

You have got to the end of your round and you know your score – but do you know how that score was constructed? It might seem an odd question but in fact there are lots of different routes to the same destination and from a coach's point of view they are crucial. Without a diagnosis of how you shoot, a coach cannot put together a plan to help you to the next level.

Let's take an extreme example. Two shooters both return a score of 70 – respectable, but likely to leave them back in the pack in most competitions. Shooter A shot seven of the ten stations straight, while shooter B shot 7/10 on every station. Immediately that indicates that their problems are likely to be very different. The first is likely to have one or more specific problem targets or angles - problems that he just has no answer to at the moment. Having identified those

weaknesses, a good coach would put together a structured practice and coaching plan to overcome them.

Shooter B's problem is less easy to identify and more information would be useful. Is there a pattern to his missed targets? Do they mainly come in the first two pairs on each station or towards the end? Missing early on indicates a failure to read the targets properly and to set up accordingly. So competitive has the sport become that you simply cannot afford to take one or two pairs to 'find' the target. That means going into the box with an action plan already established in your mind. You should have mentally rehearsed shooting the pair and have visualized in your mind how you are going to tackle each one. "I find it helpful to do this in reverse, picturing shooting

the second target first", says Steve Nutbeam, "because it gives me a much clearer idea of how I need to shoot the first target. Where does my gun need to be to pick up the second target? Do I have time to change my foot position? Can I gain an advantage by shooting the first target quickly or leaving it late?"

It is important for shooters to recognize that the target setter will try to force you out of your comfort zone. Knowing this is at the heart of building a big score – using your array of skills and techniques to give yourself the maximum advantage. The time to decide that you need to shoot the first bird earlier or later is before you step into the box, not after you have missed the first one!

Your preparation should take you through all the basics – stance, where to hold the muzzle, where to look for the targets. It is amazing

ANALYZE...

RICHARD RAWLINGSON TALKS WITH STEPHEN NUTBEAM WHO EXPLAINS THAT A COACHING AND DEVELOPMENT PLAN NEEDS TO BE BASED ON A CAREFUL ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT ABILITY

THEN CURE



just how many people struggle with the concept of having different hold points for the gun and the eyes, but where you start the swing determines the tempo and timing of the shot. The gun hold position is therefore crucial to your rhythm. Your eyes, on the other hand, can buy you vital split seconds of extra time by picking up the target at the earliest point. Gun and eyes need only come together as the gun hits the shoulder and you take the shot.

CONCENTRATION

Let's assume your preparation is good and your ability to read the target is well developed. However, having hit the first couple of pairs you then drop targets and come off with those sevens and eights that drive us all mad instead of the perfect ten you should have scored. This could be a concentration issue – not giving the final pairs the same respect and attention that you gave the first pair. It is a common error.

“Often I see competitors who do all the right things to start and then get sloppy,” says Nutbeam. “They shift their foot position or change the gun hold point or jump the target once they know where

the break point is. You can hear the miss without needing to have seen the shot, because the timing has changed. Winning scores come from the mental discipline of making the most of all the targets you can hit. Shooters who are proficient at trap or skeet know this and do it well, because those games require you to build a big score one shot or one pair at a time. The same approach is needed to build big sporting scores – only the next pair of targets matters.”

All this analysis can come from a simple study of your scorecard and it is something you can do after each shoot. In fact it is a good idea to make a copy of your card so that you can look at it at your leisure – or write down the scores from each station in the order you shot them, because some simple analysis can show recurring faults. Fold the card in half along the middle, effectively splitting a 100 target competition into two rounds of 50. Are your scores fairly even or do you consistently score better in one half or another? If your first half scores are generally higher, then again, we have a possible concentration problem and it could be linked to stamina.

STAMINA

Shooting well, with 100 percent effort, is tiring. If you don't feel weary at the end of a competition, the chances are that you have not given your all. Running out of steam two-thirds of the way through a competition is no good. Although you don't have to be a perfect physical specimen to be a top shot, you do have to be 'match fit' – conditioned to go the full distance. Dry mounting practice for a few minutes each day at home can do much to build up the shooting-specific muscles.

Blazing away on the side games for an hour before you start the competition proper is another sure way to blunt your competitive edge – leave that until the end of your round when the pressure is off. Which is not to say that some form of warm up is not beneficial. If you are a slow starter then look again at your routine before you shoot. A long drive that gets you to the venue just in time to make your squad is the worst possible preparation. Take some time to relax after the journey and let your eyes adjust from driving speeds to target speeds. Stretch your legs and get the stiffness out of your muscles. Have one go on a practice

station by all means, if it helps to get your brain in gear and your arms moving. Proper preparation will put you in the best position to let your skills come through.

Improvement comes from building on what works and eliminating what doesn't. Careful analysis of your performance and an honest assessment of weaknesses is the first stage on the road to consistently higher scores. ■

A WINNING ATTITUDE

Too many shooters are looking for reasons to fail before they start. You hear the negatives and the excuses in every clubhouse:

“I never shoot well here”

“You couldn't be expected to see an orange target against that background”

“Watching that novice on our squad missing all the time freaked me out”

The top shooters blank out those thoughts and ignore the things they can't control. They shoot what is in front of them and try to do the best they can on every shot. They build a score one target at a time. They will accept any conditions, any squad and any start time and leave the excuses to others. Try it, it works.