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# Sharpen Your Competitive Edge



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## FLIPPING THE SWITCH

In his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman explained that System 1 thinking is fast, reflexive and managed by the unconscious mind, while System 2 thinking is slow, deliberate and managed by the conscious mind. Since System 1 is essentially autopilot mode, competitive shooters must learn to flip the switch from deliberate mode to autopilot mode when they step onto every station during competition.

John Bargh, a psychology professor at Yale, demonstrated that trigger words or phrases could effectively prime the human mind to act in a particular way that would enhance the performance of a specific task. Bargh stated these "triggers" must be connected to a habit or reflex (pre-planned move) that is managed by the autopilot (adaptive unconscious).

My trigger phrase to flip the switch that activates my autopilot is, "Settle your eyes." This simple phrase quiets my



▲ If you miss a target in practice, remember not to slip back into training mode and overanalyze.

conscious mind and allows my vision to expand into a steady, expanded soft focus. The autopilot, which has been activated by kinetic visualization, will be ready to react to the target as it emerges into my expanded soft focus at the eye hold.

Proper visual detection and acquisition of the target are essential to the transmission of accurate target data to the visual cortex in the brain. The visual cortex interprets the visual data and transmits it to the brain stem, which initiates the pre-planned move that automatically engages the target before the break zone.

## AWAKEN THE AUTOPILOT

Stewart Cotterill reported that athletes who used a pre-performance ritual immediately prior to an uncontested activity (i.e., free throw, putting, etc.) improved their results when compared to not using the ritual. Shooting instructors refer to pre-performance rituals as pre-shot routines. I use the term "kinetic visualization" to help shooters prepare to feel and see the next target.

The pre-shot routine is managed by your conscious mind. The pre-shot routine should consist of a key phrase or a few key words that will initiate the transition from self-talk (thinking) to a no-talk (no thinking) state of mind. I've described

◀ You are deliberate off the station, but when you step on the station, you must switch to autopilot.





▲ No thinking while you're shooting! Your pre-shot routine should include a cue that switches you from thinking to non-thinking mode.

this process as akin to a pre-hypnotic induction, which is intended to quiet the conscious mind, direct your conscious mind to exclusively focus on one thought, and awaken the autopilot to be prepared to execute a specific pre-planned move.

Most shooters are able to detect the flash of the emerging target. The typical visual fault is poor target acquisition due to a distraction. The shooting eye must see the target at the eye hold and focus on it continuously until it breaks. Visual discipline enables the autopilot to subconsciously point the muzzle of the shotgun to the correct position, and at the correct speed, ahead of the target. Any intention apart from detecting, acquiring and tracking the target continuously will disrupt or distort the "targeting data" transmitted to the visual cortex of the brain via the shooting eye.

## FRIENDLY COMPETITION

Worrying about past failures or not scoring well enough to win a competition are the primary distractions for shooters

who suffer with performance anxiety. The shooter's ego uses these worries to create fear and doubt so it can take control of every shot. Whenever performance anxiety allows the ego to become the pilot of your shooting system, the autopilot will stop working.

Many people experience performance anxiety during competition. I find it interesting that some shooters actually crave the feeling of competition mode, while many others yearn for the comfort of their training mode. Whenever I am asked to discuss a competitive mindset, I think of my close friends Artie Tessman and Steve Krukoff. Artie and Steve are good friends, and they compete at shooting, golf, or any other game they play together. I never had a competitive mindset like Artie and Steve. I just liked shooting skeet because I was good at it, and my Dad liked watching me win, so I won to please him.

I never understood athletes like Artie and Steve until I discovered research by Norman Triplett at Indiana University and Gavin Kilduff at New York University. Triplett carried out studies related to the "thrill of competition" in the late 19th century. He analyzed the results of a series of bicycle races in which 2,000 cyclists competed. There were three types of



▲ Got performance anxiety? You're too worried about past failures or concerned you won't score well enough to win.

races: unpaced, where cyclists competed against the clock; paced, where cyclists raced by teams in which members rotated to keep up a specific pace; and just racing, where individual cyclists competed directly against other cyclists.

The results demonstrated that the unpaced results were slowest, the paced results were 34 seconds per mile faster than unpaced, and the results of individual racers were 5 seconds per mile faster than the paced results! These results demonstrated that head-to-head competition is the best motivator for peak performance by highly competitive athletes.

More recently, Gavin Kilduff demonstrated that competing

