

Introduction to Training to Compete and Controlling Nerves

by Ross Mason

I suffered for twenty years. The heart would start banging the loose nails into the floor. The third shot of the first card usually did it. It would be a 9, the heart would literally stop and the rest of the cards would be OK. It took Alistair Stronach to turn me around. I was his first guinea pig after he finished his Sports Psych degree. He also went to Victoria, Canada with the CG shooting team in 1994, but that is another story.

We sat down and analysed what it is I do when I am on the range. Thought about the thoughts, actions and feelings that went on. In the end he put out the plan. It was to think about "doing the shooting", what is required to shoot a good shot, to take the shot in the scope as the result of all those prep things and move to the next one. After ten of them you were finished.

I went away and practiced. Thinking about how I got down, how I put down my elbows, positioned my left hand, shoulders, right arm, right hand, trigger finger, cheek, eyes etc. All the things associated with the "doing". Totally focusing on performing the shot and forgetting about each and every points result of each and every shot.

Within weeks I had cleaned up at the outdoor Nationals. The following year indoor I won the Wairarapa and Wanganui Champs. I shot my first 300 at Manawatu and by the end of the season had won the Provincial Championship. Just after the Nationals and getting into indoor I shot eight 200s in a row. I couldn't miss.

Can I attribute that to the input of Alistair. Too bloody right. His input put me on the road to helping me get the results from the athletes at the Paralympics. He showed me the spiral. When there is doubt the spiral goes down. By developing confidence, the spiral goes up.

The score is the killer. Count and ye shall be damned. By focusing solely and totally on the performance of the execution of the shot, the result will look after itself.

I advocate using the scope to measure the direction of the shot. That was a major key to training myself to concentrate on the performance aspect. A glance in the scope to see which direction it was. It is extremely rare that a shot drills the absolute centre and so even a fraction off is sufficient to tell you the direction of the shot. So rather than score 10, 9, 8 etc., a shot can be anything from a 1 to a 12 and still be in the middle. Two or three shots favouring four o'clock tells you to change the sights. Two or three bulls tell you nothing.

The other important training trick is to train as if you are shooting the next championship. Imagine you are there. Work your way through the day. Preparation, travel, entering, squadding, assembly, going into the range, shooting, packing up, leaving for home.

Rarely, in this country, do I see shooters utilising the few times they are on the range for training and practice. It seems every card HAS to be the best score they can achieve. Rather than do that, why not use these cards to train one piece of the process for five shots or so. Divvy up the process of shooting. Pick one thing and concentrate consciously on it for five shots. Then forget it and move to the next. This could include: Trigger hand on pistol grip positioning. Trigger finger positioning. Trigger release; Cheek position; Sighting - and I mean consciously WATCHING what you are seeing and doing to centre the target; Loading the rifle with minimum movement.

They are all things that HAVE to be trained and practiced. Then pick one card a night to put all the things you have trained into practice without thinking about them. In other

words, you are testing if the training has worked. This is the time when you put yourself in competition mode. You are training to compete in the next championship.

Train the way you are going to shoot at a championship. The more important corollary is to shoot the championship the way you trained. Nothing more, nothing less.

If you can consciously do all the bits of the process, understand the reasons why something works or doesn't, you develop confidence in your own shooting. Developing that confidence is the key to the good performance.

The nerves. Understanding where they come from is important. It is DNA. It is all about tigers. It is all about personal expectations.

By the way I have yet to see a tiger on the range.

Tigers??? We fear the unknown. We are designed deep within our DNA to react to sounds in the savannah because not to respond could have meant death. If we reacted in this fight or flight syndrome every time we hear a rustle in the grass, we had a much better chance of survival. All your ancestors acquired this skill otherwise, you wouldn't be here.

It is inbuilt and perfectly natural. We all know how we feel after getting off the range after the heart has been beating furiously and when that nine shoots through, we are amazingly relaxed. But truly annoyed with ourselves.

I repeat: There are no tigers.

We are hoping to shoot well. To counter it we must address our expectations. Who are you shooting for? To feel the thrill of seeing a good score against your name? No, I suspect one of the biggest fears is seeing a score below your expectations against your name where everyone can see it. If this is so, could you recall who finished second to last in B Grade at the 2010 Manawatu Championships? Thought so. No one remembers where you finished in the field except you.

If your average is 98, then it should be beyond your expectations to shoot an average of 100. For a three card championship anything more than 294 should be regarded as a bonus. So what we see here in this result is for every five shots one will likely be a nine. What would happen if we thought about that for a moment. What would happen if we tried to train ourselves to achieve a performance of one nine every six shots? Well, after a three card shoot the score would now be 295. Is this an improvement? It certainly is. Now move it out to 1 in 8, 1 in 10, 1 in 15, 1 in 30 shots and you can see what happens. I'll take a 299 any day. The average moves up, the expectation of achieving a better score based on your average moves up. Your confidence improves. That feeling of hoping for a good shot recedes into the background because your confidence has grown and overrides it.

I often counted in groups like this while shooting 50m. Counting four shots as a group. Then shooting five shot groups and counting the 50s. The more 50s on the card, the better the score. So if you dropped a shot, the concentration and performance refocused on getting the next one to be a 50. They are the intermediate goals. The small goal is each shot being a well executed shot. The overall goal is a good performance.

And so it is on a ten shot card. Work on the performance, develop confidence in what you are practically and honestly capable of achieving and your scores will improve.

The next important part - which I failed to nail - was to

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develop the skills to carry on winning again and again season after season. This is an entirely different skill set focusing on what YOU want to achieve after the first few wins.

This will have to wait for another chapter.

What staggered me about winning was that it was boring. What scared the hell out of me was that the times of the "be still my beating heart" seemed to be the fun bits. It was nice to win but at the time when it was over, it was not exciting at all. It just felt so easy. A thrill seemed to disappear.

The other source of fear is of not having full or any control of the situation you are in. The "What ifs" and all those stupid little things you forgot or failed to do before starting to shoot begin to manifest themselves at the most inappropriate time. An extreme example of this is flying. Once you are in the tube, there is nothing you can do. You are not flying the plane. You have no control over your traveling destiny. It is like being a passenger in a car and thinking about all the things this stupid driver is doing next to you. Then comparing that to having confidence in the airline and their pilot or car driver and trusting them all of a sudden things feel inside so much more comfortable.

These are classic examples of the "panic attack". And panic stems from a weird belief that the worst is about to happen to you.

Shooting is a wonderful sport to initiate plans to counter this "out of control" feeling. In rugby, you have fifteen guys trying to rub your nose into the dirt for eighty minutes. Not in shooting. You have damn near complete control of your performance. The shooter next to you is not going to grab your arm and tear it off. No doubt you could shoot the tiger if one turned up. So what could possibly be "the worst" thing that could happen? You could miss all ten shots maybe? But, whatever, in the end, your Mum, partner, kids will still love you and the sun will come up tomorrow morning.

You need to remember that!

With control comes confidence. So here comes an incomplete list of some of the things that you DO have control over.

1. Clean your rifle. This removes those thoughts of "Have I cleaned it" or "Damn I should have cleaned it".
2. Arrive on time to the event. Work out for yourself how much time you comfortably need to prepare to shoot. Include time for entry, time to select mound, get gear ready etc.
3. Eat breakfast. Or have sufficient food to keep those gnawing feelings away while you are shooting.
4. Be adequately hydrated so that your eyesight does not crap out during the match.
5. Have clothing that fits.
6. Ensure your rifle and ammunition combination outshoots you.
7. Make sure your rifle fits you. NOT the other way round!
8. Develop the confidence to break at any time and have the skill set to get up, lay back down and shoot a 10, 19 times out of 20. (Haven't you noticed how well you shoot your sighters?)
9. Know your current average so that when you plan your shoot you have those realistic expectations to the fore of

your mind. This means you do not HAVE to aim for a 300. But that you are happy within yourself that the odd nine is to be expected if your average is 295/300. See previous comment. You will be surprised at the bonus points you can count up at the end of the match.

10. Develop the skill set to start and finish a card. Practice shooting 3 sighters and the first 2 counters, over and over again. Practice shooting the middle 6 shots, over and over again. Practice shooting the final 3 or 4 shots, over and over again. So that, when the time comes you can honestly say to yourself, "I have already done this". These are powerful thoughts and actions.

11. Develop the understanding that "pressure" is internal. There is no force(s) acting on you from outside. Yes, there will be a time when this last shot is necessary to confirm a good performance. But in the absence of live scoring, you have no idea how your performance ranks over someone else's while you are shooting. And remember, you will have trained to perform that last shot to the best you can do previously.

12. Be inscrutably honest with yourself at all times. Accept your mistakes. SHMO. Shit Happens; Move On.

Some call this list visualisation. But in reality, all you are doing is putting your training into practice.

So this is the visualisation thing.

Some of you may remember that I shot at Nationals and competed in the 10m Air Rifle Prone Match and shot a 600 a few years back. Air rifles do not miss. I would bet my house that if I put my air rifle in the vice it will make a hole approx 1.2 X the diameter of the pellet. I wanted to give Mike Johnson a fright. So prior to the event while traveling on the ferry, lying in bed, driving the car and any odd smidgeon of time I had, I visualised shooting the first to the last of sixty shots perfectly. I repeatedly visualised the sighters and the first 1 or 2 strings and also the final string many times.

When it came to the match it flowed very nicely and the thoughts going through my head for the last string to the last shot were "I have done this before".

Practice this: Imagine shooting thirteen 10.1s on a ten shot indoor card. Make a card that has ten perfect 10.1s on it that YOU have shot. Cut out the blacks of the good shots and stick them in the holes of a card. Then work your way around the card imagining all the steps you need to do to shoot those nice shots. You cannot miss in this exercise so the result will always be one of those perfect 10.1s. I insist you use only ones that YOU have shot. Then you cannot lie to yourself that you did not shoot them.

Enjoy the good results. Accept the plaudits of your fellow shooters with a "Thank you". And offer no excuses.

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