

If The Challenge is You

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The last time we talked we discussed how the challenge in the intermediate and advanced levels of shotgun sports was more within your mental game than the physical one. It follows that if the challenge is you, then to grow you have to learn how to challenge yourself in training. While we talked about looking into yourself to discover the mental issues that hold you back from a good performance, we need a practical method for focusing our training on the mental side of the game. Just going out to the field and shooting targets and adding up the score is not going to be productive. Training must include the opportunity to improve your mental abilities as well as the physical ones. Yes, we know that training and practice is not the same as the match, but still you have to intensify your sessions such that meaningful mental improvements can be made. Every trip to the range must include both the physical and mental components of the game

At first, when you were learning the physical part of the game you took small steps focusing on the fundamentals by doing drills to develop those skills. So too when learning the mental game. The physical aspect of the training exercise should be kept simple at first so that all attention can be directed to the mental side. Later on, as your mental strength increases, the physical demand may be increased in difficulty.

Basic example: A good way to start is to pick a target that you are comfortable with and then break it ten times in a row. In trap it could be one of the lefthanders from a certain post or in skeet the high house target on station three. If you fail to hit the target during the climb to ten, start the count over until you have made ten in a row. There is no quitting this exercise until you have reached ten in a row - so bring a lot of shells.

This drill creates several opportunities for enhancing your mental game and demonstrates a methodology to be used for future mental training sessions. First, by choosing a target that you are comfortable with you have minimized the physical component so as to concentrate on the mental functions. Next, you have set a goal within a time frame - ten in a row before you go home. Most important you have created jeopardy or risk in that a miss causes you to start over. That coupled with the fact that you just can't stop until you succeed will help cause the mental weaknesses within you to come to the surface. However, be aware of some danger with this exercise. If you make the physical part too demanding, that is, greater than your capabilities, you can overwhelm yourself to the point of mental frustration. A balance must be achieved between the difficulty of the physical act and the mental challenge. That is why it is best to start simple and work your way up. Other exercises include,

Skeet example: Begin by shooting singles around the horn (stations 1 - 8). After hitting the high house and low house targets on the first station go to the next station. Continue until you reach and hit the two on station eight. If a target is missed, immediately start over at station one. The jeopardy involved is that you must start over at station one when a miss occurs and continue until all 16 targets are hit in order. Now, can you do the same with the doubles?

Trap example: First choose an amount of targets to be broken. Start with five. Later you can increase this to 10 or 15. Start on post one and using two shots for each target, break a target on post one, and then advance to post two. If a target is missed immediately start over at post one. Continue until the selected number of targets is hit in a row. When the goal is reached this becomes your personal best. How far can you push your personal best? Now, can you do this drill with only one shell in the gun?

Challenge example: You will need a friend or at least another shooter for this one. Challenge each other to a 5 or 10 target shoot-off with something at stake. It could be just like a formal shoot-off or a game you make up like the ones above. The prize should be something other than just a soft drink. It's hard to get interested in the 50 cents or dollar for the drink. Make it something personal, like 20 push-ups, cleaning the winner's gun, or similar actions. Use your imagination and create interesting and provocative stakes for the match. Remember, you want to add jeopardy to the mix to increase match pressure.

One of the athletes from Brazos County Texas, now on the World Championship Team, says that this type of drill "is teaching me to emphasize the importance of every target", adding that he liked it because, "you were competing with the targets □□ that's what you concentrated on." That's right, not the match or the results, just the targets. What a great outlook for success!

As you participate in these drills your awareness should be directed towards several areas. Become consciously aware of the changes in your attitude, breathing, body tension, and thinking. Are negative thoughts entering your mind? Are you becoming nervous or experiencing tight or jerky movements? Are you impatient for the exercise to end? Has your breath become shallower? Are you in denial and not focusing on the moment? When you become aware of these changes in your body you can now take steps to remedy your behavior. You should not try to fight them, but instead accept them as part of what makes you the person you are. The next step is to release the tension they have created, and then re-focus on the outcome you desire.

For example, you notice, "I'm so nervous I'm starting to tremble". First, acknowledge to yourself the many times in training and matches that even when you were nervous you were still able to shoot well. Next, take steps to ease the nervousness by breathing deeply or thinking calming thoughts. Then, before attempting the next target, picture the intended outcome of the shot in your mind. Now go ahead and let it happen. After you complete the exercise review these points and record your feelings in your diary. Evaluate your success in terms of your ability to perform well with nervousness. Just like

physical skills these actions require practice.

The real opportunity in these exercises is that they provide you with a chance in training to learn to recognize, and be aware of the things that come up in your mind when you are meeting frustration, impatience, anxiety, and fear of failure during a match. These weaknesses normally hide in the sub-conscious and we are unaware of them until they surface in times of stress. These are the same frustrations that occur when you are shooting under pressure, except now we can deal with them in practice. Once you get them to the surface of your thoughts, you can begin to learn ways to handle them. As you increase the difficulty of the physical challenge in this type of exercise you increase the chances that your mental, as well as physical, weaknesses will come to the surface. This is exactly what you want to happen to make your training meaningful. These exercises move you out of your comfort zone towards growth. Make this type of practice part of every one of your training sessions and you will be challenging yourself to be on the path to success.