

John is in a slump. His sporting clays scores have dropped, his confidence is down and shooting is not fun anymore. The more he tries to work himself out of this hole, the deeper he seems to go. What is he to do?

Let's look at common reasons for a slump and ways to get past it and the best way to avoid experiencing one. A slump is a period of time where poor execution produces doubt which produces poor execution. It's a down hill spiral, and can be difficult to turn around. One of the most frustrating things about this phenomenon is that it is often difficult to diagnose when and why it began. Most of the time we are deep within a slump when we determine that a slump exists. The difference between a slump and a bad station or bad round is that in a bad round we normally bounce back next time with a good performance to balance it out. It's just a temporary setback and is of no real concern. We don't bounce back in a slump.

Caused By Doubt

Slumps are caused by a change in something that creates doubt. Let's take inventory. Have you changed any of the following recently: shotgun, stock, form, training methods, exercise routines, glasses or clothing? Changes in these things do not normally cause a slump but they can and here is how. When you change anything, only three things can happen. You improve, you stay the same or your performance drops. Remember, there is a honeymoon period with any change. Because we have no negative history with the new thing, we can experience a false appreciation for it. Given time, the true nature of the change will show up. Also, remember to only change one thing at a time. If you change multiple things it is difficult to evaluate which item affected the result. When performance drops because of a change and you do not recognize it quickly, it can spiral into a slump.

When you start to miss because of this change you begin to doubt yourself. It's not uncommon for you to begin to doubt other parts of your game as well. Doubt triggers loss of confidence. Now you are not committed to the shot and you begin to try instead of trust. One problem spawns another and soon you are in a hole.

Doubt can also occur when you change the way you think? Several non-hits in a row can cause shooters to alter their mental effort by becoming too cautious. Are you trying not to miss instead of trusting that you will hit the target? Have you become careless? I've seen shooters after a bad start in an event just give up. This leads to poor judgment, sloppy execution and more lost targets. Make this a habit and you will have more than your share of slumps. You must stay mentally strong and consistent with your mental effort.

Getting Past It

How long you remain in a slump will depend on your attitude, your actions and your discipline. One definition of confidence is the absence of doubt. Now is the time to rebuild your confidence.

Step one is to take a break. Get away from shooting for at least a week or two. Clear your head and habits. People tend to forget what they are doing wrong faster than what they are doing right. A break has often been the key to unlock a shooter from a slump. Next, when you start shooting again, return to the point in time when you were confident. What were you doing then? What have you changed since then? Could anything that you have changed possibly be the cause of your slump? If so, reverse the process. Return to the pre-change condition immediately.

Your attitude must grow away from doubt and toward confidence. If you have been keeping a performance journal, review the sessions when you were shooting well. How did you feel then? It's vital at this time to imprint that you are shooting well and avoid self-talk about any of the old issues. Sporting clays is a people-friendly sport with conversational contact on the course. If you are not disciplined, how you talk to others about your performance can turn progress into regress. You must focus on where you want to go, not on where you have been. Talk about what you want to do not about what you did in the past. At no time think

OVERCOMING A SLUMP

BY LANNY BASSHAM



about, talk about or write about what you do not want to happen with your shooting. I cannot stress this enough. Your success in climbing out of a slump is directly related to your thoughts at this time. Chances are you thought your way into this situation and you will have to think your way out.

A Useful Tip

Successful sporting clays shooting is a game of consistency. The process is simple. Step one is to learn how to break a pair. Step two is simply to duplicate Step one. To reach high scores you must have confidence in your form, your mental program and in your ability to read targets. To achieve this end we carefully choose our primary way of doing everything to do with breaking targets. We define a best

or primary way of doing everything. We have a primary way of holding the shotgun, of standing on the station, of reading targets and looking for them as we call pull. We have, or should have, a primary way of thinking during this process.

Losing confidence in your primary way of doing something can cause a slump so here is a suggestion for you. I'm a firm believer that if you're going to experiment with change you should put down your primary gun and go to your backup. Testing with your backup gun will keep your primary 'pure and safe' to return to should the change not work out. Carefully test out the change using your backup gun. If over time the new way out performs your primary one, then you can move it to your primary gun. If it still works better it should replace

your primary. If however, it should not prove to be better than the primary, then you do not have a history of missing targets with your primary gun during the evaluation of something new. This should reduce the chances of a slump occurring. Just be careful not to change too often. The longer you have used a primary and had good success with it, the greater the trust in using it. If you are constantly changing you have little to trust. Confidence and

trust are directly related.

Finally, be careful not to mistake a short series of bad stations to actually be a slump. If you are looking for something to happen you can bring it upon yourself through imprinting. Stay positive in your attitude and use what has worked for you in the past. As your confidence begins to grow, so should your target-count. Stay with it and soon you should be back on top. ■

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Lanny Bassham is an Olympic Coach and an Olympic Gold Medalist. He is a member of the Olympic Shooting Hall of Fame, ranks third among all shooters in total international medal count for the USA and one of the most respected mental trainers in the world. His book *With Winning in Mind* and his Mental Management® concepts are used and endorsed by Olympian and World Champion shooters.

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