not to mention the aqueous nature of the eyeball itself). If these muscles become dehydrated, their function degrades and therefore the precise

vision you rely on in competition deteriorates. The rule of thumb is not to wait until you are thirsty to drink water. Drink plenty of water before, during and after training or competition, even in cold weather. Pay attention to the color of your urine: if it looks like iced tea, guess what...?!
Bottom line, shooters should think of themselves as athletes (“fine-tuned and on the verge of greatness”) and

approach their training with that mindset. There are many dimensions to the success equation and physical training is often a neglected component of that equation. You don't need to be Arnold Schwarzenegger, but then again, you don't want to be the consummate couch potato either! Stay Army Strong!

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