

## MENTAL PERFORMANCE AND SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY--TEACHING THE FIRST STEPS

By Gary Anderson, DCME

Most shooting coaches are well aware of how critically important mental training and sport psychology are to achieving good shooting results. The oft-repeated statement that "shooting is 90 percent mental and 10 percent physical" is an exaggeration, but it underscores how important it is for competitive shooters to develop a strong "mental game" and for shooting coaches to be able to teach the basics of sport psychology.



*Sport psychology for shooters involves understanding motivation, emotions and how the mind orders and controls the shooter's athletic performance.*

This, however, leads to a paradox facing coaches and instructors who work with beginning shooters. There is an equally widespread perception that mental training is an advanced concept that should only be taught after the shooter has acquired considerable experience as a competition shooter. Most coaches view mental training as something that should be reserved for much later in a shooter's development. They believe mental training has no place in basic marksmanship training.

This is a false understanding that needs to be corrected. The main point of this article is that the first steps in mental training can and should be introduced to new shooters during their first sessions on the range. Coaches of beginning shooters should understand sport psychology concepts and strive to include them in the instructions they present and the coaching advice they give on the line.

Sport psychology is concerned with the behavior of athletes and coaches. Sport psychology in shooting involves communications between the coach and athlete, understanding motivation, dealing with emotions and learning to use the mind to order and control the process of firing the shot. Shooting coaches, even those who work with beginning shooters, need to acquire at least a foundational knowledge of sport psychology. A wealth of printed material on sport psychology is available, but it is best to start with a basic coaching principles book like *Successful Coaching* by Rainer Marten that can be ordered from Human Kinetics (<http://www.humankinetics.com/>). The American Sport Education Program has a Coaching Essentials Online Course (<http://www.asep.com/preview/index.cfm>) that incorporates the basics of sports psychology into the initial training of sports coaches. The two-day NRA-USAS-CMP Shooting Coach Schools also provide a primer on sport psychology ([http://www.nrahq.org/education/training/coaching/coach\\_training\\_schools.asp](http://www.nrahq.org/education/training/coaching/coach_training_schools.asp)).

There are many components of sport psychology and mental training that shooting coaches can and should incorporate into their work with young shooters. Each of the points discussed in this article represents an important first step in mastering sport psychology concepts that will later prove to be absolutely essential. More importantly, beginning shooters can use each of these concepts in their elemental forms.

**MOTIVATION.** The interest and excitement that young people have for shooting is the first stage of motivation. Most youngsters sign up to learn how to shoot because they are genuinely interested in shooting. The idea of being given the responsibility to hold and shoot a gun is exciting to young people; it is a grown-up responsibility. Youth may also be fascinated by guns as tools of adventure, weapons of war or as sports equipment. The coach can do a lot to guide and encourage this basic interest into a real motivation to learn target shooting as a sport. It is far too early to try to motivate a new shooter to win, but it is not too early to encourage them to see target shooting as lots of fun, a super challenge and an Olympic sport.

There is much the coach can do to encourage motivation; there are also many things a coach can do to discourage motivation. Long, stern, boring safety lectures are not motivating. Getting on the range and having plenty of opportunities to shoot is motivating. Being permitted to shoot in a poor position is not motivating. Being taught

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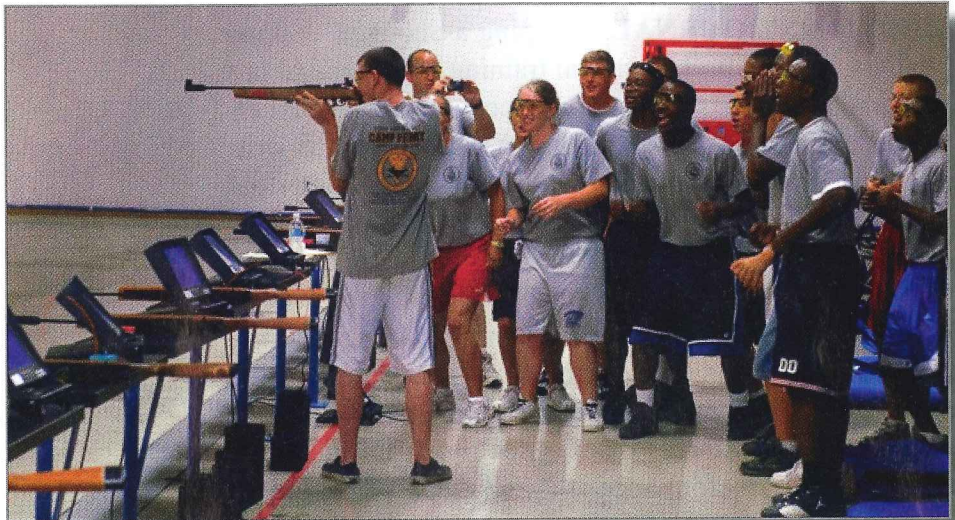
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a good stable position and then shooting well in that position is motivating. Being yelled at is not motivating. Being part of a group where everyone is respected and encouraged to have fun is motivating. This list of dos and don'ts could go on for a long time, but the point is clear, the environment in which new juniors participate is the first step in developing the motivation that will lead them to long-term participation in shooting and perhaps event to significant competition successes.

**FOCUS-ATTENTION.** Concentration skills are a mandatory mental building block of shooting success. Shooters must learn to concentrate, but concentration is not possible without something specific on which to focus attention. New pistol shooters are instructed to focus attention on sight alignment, shotgun shooters must focus on their targets and rifle shooters must focus on their sight pictures. These are the real objects of focus or attention for new and experienced shooters. How effectively a shooter concentrates on these attention centers is the key to good shot technique. The coach's main task here is to get



*Learning to take a "relaxation pause" before starting to aim at the target and fire a shot can yield big improvements. This pause involves taking two or three extra breaths while making a conscious effort to relax the left arm and shoulder before starting to fire the shot.*



*Games like King of the Hill or Guts Matches enhance motivation and help young shooters understand that target shooting can be lots of fun.*

the new shooter to see and think sight alignment/target/sight picture as clearly and intensely as possible while attempting to fire the shot.

The coach can enhance concentration by clearly teaching the correct attention center for

the type of shooting being done. Occasional and sometimes frequent reminders to focus on sight alignment/target/sight picture are definitely in order especially during the early stages of learning. Once that skill is established, the coach can also introduce the idea of hold control, that is, using visual and mental effort to see the front sight movements become slower and smaller.

**RELAXATION.** Correct shooting technique calls for using only the minimum amount of muscle tension necessary to achieve stability and control. That means the shooter must learn to reduce muscle tension or relax and in the case of rifle shooting, learn to totally relax the support arm that holds the rifle in standing, prone and kneeling. Relaxation belongs in any discussion of mental training because the mind initiates relaxation, first consciously and later sub-consciously.

The coach can introduce relaxation by teaching new shooters to take a "relaxation pause" before they begin aiming to fire each shot. Teach them to take two or three breaths while trying to let their bodies relax or "let go" as they exhale. Later breathing techniques will become a part of relaxation training. Rifle coaches must teach their shooters to totally relax their support arm while holding the rifle in position. In standing that means establishing bone support for the rifle; in prone and kneeling it means letting the arm muscles relax so that only the sling holds up the rifle.

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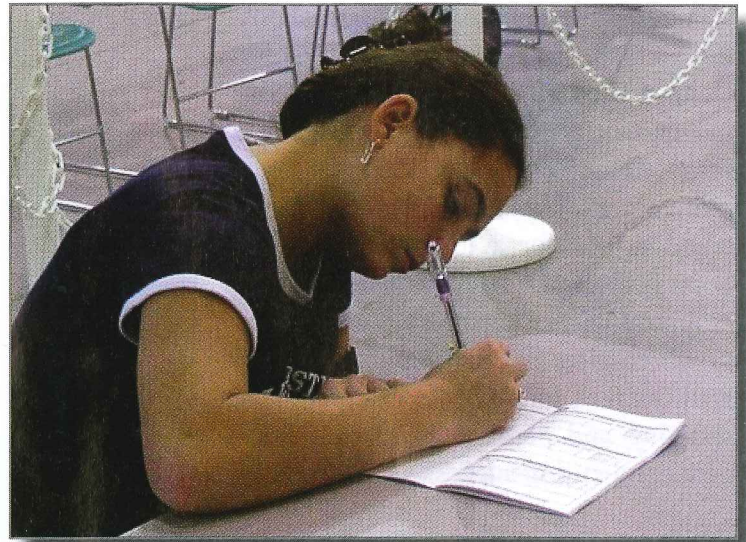
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**SHOOTERS' JOURNAL.** Keeping a Shooters' Journal or Diary is a key part of mental training. The journal is a daily record of the shooter's practice and competition efforts. An essential part of making a journal entry is writing down a few observations about what the shooter did during each shooting session. These written comments should center on two things, what the shooter did right and what problems occurred that need to be resolved in future sessions. The diary is mental training because making a written analysis of shooting causes one to think about what actually went right or wrong. Describing good performances reinforces them. Identifying mistakes and causes of poor performance is a first step in fixing those problems.

Brand new shooters are not ready to keep a journal, but once they have done enough shooting to be able to complete a standard course of fire, it is time to start. Printed, formatted diaries are available from the CMP or shooters can use a loose-leaf or spiral notebook as a free-form diary. Once keeping a journal is started, it also becomes a matter of self-discipline to continue to keep the journal.

**SELF-DISCIPLINE.** Young shooters quickly learn that they cannot consistently handle guns safely unless they discipline themselves to always pay attention to gun handling rules. Young shooters must also learn that they cannot master correct shot technique unless they discipline themselves to focus on sight alignment/target/sight picture while firing their shots. Indeed, much of what new shooters do must become a matter of self-discipline. Getting the most out of every practice session by maximizing firing line time while eliminating horseplay and distractions is a matter of discipline. Regularly attending practice or beginning a regular home training schedule is a matter of discipline. Keeping emotions under control is a matter of discipline.

**EMOTIONAL CONTROL.** The first steps in learning emotional control usually come when things are going badly. After a bad shot or a bad score, a new shooter's first impulse may be to act out, to make some kind of verbal expression, to jerk open the gun action or to throw something. Every coach should have a firm rule against such behavior. If it occurs, the coach must intervene and make sure every shooter in the program understands that



*Mastering the discipline of making shooters' journal entries after every shooting session can be a major step in improving a shooter's mental performance.*

they are expected to keep themselves under control and that acting out is not permitted. Help shooters understand how their ideal behavior is to "stay cool no matter what." Teach them to control their reactions so well that someone watching them would never know whether their last shot was good or bad. Teach them to accept distractions such as loud talk behind the firing line, by just staying cool no matter what is happening.

**RESPONSIBILITY.** Sports champions are remarkable in their common refusal to blame anyone or anything else for their poor performances. They have learned to accept full responsibility for their results because they recognize that every cause of a bad performance is an opportunity for them to learn something new or to fix a weakness in skill or technique. Coaches should help their new shooters take their first steps in developing a sense of full responsibility for their scores. It is bad advice to tell a shooter to just forget a bad score or throw away a bad target. It is also bad advice to tell a shooter to "don't jerk the trigger on the next shot!" That is negative advice, instead, ask questions to help the young shooter with a bad target describe why the score was bad. However, always finish these discussions with positive questions; "what should you have done to get a better score?" By accepting responsibility for the bad score and by trying to learn what should have been done to get a better score, the young shooter will have something positive to focus on during the next session.

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**POSITIVE SELF-TALK.** Champions are positive people. Negative people do not succeed in sports. The new shooter can from the very start be encouraged to think of themselves in positive terms. Coaches must help their new shooters understand that advancing in shooting is not a matter of natural ability where some will succeed and some will not, but that advancing in shooting requires many repetitions of correct positions and techniques. If the new shooter can be brought to believe that training works and that problems can be solved by analysis and correct techniques then their self-talk can be changed to "I will," "I can" and "I will keep working on this until I master it." Help every new shooter believe that they have the possibility within themselves to become a good shooter.

**SHOT-PLAN.** A shot-plan is a step-by-step delineation of what a shooter does to prepare for and fire a shot. The steps in the plan should describe how each action is done. Following this plan for every shot requires mental effort and discipline. Advanced shooters may have a very detailed plan, but even beginning shooters can be taught to outline a simple shot plan. For example, a new rifle shooter's shot plan might be: 1) shoulder the rifle with the butt-plate on a specific spot, 2) take three breaths while relaxing the left arm, 3) bring the aligned sights down onto the bulls-eye from above the target, 4) exhale and stop breathing, take up the trigger slack and add pressure, 5) focus on sight picture--center the front sight movements and 6) press the

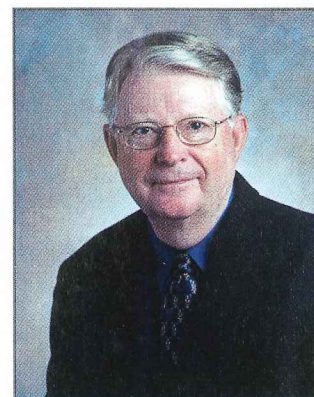
trigger smoothly. Following the plan develops consistency and with consistency scores will improve faster.

**GOAL SETTING.** Goal setting is also part of sport psychology because having a goal in one's mind helps to prioritize attention and effort so that the goal can be reached. When goals are realistic, achievable and focused on high priority achievements, they will enhance progress. New shooters can certainly begin to learn about goal setting, although their goals should initially be restricted to short-term goals. Their goals should be things that they can achieve today or this week or this month. Goal setting should be done in conjunction with keeping a Shooters' Journal. Write down one or two specific goals for the next practice session. They can be as simple as "I will learn how to use the sling correctly in the prone position" or "I will check my left arm before every shot standing to make sure it is relaxed" or "I will follow my shot plan for every shot." When new shooters learn to set goals for their practice and match sessions they will prioritize their efforts and advance more quickly.

Mental training and sports psychology belong in the teaching and training of new shooters. This has been a review of the key elements of sport psychology or mental training that can and should be incorporated into the training and development of new shooters. Many of these are concepts that should be taught in the first days of marksmanship instruction. When young shooters are given the opportunity to master these mental performance points, they will develop much faster as competition shooters and will be better equipped to benefit from the rigors of training and the pressures of competition.

### About the Author

Gary Anderson, Director of Civilian Marksmanship Emeritus, is a regular contributor to *On The Mark*. He served as DCM for 10 years and remains an effective advocate for firearms safety training and rifle practice. Gary's primary role at CMP has been to develop and sustain successful youth shooting programs at both regional and national levels.



*Guiding the execution of each shot with a shot-plan is a great way to use the mind to control the firing of each shot and achieve consistency.*