

## ***FIRST ROUND BLUES***

**by BJ McDaniel**

Recently, one of our younger athletes asked a question. He wanted to know what he could do to improve the scores of the first round he shot each day. He said that in a match it always seemed to be his lowest score, while those that followed were much better. He couldn't fix a clear reason for the lower performance, but it was never his best and always below his average.

While considering this question a conversation from years ago with Matt Dryke came to mind. Matt was the skeet gold medalist in the 1984 Olympics. In those days the course of fire was 200 targets shot over two days. It was common for Matt to shoot a 196-199 in these events and, more often than not, he would run 100 straight on the last day to close everyone else out. When asked how he was able to shoot so many 100's on the last day of a match. His reply was; "When I am driving to the range I am thinking about running 100 straight. When I walk out to the field I'm thinking of breaking 25 in a row. As I step on the first station, I'm thinking about breaking the next target." Pretty simple, huh?

It took years to realize what Matt was doing when he was thinking like that. He was planning for success. His preparation was changing his focus from a broad external focus of overall success to a narrow internal focus of breaking the next target. He was first letting his subconscious know the goal that he had set for himself for the day. Then, he put his focus on being ready for the short-term milestone as he walked to the field. Finally, he turned the control of his actions over to his trained subconscious as he attempted each target individually.

What steps can you take to implement this thinking into your preparation for each of your starting rounds? Consider the following six points.

**Set your expectations early.** Change your thinking. In the weeks leading up to the match include positive affirmations and visualization exercises in your daily routine which points towards a good first round performance. Examples of affirmations might include; "My first round performance always gets me off to a good start", or "I am always pleased with my first round score". Visualize yourself shooting a perfect round first thing in the morning, or seeing yourself walking off the field to congratulations from the other shooters. These steps will let your sub-consciousness know, in a positive way, what it is you expect to happen during your first round of the day.

**Get used to shooting early in the morning.** When we practice at home we most often don't get up until 8:00 – 9:00 and don't get to the range until mid-morning. Our first practice round might not start until 10:00 – 11:00. When we go to the important National matches we find that they start early in the morning. You may be required to be at the range by 7:30 AM and could be shooting your first round between 8:00 and 9:00. We end up having to shoot important scores 2 -3 hours earlier than we practiced at home. Your mind and body are not used to being awake and ready to perform at that time. This is just like not practicing a certain station or specific shot prior to the match and then expecting to do well in the match. To overcome this you should occasionally change your practice time at home to simulate the time of the day you will be shooting your first and last

rounds of a match. If you are prepared and know what to expect, your results will be better.

**Warm-up both your eyes and your body.** Before you go out to the field make sure that your body is prepared to perform at its best. Develop a stretching routine and begin to use it on a daily basis and certainly before each round. Stretch and loosen your legs, back, and shoulder muscles so that they can support the gun and move to the targets freely. Make sure that the both the neck and eye muscles are loose by rotating your head while keeping the eyes focused on an object in the distance. Next, hold the head still while rotating just the eyes to make sure those muscles are ready to look for targets. After that, go to a safe area and do 10 – 15 gun mounts. Get the feeling of the correct movements. Use this time for both a physical and a mental warm-up. While you are warming up your body, your mind should be thinking about how well you are going to do in the round and how every mount will result in a hit target.

**Get to the field early to view the targets.** One of the steps most elite shooters do is to get to the field early and watch the targets of the squad ahead of them. First, they check the light and choose the correct lens tint for their eyes. Then, they look for any unusual target presentation that might make the round more difficult. In skeet it may be that the targets are moving up and down due to the wind, or that the wind or sun is affecting the shooters. In trap it might be a hard angle on one station, or a target that is coming off to the right of the mark. Being there early allows you to check for these situations and prepare the proper techniques to insure that your score is least affected.

**Begin the round focusing on everyone's targets.** Once the round starts you will want to put your attention on other shooter's targets more than you normally do. This is easier to do in skeet and double trap. Watch the targets of the shooters ahead of you. Practice keeping your attention on them while the other shooters are taking their turns. The purpose of this is to establish a mental and visual connection between you and the targets. Focus your attention not on the outcomes, but on seeing the targets quickly and clearly. This might be called "getting your mind into the game".

**Get out of your own way by using your pre-shot routine.** Once you are on the station stick with your established pre-shot routine. Its purpose is to change your focus from a broad external focus to a narrow internal focus. This means as you perform each step you are funneling your awareness from everything that is going on around you to just the target that is about to appear. Both your conscience mind and your sub-conscience mind have different jobs to do at this time. It's the job of your conscience mind to do everything up to the point when you call "pull". It should not be involved after that point. Once you say pull, you need to turn everything over to your sub-conscious mind and let it perform the shot. The mechanism that stops that from happening is when we want to "be sure" or "careful" to insure we make a good shot. We let the conscience mind back into the action and the results always suffer. Set yourself up for success by trusting the action to your sub-conscience. You have spent all of your practice time training it to do the job correctly – so get out of its way and trust yourself!

Try incorporating these six points into your match preparation and you will begin to see your first round scores improve.