



THE FINE ART
NOT
CRACKING
UNDER PRESSURE

Interviews with Champions, Part One of a Three-Part Series

By Jock Elliott // Photo by Lloyd Hill

One day I was shooting groups under fairly bad conditions when suddenly a really terrific group began to come together. As I looked through the scope at the three shots through one hole, internal voices began to pester me: "Don't blow it! You know it only takes one bad shot to ruin a great group like this." Listening to these messages, my breathing became shallower and more rapid. My heart rate accelerated. I could feel myself "blowing up" inside. I knew this was not going to help me shoot more accurately.

I mentioned the experience to a friend, and he suggested I write an article on dealing with pressure while shooting. Chip Lohman, Managing Editor of *Shooting Sports USA*, thought this was a good idea and added, "We should interview a list of champions and see how they deal with pressure on a personal level." So, with Chip's help, I approached a number of past and present champions with the following:

The focus of this article will be to find out how champion shooters in various NRA disciplines manage the pressure of competitive shooting. This could be

the pressure of "Hey, I'm doing really great, I hope I don't blow it," or the pressure of, "I'm doing really badly, I need to fix it now," or simply the pressure of, "This is the biggest, most important match of the year. I need to shoot my best." What I want to know is how you, personally, deal with pressure in competition or how you prepare to minimize pressure when you are shooting competitively.

What follows is what those champions had to say about the fine art of not cracking under pressure.

PART I September	PART II October	PART III November
Judy Tant	Lanny Basham	Lones Wigger
Phil Hemphill	Jessie Abbate	Brian Zins
Doug Koenig	Launi Meile	Bruce Piatt
	Julie Golob	Carl Bernosky
	Jason Parker	Ernie Vande Zande

DR. JUDY TANT, Bullseye Pistol

The fundamentals of handling match pressure are not very exotic. In fact they are mundane approaching boring, having to do with being well prepared for the match in terms of equipment, physical health and positive outlook. No apt phrase is going to help you with your fears of shooting badly if you haven't cleaned your gun, checked your ammo, arrived at the match comfortably ahead of time and not started an argument with your spouse the night before! If you haven't prepared, you deserve to be anxious, because it is in some sense a rational response.

The other basic that is mundane is that the more matches you shoot, the more desensitized you are likely to be to the pressures of competition. Again, this is not a glamorous solution, but the feelings of match pressure can recede as the process of competing becomes routine. Here are some things I do and don't do.

I try to stay positive no matter what. I am aware that telling myself to NOT blow it, for instance, is the same as instructing myself to fall apart, because the brain deals with the assertion "blow up" and ignores the "not." So if I catch myself in a negative, I reframe it to direct myself towards something I want to do. This usually has to do with focusing on the shot at hand, no matter how awful the shot or target before turned out. "One shot at a

time" is a favorite of mine, or "Finish!" when I get close to the end of a competition.

Some shooters seem to have success when they get mad at themselves for failure and then pull up their socks, and I've used this occasionally, too. The problem with it is that you have to do badly before you do well when you take this approach, so I try to stay away from it. I figure that the shooters who use it could be a lot better if they shifted their approach to the positive. Likewise, some shooters (very few at the upper skill levels) try to intimidate others or get under their skin. That's a waste of energy that could be directed at their own game, so I think they put themselves at a disadvantage when they do it.

PHIL HEMPHILL, PPC, Bullseye Pistol

Pressure is something that we actually create ourselves—it's that little anxious feeling: I don't want to blow it; I might set a new national record. John Pride out in California does a lot of mental imaging. I thought he was off his rocker, but you can sit there in a quiet place and imagine shooting the match very well. If you sit there in your recliner or in your bed before you go to sleep, you can get as realistic as you want. Imagine the squeak of the targets when they turn, imagine drawing your pistol, aligning

the sights, and so forth. The more that you do it, the more routine it becomes.

I'm one of two people who have shot a perfect score in Police Pistol Competition. There are five matches in a 1,500 course. I knew I wasn't down any points at the end of match four. I just went back to my routine: Identify my target, go to the aiming point and shoot the shots.

I try to put pressure on myself when I'm practicing, so am accustomed to it in the actual match. Train as realistically as possible. That's the good thing about training: If you make a mistake, you can go back and correct it. What separates the good shooters from the average shooters is that we have a set game plan, and we go back to our game plan or our checklist, and that helps me to feel that I am back in control.

Also, you can have good fundamentals and poor execution, such as jumping on the trigger when we should be pressing the trigger. Lastly: Confidence in your equipment is key. Check everything. You want to know that everything is running at optimum level.

DOUG KOENIG, Action Pistol

Everybody suffers from pressure, but the more you are in a particular situation, the better the chance you have of dealing with it. Being in many high-level competitions helps reduce the amount of pressure you feel. If you want to go to a national level, you have to shoot a lot of lower level matches and get comfortable with being in competition. I've shot a lot of big matches, so I'd like to think I have them figured out a little bit. Preparation is the key to making sure I don't crack under pressure. Making sure I am prepared, that is first and foremost, which includes making sure my equipment is ready, and that I have trained well.

I've been a fulltime professional for about 20 years. I generally practice every other day, two to three times a week, depending upon what's coming up. When it comes to my training, I don't focus too much on the basic stuff anymore. I'll pick one of the stages and fine tune on that. I absolutely try to duplicate competition conditions when I practice. I shoot on the exact same target, and so forth. I try to replicate things in the competitive environment as best I can, within reason.

When I am in competition, I try to focus on what I have trained to do—just pick one thing and focus on it. As an example, for the Bianchi competition, I try to focus on the middle of the target and put all my attention there. I try to maintain a laser focus on the exact center of the target. If I have a bad shot, I don't pay attention to it, but learn from it so that I can make any necessary adjustments, and move forward. Before shooting the mover at Bianchi this year, I spent several minutes just relaxing so that I could maintain that focus when I was shooting. ●

THE FINE ART OF NOT CRACKING UNDER PRESSURE PART II



LANNY BASSHAM, Smallbore Rifle

My answer might not be the same as others. It doesn't mean they are right, or I am right. There are multiple ways that people deal with pressure. One of the things I learned in my early shooting career is that I had some wrong ideas about pressure. The reason that I wasn't able to deal with it was because I didn't understand what the right ideas were. Initially, I was able to find some information outside of shooting. When I started working on this in a lot more detail, I found a lot of misinformation about the sensation of pressure.

The major reason why this has become a problem for some is because people are very interested in outcome

and accomplishment—they want to do well. They want to finish the event on top of the leaderboard. While we're thinking about outcome, the probability is that we can't simultaneously be thinking about executing the shot. This can cause us to "over try"—and that's the number one reason why good shooters don't shoot well under pressure. Shooting is a "trust sport" not a "try sport." You need to train so well that you can *trust* your training. The minute that you *try* to get that national record, things come unzipped. You are applying more mental effort than it actually requires. Our conscious thoughts are interfering with our subconscious mind. The best scores that people shoot happen when they are not thinking about the outcome.

Beginning last month, Elliott chronicles the personal solutions of 13 champions with regard to dealing with match pressure. Next month we'll complete the 3-part series with input from Lones Wigger, Brian Zins, Bruce Piatt, Carl Bernosky and Ernie Vande Zande.

By Jock Elliott // Photo by Chip Lohman



Here's a myth: Pressure causes performance to drop. Pressure does not cause your performance to drop. What I learned about pressure was that when you feel the physical effects of pressure, it's real. You feel an adrenaline rush, your heart rate increases and your blood pressure goes up. I've seen shooters shoot extremely high scores with their legs shaking. Pressure doesn't cause your scores to go up or down—but your *attitude* does.

Another myth: If I could avoid pressure, I would do better. Actually, pressure is an amplifier. It is my friend. Pressure makes me realize what I'm doing is important so I pay better attention to my shooting. Be careful what you care about. It is more important to focus on your shooting

process. The primary reason people "over try" is that they go into competition with an incomplete goal. People tend to seek out what society rewards them for, and accomplishment is easy to measure. It has a number associated with it. But it is focusing on the process that will get you there. Attaining that goal—how and what we learn from our mistakes, is valuable. There's nothing like making a mistake to make a person realize that they need to do something about it. If you look at the only benefit of shooting in a tournament as a place on the leaderboard, then you don't recognize the accomplishments that lead up to that score as the more important objective.

Pressure is not the problem. It gets a bad rap. You don't want to get rid of it. You're not going to go to the Olympics without it. You better make it a friend. It's put there for you to amplify the experience of doing something few people can do.

The primary reason we compete *should* be so we can pay attention to who we become along the way. When outcome is primary, we're concentrating on the wrong thing. When I stopped trying to win tournaments, I started winning. When I stopped worrying about where the bullet went, I concentrated on how well I executed the shot.

JESSIE HARRISON, Action Pistol

Say I'm at a match to defend my title. That means the other ladies are ready to go after it too and want to beat me, so I do feel a certain amount of pressure. The way I deal with it is I never look at scores during a match. If I'm behind or ahead, I don't want to know it. I don't want to put pressure on myself if I'm behind, and I don't want to think I can coast if I learn that I'm ahead.

Not knowing where I stand as the match progresses allows me to do my very best every time I step to the line—giving it *everything* I can, right there. If I am in a match and I know I have a good stage, it gives me self-confidence to shoot well. But then I tell myself that stage is over, and the next stage is a brand new one. If I do badly, I have to drop it, forget it and move on. Otherwise, dwelling on it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

One thing I've always said: "I can only shoot to the best of my ability." If that's enough to win the match, that's great; if not, I'll be the first to congratulate the others. I want everyone to compete at their best so we can say, "Whoever won, they were the best shooter that day."

My main job is to be on the range and shoot. I spend 4 to 5 days out of the week on the range, training for what I have coming up and making sure that my equipment and guns are working properly. I check all my equipment before I go to a match. The last thing you want is to have a problem with your gun. In my sport, there are no alibis. This preparation also helps me deal with pressure.

Because each match can be unique, I don't have set regimens. Instead, I keep a clear head when I shoot. If there

When you're shooting in competition, you can't be past or future tense. You have to be in the moment.

is an unusual type of shot in a match, I'll just focus on the basics of executing that shot. At the Florida Open, for example, there was a 12-inch plate at 40 yards—a little longer distance than normal. I cleared my head and told myself, "you have done this shot many times." Next, I go over the fundamentals of what is involved in executing that particular shot. I visualize myself executing every element of the shot: A clean draw; my dot coming up on the center of that plate and executing the trigger pull. I visualize every detail in the exact sequence of the shot.

Sometimes I will practice every element of my shooting at an exaggerated slow pace to make sure that I execute all the little pieces perfectly. Auto racers have a saying: Slow is smooth and smooth is fast, and there is a lot of truth in that.

I also constantly work on little things that sometimes get overlooked. For example, I work heavily on my footwork to be as smooth as possible as I transport myself along the line, with no wasted movement. I practice leaning into and out of barriers to make those transitions as smooth as possible. I also practice my draw, sometimes taking an entire day just to work on that. I'll start in slow motion and then speed it up when the fundamentals are right.

The point of all this is to take away pressure during competition. When the timer goes off, my mind is blank. If I start to think—that is when I screw up and slip into the past tense, thinking about how I messed up. When you're shooting in competition, you can't be past or future tense. You have to be in the moment.

LAUNI MEILI, Smallbore & Air Rifle

In my experience, it comes down to the shooter's personality as far as dealing with pressure. Dan Durban is the one person I know who used "fear of failure" in a positive way. That was his fuel to not shoot badly. For me, every time I shot, I *expected* to break a record. I had very positive expectations, but I also trained to *earn* it. If you're shooting 10 points better than you've ever shot, you need to keep your perspective. If you're saying to yourself, "This could be a national record," you're bringing the future onto your shoulders. If that happens, you have to deal with it. But what is your job really right then? To shoot *one* perfect shot—the thing that you've done thousands of times to finish out this match. It takes practice to have that discipline.

My big experience with pressure was in the 1988 Olympics. I went into the finals with a new Olympic record, and then dropped more shots in the final than in the whole

match. For the next four years, I mentally shot thousands of shots as if I were in a final. My job was to shoot 10s. I didn't need to let scores bug me in the final. I needed a stronger plan to handle each shot of the final so that, no matter what, I could rely on that plan to get me through. The key question is: What does it take for me to shoot one perfect shot?

Finally in 1992 I went into the smallbore final in first place and I kept that lead. I'm talking about repeatedly executing the perfect shot—inside a 9.8 or better. Everything goes back to the practiced routine. For example: Before I pick up my gun, I analyze my last shot to decide what changes I need to make, i.e. the placement of the last shot, where I thought the wind was, where the wind actually was, etc. in order to learn from the last shot. It's important to be realistic and constructive. A key component of evaluating the last shot is being optimistic vs. pessimistic, i.e. a constructive attitude. What can I learn from the last shot that I can use on the next shot? Don't begin a shot sequence while you're being negative or emotionally self-destructive.

Once I've analyzed the previous shot, I have a plan of how and when I want to take that next shot. I check my body; take three breaths and relax, relaxing a little bit more with each shot, just letting everything go. I take another deep breath and lift the gun. As I exhale, the gun comes down on my hip and the target. And now I'm looking over my sights, and I take another couple of breaths to check my body alignment. I put my finger on the trigger and take another breath while I put my face on the cheek piece, assuming that my natural point of aim is correct. Now I take another 2 to 3 breaths. Take one more slight breath and hold. I stop my breath as the sights align at the center of the target. I've checked my rear and front sight alignment and now am focusing on the target because it's the thing that's not moving. I am *anchored* in the 10 ring. My shot plan starts at the ground and ends in the 10 ring. The thing that you should always be able to rely on is your shot plan, both physically and mentally. You train for endurance to shoot your last shot as well as your first. You have to build it and learn to trust it. To use it and trust it when the pressure's on, takes years of training.

JULIE GOLOB, Action Pistol

The critical thing for me is to accept that there is going to be pressure. You're going to feel nervous or can even have feelings of self-doubt. Add to that, whether you're thinking about it or not, your body is going to naturally react to tension. The best thing you can do is simply accept this.

There are two ways that I deal with it. The first is to stay positive. It's never over until it's over. I've seen shooters pout and throw equipment on the ground after a bad run. Not only can it reflect badly on the

shooter, but if you allow a negative attitude into your competitive mindset, you could lose because of it. Instead, I think, "This is my time to really feel alive." It's like the moment before bungee jumping or the moment you start to move on a crazy roller coaster ride—you feel everything pumping through you in that moment. Harness that nervous energy as positive excitement. It can actually help you shoot well if you accept it and not fear it.

The second thing, while you have all these emotions racing through your system, is to focus on technique. As an action shooter, I tell myself to micromanage everything about my stage—every little thing that I can, instant by instant. Nothing is on auto pilot when I'm preparing to shoot.

Hear the buzzer, draw the gun and bring the sights in line with the target. Smoothly engage the trigger. Trigger the shot. I think about all these things and focus strictly on what to do. I micromanage the moment as best I can, focusing on the individual skills necessary for the particular event I am shooting. This helps me to avoid thinking about pressure. This type of visualization is like getting a free "perfect" run at the course. When you're actually competing, it's possible to shoot in what many athletes call "the zone." But if for some reason you can't get there, focus on all the steps needed—the process, that will help you to do the best you can.

It's like the moment before bungee jumping or the moment you start to move on a crazy roller coaster ride—you feel everything pumping through you in that moment.

At the end of the day, I think some shooters get angry with themselves for not having a perfect performance. You have to be proud of yourself for putting forth your best effort. Don't be angry with your performance, just learn from it and focus on the positive for the next time.

JASON PARKER, Smallbore & Air Rifle

The best way to deal with shooting so well that it scares you is to have prepared yourself for those days when you are successful. You have to be ready for those big scores to hit you at any point, which starts with training. When you're about to shoot a record or are trying out for an Olympic team, you say to yourself, "I've been shooting these scores in practice, it's okay to shoot this score now."

I do a lot with breathing techniques. I don't have to shoot a particular shot if I don't want to, so I take a couple of deep breaths, let my heart rate go down and then I'm ready to shoot the shot.

During my preparation, I have a pre-shot routine that I can depend on—how everything is supposed to be positioned and how it is supposed to feel. When I feel my heart rate go up, I go back to my pre-shot routine. If you do every single shot the same way, you can take it anywhere, be comfortable with that and shoot a 10 at any time. I'm just doing the same thing I did in practice. I was shooting in a world cup and shot a world record. When I felt that extra anxiety coming on, I embraced it, and then I used my breathing and relaxation techniques to calm down.

If you missed the preceding series, just go to www.shootingsportsusa.com, select the current issue and then look for the archives menu choice. ☺

Enoch Smith of the U.S. Border Patrol leads by one point during the 2011 National Police Pistol Championships. At this stage in the tournament, his focus is in the present, rather than what has already happened or what could be.



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By Jock

Jock continues performing and maintain the

LONES WIGGER, Smallbore Rifle

It's pretty complicated—this subject of dealing with pressure. I'm a precision shooter and have learned to excel in that discipline. You've got to learn to shoot the desired scores at home and in training. And once you're capable of shooting the scores, you may not shoot the same way in the match because of the match pressure. As a result, it takes 3-4 years to learn how to shoot, and another 3-4 years to learn how to win—to deal with the match pressure. It takes several more years to learn how to do it when it counts.

To win, there are several things you have to learn how to do. You have to do it from within. You have to learn how

to train just as if you were in a big competition. You work on every shot. You have got to learn to treat it just like a match—to get the maximum value out of every shot. You have got to use the same technique in practice and in training. A lot of shooters have a problem because they change their technique from practice to the match. In competition, you work your ass off for every shot. You have to approach the training the same way.

A second way to combat pressure is to shoot in every competition you can get into so that you become accustomed to it.

The third technique is preparation. Before you are going to shoot in a big competition, train hard to do everything

THE FINE ART OF NOT CRACKING UNDER PRESSURE PART III

Elliott // Photos by Chip Lohman

...ues the interviews with top competitors and how they ...ir focus under pressure.

you can to raise your scores. So when you're in the match, you know that you have done everything humanly possible to get ready for the competition. If you have self-doubt, you will not shoot well. You have to have the will to prepare to win.

When Gary Anderson was a kid, he couldn't afford a gun or ammunition. He had read about the great Soviet shooters. With his single shot rifle, he would get into position, point that gun and dry fire for hours at a time in the three different positions. He had tremendous desire. He wanted to win and he did whatever he could to get there. When he finally got into competition, he shot fantastic scores from the beginning.

A little bit of psychology: You picture in your mind what you want to do. You have to say, OK, I'm going to the Olympics and perform well. Picture yourself shooting a great score and how good it feels. You are training your subconscious mind. Once you get it trained, it takes over. A coach taught me to visualize the outcome, and it worked. Eventually you train your subconscious and it believes you can win.

At first I didn't know about teaching the subconscious to take over, but now I do it all the time. And it certainly worked for me at the 1972 Olympics. What it really takes is training and doing the same thing in training as at a match. If you are "just shooting," you are wasting your time.

BRIAN ZINS, Bullseye Pistol

For me, it's all about the shot process. There should be nothing you do different from shot to shot; whether you're shooting well or shooting badly. Every good shooter develops a process. The difference between a good shooter and a bad shooter is consistency. From the time you decide you're going to shoot a shot until the shot goes off, everything has to be the same.

As long as you maintain your process, you're fine. From the time the gun leaves the bench, everything you think, do and see until the shot goes off should be the same. If anything interferes with that, you abort and reset. The ability to shoot well comes from dealing with each individual shot.

I don't get nervous before a championship match. The first time someone is knocking on winning the nationals, they are going to feel a little anxiety because it's something they haven't done before. We're not changing the course of history, so if you're not having fun, there is no sense in doing it. There is no sense in getting stressed about shooting a pistol match.

Once you develop a shot process, it's hard to forget it. Most people don't consciously develop a shot process or set out to develop one. When I began shooting, I had to actually write down a process. I don't do the same process now, but it certainly burns into your mind the notion that you need to have a process, even if it changes over time.

I avoid the whole issue of pressure by getting into my shot process. I focus on each individual shot and each individual string of fire.

BRUCE PIATT, PPC, Action Pistol

First of all, I think there are two kinds of pressure. If I'm shooting steel challenge where it is very fast and reaction time is important, I actually need to be a little nervous to go fast. That little bit of nerves or excited energy is good and is acceptable, so long as it is not too much.

Bianchi Cup and Bullseye, on the other hand, are slower and based mostly on accuracy. Being nervous in those competitions is going to ruin your day. It will affect you mentally and physically. Being nervous means you're

going to have tremors. Nerves will therefore throw off your accuracy and timing. Here's how I deal with it.

On match day, I expect to be nervous. The trick is to monitor yourself and not let it overcome you. Some people, especially new shooters, will have a tremor in their hands and will panic, making themselves more nervous. Know that it is coming; accept that it is here; and deal with it. Before shooting, I can feel it coming. I often breathe deeply, which does help some. I store my stress in my shoulders, so I do some shoulder rolls, look at the leaves and trees and think what a nice day it is—anything to get my mind off of the match, if only for a moment. If you focus totally on the shooting all day long, you'll burn yourself out. The only time you have to focus is when you are on the line. At Bianchi Cup, I take a break and give myself a mental vacation between rounds.

When I practice before the match, that's when I think about the technical parts of shooting like the grip or the stance. I'm not going to change anything in the middle of the match just because I'm nervous. The gun is going to wobble some and the sight picture won't be perfect. Just do the best you can. Mentally, just watch yourself shoot. Trust yourself to just let it happen. When I'm shooting well, it's like I'm watching my gun go off by itself with no mental input. As far as wobble: You're on the target more than you're off; you just have to have the guts to press the trigger correctly. When the wobble is at its minimum, that's when I start my trigger squeeze. W. Timothy Gallwey's book "The Inner Game of Golf" deals with the mental aspects of the game and relates almost exactly to what we do as shooters. I would recommend this reading to anyone.

CARL BERNOSKY, High Power & Action Pistol

I always get excited when I am going to a match, but preparing for that is part of the training. If I train well, I am comfortable at the match, and I am going to do okay. I'm actually a lot less nervous after I have fired the first shot. The uncomfortable zone for me is waiting to shoot; shooting is more comfortable.

When the competition begins, I just go through my routine. I do the same routine in practice as I do in a match, so that when I get to the match I have already rehearsed it all. For example, when I'm practicing for Bianchi, I have everything set up the same as at the match. I try to put myself in that situation as closely as I can and visualize myself shooting the score I need to shoot.

I do the same thing for high power. I try to visualize myself there, shooting the score I need to shoot. If I will be shooting a target with a spotter on it, that's what I will shoot in practice because that's what I will see at the match.

I have trees close to my practice range, but at Camp Perry there are no trees around. As a result, the team match before Camp Perry is an opportunity to stand on

the range, fire 50 shots and become accustomed to the environment there.

You want to be in your match mode in practice and in your practice mode at the match.

For standing shooting, I have a routine that takes me right up to where the trigger goes off. When I see what I need to see in the sights, the gun goes off. I try not to pay attention to the gun moving and all the self-talk that comes at you. When I see the sight picture that is correct, the gun should go off. The worst thing you can do in a match is be cautious. Being cautious makes you over think. You want to be in your match mode in practice and in your practice mode at the match. Your brain is what makes you nervous, and if you have accustomed your brain to what you are doing, that helps to minimize pressure.

In summary: Deep breaths, shoulder rolls, monitor yourself, feel it coming, and don't panic when it comes. And don't stay focused the entire time you are at the match. Take opportunities to get your head completely away from the match.

ERNIE VANDE ZANDE, Smallbore Rifle

It's a complex issue. I'm 63 right now, I started shooting when I was 11, followed by a college team, then the Army Marksmanship Unit at Fort Benning and later shot for the Army on the reserve shooting team. I retired from active competition at 44 or 45.

Back in high school, I felt that pressure was normal. I started noticing in speech class that sometimes I got pretty nervous, but I didn't get nervous every time. Over time, I realized that I became more nervous on days when I gave a speech when I felt *less prepared*. I started thinking about that in relationship to my shooting. It was the same kind of thing: At those times when I wasn't prepared, I felt more nervous.

Then I thought about my shooting. Why was I prepared one time and not the next? I started studying what I was doing to get prepared, or not. I learned pretty early to prepare, to look at what I was doing, so that I would feel more confident. That was a really good lesson.

When you're shooting and you can tell that you are close to a record, you need to focus on those things that got you to where you are. When people have extreme issues with pressure, it's when they allow their focus to shift to the outcome, rather than doing those things that lead to good performance. When our thoughts shift to the outcome—things that have essentially nothing to do with *creating* the

good outcome, that's when nerves can get the better of us.

With shooting, we have the luxury of stopping and starting over if we can catch ourselves varying from that high level mental focus. It's a high level technical focus: How does the gun fit, is the position set up correctly or am I using muscles? The other is the mental focus: What you're focusing on that creates the good shot, rather than focusing on the trophy.

When you can feel either technically or mentally that your high level focus is starting to decay, you have to detect that you are moving away from a high level focus. What do you do about that? It takes self-discipline. We have time during competition when we can just dry fire shots. I stop and take a little mental vacation. I think about something else for a few seconds, totally away from what I am doing, to relax myself technically and mentally.

The things that I think about take me totally away, like a beach in Maui. I'm getting totally out of the situation I'm in. After I take my micro vacation, I start analyzing. Define the issue: (1) Am I making a mistake technically or mentally in what I am doing? (2) Am I leaving something out in my process that I normally do? From that analysis, then I ask: What do I need to do to correct this issue? Then I come up with a little plan to implement the correction. I dry fire three to five shots and I visualize implementing the new plan of doing things right. It's a rehearsal in my mind before I do the dry firing. Then I dry fire five shots to get my technical level back up.

The last thing is you load your gun and shoot a perfect shot.

There is something else that I do that is called contingency planning. I'm off the range when I'm doing this, and I'm identifying a list of things that could you wrong. If item 'A' happens, what is the best, most logical thing for me to do to get back into the competition at a high level? If it actually happens, then you implement the plan that you have already thought out. You know what to do and you do it. It takes a lot of discipline to learn to do this and do it well.

I would be a liar if said I never thought about the outcome. It is normal for our focus to divert sometimes, but if you train hard enough, you can put yourself back on track. 🕒

If you missed any of the preceding series, just go to www.shootingsportsusa.com, select the current issue and search the archives for the September and October issues.

Larry Carter (of Larry's Guns) takes a mental vacation during the 2011 Camp Perry National Pistol Matches to relax his mind.

