

BEWARE OF WHAT YOU THINK



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In his introduction to *The Mental Toughness Handbook*, author Damon Zahariades acknowledged the plethora of books and articles published on this topic during the past several decades. Mental toughness, as defined by Zahariades, is simply an individual's ability to endure adversity. Enduring adversity involves managing the emotional stresses that arise in competition, demonstrating resilience in the face of failure, and exercising the grit necessary to persevere following defeat. According to Zahariades, mental toughness is not an innate trait with which great athletes are born; it is a state of mind that great athletes develop through rigorous training.

Most individuals become competent clay target shooters with some instruction and after several months of practice. Then they seem to reach a plateau. That's because it is the shooters' mental game that ultimately determines whether they attain their shooting potential.

When shooters plateau, they tend to believe that mental toughness will enable them to exert more effort to break each clay target. I am not going to argue with shooters who achieve consistent success in any clay target sport and attribute it to mental toughness. However, I believe there is a better way to improve a shooter's mental game.

Most experienced clay target

shooters accept that concentration and focus are key elements of the mental game. However, the operative phrase in the previous paragraph is *consistent success*. Any shooter can properly concentrate and focus some of the time, good shooters are able to correctly concentrate and focus most of the time, but great shooters discipline themselves to concentrate and focus the right way - every time!

Since I am convinced that *how we think affects the way we shoot*, I propose that clay target shooters must practice introspection to examine their mental game in a way that allows them to understand the way it works, how it can be improved, and how it can be maintained.

How It Works

While earning degrees from MIT and Princeton the famous physicist, Richard Feynman developed a reputation for solving complex problems the brilliant Ph.D. students couldn't solve. What separated Feynman from his peers wasn't raw intellect; it was his ability to view the problem by using a broader set of mental models.

A mental model is an explanation of how something works. Mental models are deeply held beliefs that an individual holds to help him or her interpret the world and understand relationships between things. For example, supply and demand is a

LEARNING A NEW MENTAL MODEL HELPS SERIOUS SHOOTERS DEVELOP NEW WAYS TO WATCH CLAY TARGETS



mental model for how the economy works.

It is important for serious clay target shooters to understand how mental models work because the model they adopt guides their perceptions and behaviors while shooting. The concept of mental models supports the central theme of my second book, *A Method for the Magic: How You Think Affects the Way You Shoot*. Learning a new mental model helps serious shooters develop new ways to watch clay targets, which enables them to improve their shooting proficiency.

Every clay target shooter has a favorite mental model they unquestionably believe will ultimately solve their shooting problems. Their worldview of shooting frames their knowledge base. According to Yuval Noah Harari, "The real test of knowledge is not truth, but utility." Therefore, it is important for clay target shooters to abandon mental models that support shooting the way they want to shoot, and adopt mental models that are the most useful in supporting how they need to shoot.

In his article, "Mental Models: How to Train Your Brain to Think in New Ways" author James Clear wrote, "Creativity and innovation often arise at the intersection of

new ideas." In my role as a shooting instructor, I use my creativity and experience to identify a shooter's visual deceptions and introduce him or her to new ways to use their vision. And then, I motivate them to adopt a new mental model using alternative solutions.

1. Your Perception is Your Reality- Philosopher Robertson Davies said, "The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend." Essentially, this means the shooter's eyes cannot perceive what his or her brain cannot conceive to be visually possible. Therefore, a shooter must adopt a new mental model to solve underlying problems with visual perception.

Dr. Sim-Hee Neoh was a retired physician when he participated in one of my clinics in Australia in 2015. Dr. Neoh was having trouble with doubles because he was shooting the outgoing targets beyond the center stake. He believed the outgoing targets were too fast for him to see any earlier. I had to change this physician's mental model regarding visual perception by convincing him that altering the way he looked for the outgoing targets would change the way he perceived them. Following the clinic Dr. Neoh sent an email message stating, "I never would

THE BEST SHOOTERS ELIMINATE NEGATIVE SELF-TALK



have imagined I could shoot the double targets at 1, 2, 6 and 7 so quickly. I thought it was only possible with young eyes... It just shows how little I know about life! Thanks for opening my vision."

2. Your Score Doesn't Define You- Lexi Thompson was 27-years-old professional golfer and the leader going into the final round of the 2021 U.S. Women's Open. During the post-round interview Lexi was asked how she felt about finally being on top of the leaderboard in her 15th U.S. Women's Open. Yes, Lexi was only 12 years old when she qualified to play in the event as an amateur her first time!

"I haven't played to my standards and what I need, and I just needed to change my mindset," Lexi responded to the reporter. "It was only hurting me. Obviously, I needed to work on some technical things in my game... but the mental side was really getting to me. I was just taking it way too seriously, and thinking that my identity depended on my score."

3. The Ego is Not Your Friend- Ever since Timothy Gallwey published *The Inner Game of Tennis* twenty years ago the effects of self-talk on an athlete's self-doubt, performance anxiety, and lapses of concentration has

permeated sports psychology. Gallwey's book introduced the concepts of the *ego-mind*, which is the judgmental talker, and the *unconscious mind*, which is the automatic doer.

As I stated in my first book, most elite clay target shooters are readily aware that the actual competition is not among the participants in the event, but between the Ego Self and Conscious Self in their own mind. The Ego Self attempts to define a shooter's identity by setting unrealistic goals based upon the false assumption that these accomplishments will satisfy some unmet emotional need. The Ego Self often uses negative self-talk to promote the attachment of self-defeating emotions to random thoughts. By steam-rolling the Conscious Self, and over-riding the True Self, the Ego Self takes over and compromises the shooter's performance.

4. How You Think Affects the Way You Shoot- Serious shooters must change from the Ego Self's emotional-based mental model to the Conscious Self's rational-based mental model. The rational-based mental model involves: clarifying your purpose for shooting, eliminating negative self-talk, and pursuing emotional freedom. In her book *Emotional*

Freedom: Liberate Yourself from Negative Emotions and Transform Your Life, author Judith Orloff made two important statements: 1) emotional freedom involves choosing where you put your attention, and 2) the launching pad for emotional freedom is always yourself."

Clay target shooters must increase trust in their Conscious Self to rationally *develop a mental model based upon what they need to do to accomplish their goals rather than habitually defaulting to what the Ego Self wants to do*. Pursuing emotional freedom is the final step in the process of adopting a new mental model. The rational goal is to care less about breaking the target, and care more about watching the target break.

How It Can Be Improved

When they are thinking rationally, most shooters will acknowledge that the harder they try to break a troublesome target the worse it gets. Since the conventional "try harder" mental model doesn't work well for most clay target shooters, I suggest they consider a "stop trying so hard" mental model.

This new emotionally detached mental model for shooting makes it possible to see alternate pathways to your goals. An appropriate mental model for shooting will probably conflict with a mental model that seems to work in other areas of the shooter's life. This conflict makes it difficult for many shooters to adopt a new mental model because they trust their existing mental model to explain and solve every challenge. The following steps can facilitate the new mental model adoption process:

1. Develop a Positive Mindset- According to a study conducted at the Cleveland Clinic the average person has 60,000 thoughts each day, and 80% of those thoughts are judgmental and negative. Repetitive negative self-talk reinforces a shooter's *self-limiting beliefs* and *all-or-nothing thinking*. These ego-based strategies change any game from a "win or learn" growth mindset to "win or lose" fixed mindset. Adopting a growth mindset that facilitates learning from the experience regardless of outcome strengthens the new mental model. Celebrate the good shots in every round and learn from the occasional miscues.

2. Connect with Your Purpose- Defining your purpose for shooting each day *reinforces intrinsic motivation*. Shooters with an effective mental game use rational thinking to develop logical reasons to support their short-term and long-term goals. Their reasons for training, practicing or competing defines the purpose that inspires them to succeed. Connection to a meaningful purpose helps shooters to set practical goals and enjoy the process involved with pursuing them.

3. Find Strength in Unity- The fear of missing the next target precipitates anxiety in many shooters. Since the Ego Self uses fear and doubt to disrupt a shooter's mental game it is important for shooters to find a supportive mentor or qualified instructor to promote the flow of positive energy while adopting a new mental model. Shooting with friends who provide support and encouragement also promotes self-confidence.

4. Eliminate Setbacks- Thomas Edison didn't experience 1,000 setbacks while striving to



invent the light bulb, he discovered there were 1,001 steps to the process to build the first one. A setback only relates to a desired outcome. Every shooter has the ability to rationally direct his or her attention toward the process of learning new shooting skills rather than obsessing over his or her failure to achieve a desired outcome. By accepting that ups and downs are part of the learning process any shooter can eliminate the frustration of setbacks.

How It Can Be Maintained

Wise effort is the sixth step on the Buddha's Nobel Eightfold Path and falls under the category of concentration. *Wise effort* means to *strive without striving*. By approaching each station with the

proper mental model, I find that most clay target shooters are able to quiet their mind so they can pay attention to the most important thing - watching the next target continuously until it breaks.

When I introduce the "strive without striving" mental model to a client, I sometimes have to literally become their self-talk. Before each shot I whispering in their ear, "Settle my eyes, relax and look to see where the target is going, and then focus and fire." *Wise effort* is a mental model that requires shooters to strive to manage their mental and visual games without striving to control the outcome of the shot. In other words, *the desire to break the target must be replaced by the intention to watch the target break*.

Wise effort is based upon the concept of *simplification*, which means to eliminate every element



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