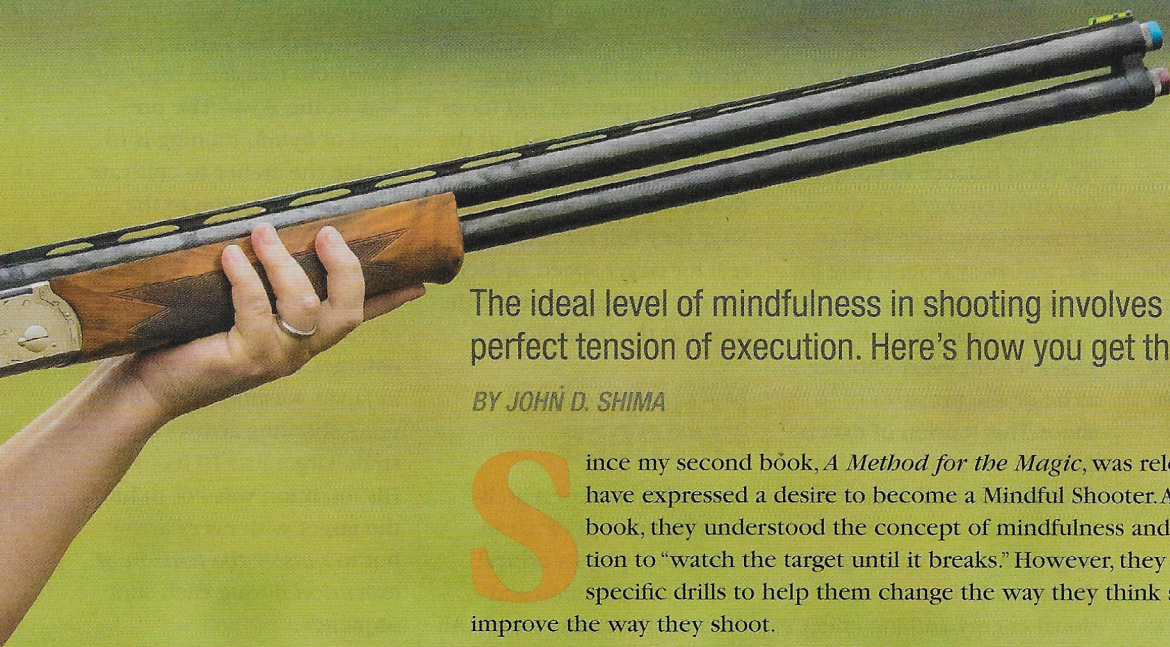

The TENSION of Execution



The ideal level of mindfulness in shooting involves a perfect tension of execution. Here's how you get there.

BY JOHN D. SHIMA

Since my second book, *A Method for the Magic*, was released, clients have expressed a desire to become a Mindful Shooter. After reading the book, they understood the concept of mindfulness and my admonition to “watch the target until it breaks.” However, they wanted to have specific drills to help them change the way they think so they could improve the way they shoot.

I am convinced that variations of the basic Incomer Drill, if used with the proper mindset, could be the most effective training regimen to help a shooter transition from being too careful to becoming more mindful. After discussing this process with my friend George, we came up with the phrase “tension of execution” to describe certain psychological and physiological factors that relate to a shooter's ability to master the mindful process of watching the target until it breaks.

JUST RELAX

When the concept of mindfulness was introduced in my first book, *The Moment of Truth*, many readers confused it with relaxation. Although both conditions are important for consistent athletic performance, being relaxed is physiological and being mindful is psychological. A shooter can feel relaxed and not be mindful, but a mindful shooter is always relaxed.

Watching the target until it breaks requires a higher level of mental engagement and a prolonged phase of attentiveness to the primary task, which is to concentrate on the detection and acquisition of the target, and progressively increasing primary visual focus on a specific aspect of the target until it breaks. This transition from settling the shooting eye into expanded soft focus in the acquisition zone to hyper-

focus in the break zone must be done to the exclusion of everything else. It is “everything else” that precipitates the tension of execution.

TENSION OF EXECUTION

Many shooters are attracted to mindfulness training to overcome their performance anxiety, which is the perception of increased psychological and physiological stress that often arises during competition. While external circumstances associated with competition are the obvious triggers of performance anxiety, it is internal self-talk that provokes the doubt, worry, anxiety and fear of failure associated with it. Many knowledgeable shooters misinterpret their deceptive self-talk as necessary self-coaching. However, undisciplined self-talk, both positive and negative, is symbolic of becoming too careful, which triggers the tension of execution.

Depending on shooting style, some tension of execution is necessary for a

shooter to achieve his or her peak performance. Peak performance requires consistent execution of each shot sequence with the appropriate balance of physiological and psychological tension.

Physiological tension occurs in the muscles. The physiological tension of execution increases with the psychological desire to break the next target because the shooter's intention is divided between watching the target and moving the gun to break the target. The physiological tension of execution decreases as the intention to watch and hyper-focus on the target increases. Hence, the ideal balance of your tensional energy is to direct it toward watching the target, and away from trying to break the target.

Anticipation naturally arises within every shooter as he or she prepares to shoot. This tension of execution is a dynamic state that must be properly adjusted for each target presentation. In general, outgoing targets demand a little more tensional energy, and incoming

targets require a little less tensional energy.

Excessive tension of execution causes shooters to become too careful. They may rush through the pre-station and pre-shot routines, attempt to look too hard for the emerging target, leave early, slide the eye hold on the call, push the gun vertically on the flash, or fire the gun prematurely.

Insufficient tension of execution causes shooters to become complacent. They may lack discipline in the pre-station and pre-shot routines, fail to settle the shooting eye into expanded soft focus beyond the target path at the eye hold, are surprised by the emergence of the target after they call for it, lose the feel for target speed, or lack a sense of engagement of the target at the break zone.

PERFECTION EMERGES

According to expert archers, the concept of “clean execution” plays a critical role in the direction and distance the arrow travels. All the steps in the shot cycle are designed to allow the archer to execute each shot with the proper tension of execution. This can only be accomplished by allowing the True Self to manage all subconscious actions.

Kenneth Kushner, author of *One Arrow, One Life*, described the essence of *kyudo* as a conscious withdrawal of the bowstring until the optimum tension is felt throughout the body. Then the arrow essentially releases itself cleanly without conscious thought. This optimum ten-

sion is just enough to send the arrow to the intended target, and no more. In *kyudo*, the ability of the archer to sense the proper tension of execution is more important than precise aiming.

The proper tension of execution is important for clay target shooters as well. Becoming aware of your tension of execution during training drills will enhance the consistent execution of the mechanical, visual and mental elements of each shot sequence.

Kyudo is the Zen art of archery and translates into “the Way of the Bow.” The purpose of *kyudo* training is to enable the archer to cultivate unbroken attention to the task at hand. The admonition in *kyudo* training is, “Thousands of repetitions, and out of one's true self, perfection emerges.” During his training in Japan, Kushner spent five years shooting arrows at a straw target just 10 feet away. His intention was not to hit the target with every arrow, but to *master the tension of execution* during each shot sequence.

TENSION OF EXECUTION DRILL

During my first private lesson with George, I sent him home with the mandate to shoot the basic Incomer Drill until he could break a hundred targets consecutively. Two things surprised me: first, that George followed my instructions, and second, that it took him 12 months shooting almost every week-end to accomplish the goal.

Eight years later, after he



▲ You must train yourself to mindfully watch the target until it breaks.

finished his second Shima Shooting ExperienceSM in San Antonio, George decided to revert back to the basic Incomer Drill — not to improve his shooting, but to become more mindful while shooting. That simple Incomer Drill that George grew to hate eight years ago now helped him appreciate Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's admonition that "great talent finds happiness in execution." Hitting the target either happens, or not.

The basic Incomer Drill is: four low-house targets each at stations 1, 2 and 3, then four high-house targets at stations 5, 6 and 7. The option shot is used after the first miss or shot as an outgoer at station 7. The intent of this drill is not to break a certain number of targets. The purpose is to use the flight of each target to help you concentrate on just one aspect of the shot sequence. Then pay attention to just that one thing 25 times, regardless of misses. As you increase your attention toward managing the watching reflex, the shooting reflex will automatically break the targets.

I suggest you begin with the mechanical game and finish the process with the mental game. This process may take weeks, months or years to complete.

Mechanical – Refining the pre-station and pre-shot routine should precede the shooting drill. The seemingly slow incoming targets allow the shooter to become cognizant of posture, knee bend, balance, cheek pressure on comb, grip pressure, forehead grip, axis of rotation, and the tension of

execution during detection and acquisition of the target, centering focus, tracking and synchronization, engagement and shot release, and flow-through.

Visual – The purpose of the pre-shot routine is to slow down, properly adjust the tension of execution, and eliminate unnecessary self-talk. Although settling the shooting eye into expanded soft focus at the eye hold seems easy enough, there is a tendency to slide through the process on subsequent shots during this repetitive drill due to the déjà vu effect. The shooter must take time before each shot, not only to settle the eye at the eye hold, but also to project the depth of focus beyond the path of the target. Projecting the depth of focus is crucial because it prepares the shooting eye to detect and acquire the emerging target naturally.

Mental – Thinking is important in the preparation to shoot; however, the goal of mental training is to "eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak" (Hofmann). The quiet mind eliminates self-talk and random thoughts, which are a distraction. These distractions are the greatest barrier to achieving automaticity during the shot sequence.

STRIVE FOR AUTOMATICITY

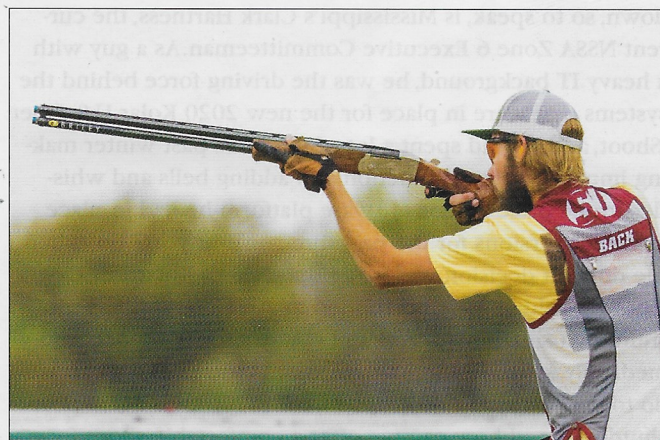
The best way to properly balance your tension of execution is to strive for automaticity. I explained in previous writings how the components of the human mind: the Conscious Self, the

Ego Self, and the True Self are involved in managing the *watching and shooting reflexes*. These two reflexes play an important role in the shooter's ability to shoot carefully (semi-automatically) or mindfully (automatically). *Self-confidence* is conditional because it relates to your mastery of certain skills, a history of performing specific tasks under familiar circumstances, and a generally positive outlook. The Ego Self uses positive self-talk to promote confidence in its abilities and negative self-talk to protect itself from potential failures. There is no logical reason to lack confidence in

execution is completely within your control. The key to managing the tension of execution is to eliminate your desire to break the target and trust automaticity. A quiet mind is essential to shooting clay targets with automaticity. Variations of the Incomer Drill will eventually enable any shooter to begin every shot with a quiet mind and trust his or her automaticity.

When I emphasize the importance of a quiet mind in shooting clay targets, I am reminded of Mozart's comment about music. "The music is not in the notes," he said, "but in the silence between." I am convinced that

▼ Too much tension of execution will cause you to become too careful. Trying too hard will pull you out of the moment mentally.



your ability to watch a clay target if you eliminate all distractions. Visual discipline determines your ability to control your watching reflex.

Trust is unconditional because it is a firm belief in your ability to perform a specific task regardless of circumstances. Mental discipline determines your ability to control the insidious self-talk that overrides *unconditional trust in your shooting reflex*.

Managing the tension of

embracing the silence and the release of tension before each shot is intimately connected to the outcome of the shot. Therefore, preparation to shoot must be deliberate and conscious; execution of the shot should be automatic. **CTN**

► John Shima is a former five-time World Skeet Champion. To view previous articles or order John's books, go to www.johnshima.com.