

An introduction to  
**Mental Training**

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Instead of the words MENTAL TRAINING one could well use the words MENTAL PREPARATION i.e. "Preparing to compete successfully". Mental training can open many doors and do many positive things. What it cannot do however is grant you shootings skills if you do not possess them. *If you cannot hit a Donkey on the arse with a Banjo*, don't expect Mental Training to do it for you. Mental training is not a substitute for technical shooting training, its primary purpose is to enable you to achieve your potential in a match.

In the past, when perhaps Sports Psychology was more of an art than the science it has become, there was a lot of unnecessary and unhelpful mystique and jargon associated with Mental Training. Unfortunately this has caused many serious target shooters to avoid using any of its undoubtedly helpful techniques in the past.

I strongly recommend that, wherever possible, you enlist the help of a qualified Sports Psychologist as part of your overall strategy for winning. They have many techniques, that are beyond the scope of this presentation, which they could use to help you.

As you will know your brain is divided into your conscious and your sub-conscious state. Your sub-conscious is an incredibly powerful and complicated machine with an enormous potential that mankind has barely begun to realise. It fulfils an amazing amount of functions, both Physical ( as a survival machine ) and Mental/ Emotional with built in balances and checks.

Although this powerful "Super-computer" controls so many of our actions and reactions, it reacts to messages from our conscious mind and this is where most of us go wrong. It is strange to note that despite the aforementioned complexity of our sub-conscious mind, I have found the most effective Mental Training Methods to be those which treat the sub-conscious state as a unsophisticated, somewhat naive, child.

For example whereas in family life you would say "Not in front of the Children" because of the negative effects it could have upon them ( it's better that they don't know about such things etc.) the same is true of your sub-conscious . You must not think "negative thoughts" because of the negative effects they can have upon your sub-conscious. There are many other examples but I'm sure you have got the message.

It's one thing to know that something works and quite another to know why it works. Science is beginning to provide the answer. Research, using a high powered electrical brain scanner, has determined that we learn a skill or technique in one part of the brain and then the information / knowledge is transferred for storage and use in an entirely different sector of the brain.

The basic cause of the problems we encounter prior to, and during, a competition lies in the fact that we are sending entirely the wrong messages to our very willing but non-discriminatory sub-conscious mind. When you get nervous at the prospect of shooting in a competition, your sub-conscious state picks up the signals emanating from your conscious mind and reacts accordingly.

Because it cannot readily differentiate between Stress; Anxiety; Fear or Anger; your sub-conscious state stimulates the secretion of **adrenalin** to prepare you for the extreme Physical action ( Fight or Flee ) it anticipates you are going to make.

**Adrenalin** is bad, bad news for a target shooter. It may be the Athletes friend but it is definitely the Shooters enemy. If you want to elicit the correct response from your sub-conscious mind and prevent the production of Adrenalin, always bear in mind you must never think about what you DON'T want because your sub-conscious will misunderstand what you want and *will give you exactly what you are trying to avoid!*

Five of the main aspects of Mental Training are:

- A.) **RELAXATION**
- B.) **VISUALIZATION**
- C.) **MENTAL REHEARSAL**
- D.) **FOCUSING**
- E.) **POSITIVE AFFIRMATION**

**A.) RELAXATION**

**Progressive Muscular Relaxation ( P.M.R. )** One of sports most widely used techniques.

Whenever possible it should be used as a preliminary to both Mental Rehearsal and Focusing. You will all have heard of this technique;

You sit or lie in a relaxed position, do some deep breathing and then systematically and progressively tense and relax your entire body from the feet upwards.

This technique is without doubt the most effective ever created to relieve tension; not only for sport but for life in general and I recommend that you use a professionally produced video or cassette tapes, of which there are many on the market.

**Speed relaxation**

This technique was devised by David Bunker, who is a leading Sports Psychologist based at Loughborough University. Using well-established principles, he created this system for the Captain of the British Olympic Women's Hockey Team, to assist her in coping with being the only one to take G.B.'s penalties throughout the games. She had to learn how to rapidly switch from racing around the Hockey Pitch, to being cool, calm and collected. Her G.B. team won the Bronze Medal.

It can be used during a competition to slow down your heart rate or to relieve tension. In speed relaxation you concentrate solely on your arms and your legs using a technique which I call "Doing the five's" i.e. :

Whilst still seated on your chair take a couple of DEEP chest breaths to build up your oxygen level.

Then take another deep chest breath counting up from one to five,

**1-2-3-4-5**

Whilst you are counting you must PROGRESSIVELY tense both your arms and both your legs until they are at maximum tension by the count of five.

Now hold it..., and hold it a little longer..., then slowly breath out, counting down from five to one;

**5-4-3-2-1**

Progressively relaxing your tensed muscles as you exhale.

**Now repeat the process once more.**

**B.) VISUALIZATION** . What you see is what you get (Also known as Visual Rehearsal, self actualisation or going to the movies.)

Long before we had a vocabulary and could speak, either as a Cavemen, or as an infant, we had visual images/pictures in our minds. The expression "Picture that in your minds eye " is especially appropriate. It is no coincidence that visualisation, be it before firing each and every shot or preparing yourself of a forthcoming competition, proves to be the most effective technique for many shooters.

Your imagination is stronger than your willpower. If willpower alone created World Champions we would have a good many... but it doesn't... and we haven't!. Trying to force something to happen by sheer strength of willpower will never be as effective as visualising it being accomplished.

If you don't believe me ask yourself this question." Could this be the reason why no matter how determined I am, and how much willpower I use, I still do not get the results I deserve in competitions?" The simple fact is the sub-conscious brain finds it very difficult to discern between; something which has been imagined and that which is actual. All it knows is what is programmed into it, by visualising something you desire to happen you have programmed your sub-conscious into providing it.

Here is an example, chosen because the subject matter has strong similarities to shooting under pressure, to illustrate the point :

In a documented experiment in America, two groups of students were given the task of practising basketball penalty shots and practised everyday for a whole month. One group actually practised physically netting the ball, whilst the other group relaxed on a bed or chair and used visualisation to mentally practice netting the ball. At the end of the month both groups were gathered together and physically competed against each other to see which group could net the most penalty shots. The visualisation group won by a considerable margin.

I am not saying that you should replace shooting training with visualisation. Mental training is not, and never will be, a substitute for shooting ability but I am saying it is a bloody good way to enable you to fulfil your potential in a match!

**C.) MENTAL REHEARSAL** *Be prepared*

Mental rehearsal conditions your sub-conscious mind into expecting/anticipating what is going to happen and preparing itself for the task to come. So when you walk onto the range to compete, the brain gets straight into gear because it thinks it has done it dozens of times before. The objective is for your sub-conscious mind to think " Ah yes I recognise this situation, there is nothing to worry about, I know how to handle this".

As an example mentally picture yourself:

On the morning of the competition preparing your kit;

Waiting in the foyer for the bus to the range;

Arriving at the range;

Going through the formalities;

Setting your kit out at the firing point etc. etc.

Mentally prepare yourself for any eventuality, this is known as '**What if...?**' scenario setting. Plan in advance what you are going to do if the target changer stops functioning; how you will handle the officious range officer; cope with a broken firearm. This is not being negative; it is foreseeing a possible problem and working out a solution in advance, which can only be to your benefit. Malcolm Cooper used this method to remarkable effect. He visualised every possible occurrence and mentally rehearsed how he would deal with it.

At the Seoul Olympics when a B.B.C. reporter knocked over and broke the bedding of his Rifle, a few days before his match, he didn't allow himself to get upset or alarmed, he had already envisaged such a scenario and worked out how he would cope with it. He walked straight off the range, leaving the team officials to deal with the problem and went for a cool fruit juice and chilled out.

The Russian Armourer subsequently repaired his rifle and Malcolm won his second consecutive Olympic Gold Medal.

### **Perfecting your shooting technique.**

Having achieved a relaxed state through P.M.R. close your eyes and picture, in your minds eye, the technical excellence you wish to achieve. At first it may be difficult but with practice it will quickly get easier, moving your hands and arms to mime the actions also can be very helpful.

For instance you could:

See and feel the weight of the pistol in your hand;

Feel yourself breathing;

See and feel your pistol being raised;

See the sights coming sharply into focus;

See the sight picture steadying;

Feel the smooth application of pressure on the trigger;

See and feel the smooth controlled recoil as the shot is released;

See the bullet hole in the middle of the ten;

See the sights coming back into line as you follow-through.

### **Another useful method utilizes sensory deprivation.**

It is based on your brains amazing ability to compensate for the loss of any of your senses by strengthening/improving those that remain.

Block off your vision. Cotton wool held in place by a day sleeping mask works well

Block off your hearing. Soft plugs under your ear defenders do the trick.

Adopt your shooting stance and click and really 'FEEL' your trigger. Free from distractions you will quickly reach higher levels of trigger control.

Check you body movement; strive to achieve Zen Buddhism levels of bodily awareness.

### **D.) FOCUSING. *Training your conscious mind to focus your concentration.***

The following should become part of your shot-firing routine, in training as well as in competition:

Prior to firing a shot, close your eyes and in your minds eye go through the whole sequence of your shot delivery technique.

Many top shooters find that saying a "trigger" phrase or mantra at the start of the process strengthens the positive effect. The word 'FOCUS' is one of the most popular with all sportspeople. A videotape is available, which assists with this process.

The purpose of this technique is to send positive, well established signals to your sub-conscious. You are programming it to give you the desired effect. The more you learn how to focus your concentration during your shooting training sessions, the better you will be able to focus your attention during a match.

**E.) POSITIVE AFFIRMATION.** *Always be positive, never negative.*

Soothe and reassure your sub-conscious, as you would an anxious child, with positive words and images, using phrases which describe the good things which are about to happen. Be positive and self encouraging at all times before, during and after your match. Indulge in positive self-talk. Tell yourself how good the next shot is going to be, how good your firearm feels in your hands. Remember, "**Not in front of the children!**".

There is never " *A bloody awful shot* ". You will say : "That's A Mistake I Will Not Repeat, The Next Shot Will Be Good And Technically Correct" Do not count the errors; focus on you good shots. It is well worth repeating: Never think about what you **DON'T** want because your sub-conscious will misunderstand what you want and will give you exactly what you are trying to avoid!

**Your 'Secret friend'.** *Very efficacious; if it works for you it 's magic!*

A very efficient method of self-talk is to imagine that you have an earpiece in your ear receiving a running, very positive, commentary from someone who's opinion you respect and trust, who will always use your Christian Name when talking to you.

If necessary keep a running dialog going with that person during a shoot. Your secret friend must keep encouraging you, praising your efforts and frequently *keeps using your Christian name*. Discuss strategy with you *friend*, if problems arise your *friend* reminds you what you have done in the past to correct the problem, or encourages you to focus on the basics, etc. etc.

## **CONCLUSION**

None of the Mental Training techniques we have just discussed are of any use if you are not prepared to spend time practising them. The more important you perceive a competition to be, the more demands it will place upon your mental training.

One aspect of mental activity which is often overlooked is its debilitating effect put bluntly "**it knackers you**". Therefore always remember adequate rest is absolutely essential if high levels of concentration are required! When away on a shooting trip always find time to have a quiet half hour, on your own, in your bedroom to do some mental rehearsal.

Doing your mental training is like putting money in the bank, the more hours you accumulate the more " Mental interest" you have to spend during a competition. Remember the more important a competition, the more " Mental interest" it costs you. If you fail to do your mental training you will quickly go into " Mental overdraft " during the competition and could suffer the consequences. Don't say I didn't warn you!

Enjoy your shooting,  
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