
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



▲ Competing against someone you know (rather than a stranger) is so motivating that it is capable of pushing you to better performance.

against someone you know, as opposed to a complete stranger, is even more motivating. His research showed that NCAA basketball teams played better defense, and distance runners ran faster, when they were competing against traditional school rivals.

All this time I thought Artie and Steve became great skeet shooters because of my coaching, when it was really due to their passion for friendly competition. Undoubtedly, they became awesome competitors because their friendly rivalry conditioned them to bring their AAA game to every meeting. The numerous medals and trophies they won at events were secondary to the bragging rights over their respective scores in each event.



SHARPEN YOUR COMPETITIVE EDGE

Most competitive shooters enter organized competitions frequently to overcome the effects of performance anxiety. However, some of my clients live in places where convenient

access to organized skeet and sporting clays competitions is limited. I encourage these individuals to find a partner with relatively equal shooting skills and competitive zeal. Then I suggest they develop various shooting games to help them sharpen their competitive edge.

Denny Sadowski and George Wessberg met at a gun club in Honolulu and became close friends. After attending several of my clinic sessions, they wanted help overcoming their perfor-

“Simulating the emotions that arise in competition is the key to sharpening your competitive edge during practice.”



◀ You can design competitive games to play in practice with your buddies that will simulate the psychological aspects of competition, improving your performance in actual competition.

mance anxiety. I suggested they play a competitive shooting game during their practice sessions.

The competitive game began with each shooter placing 10 one-dollar bills into an envelope and placing it in their shooting bag. The shooting game of the day could be an in-comer drill, an outgoer drill, or a round of skeet. The game would be 25 or 50 consecutive targets. Ties were broken by a 3-4-5 singles or doubles shoot-off. The winner of the game each day would get a dollar from the partner's envelope. When one shooter lost all 10 dollars in his envelope, he would owe the winner the ultimate prize. This prize could be a flat of ammunition, a dinner with spouses at a fine restaurant, or whatever the partners decided.

It wasn't the one-dollar bet that increased performance anxiety — it was the fear of losing all of the dollars in their envelope or the premature excitement of winning that 10th dollar that made the competitive shooting game psychologically meaningful. Simulating those emotions that arise in competition is the key to sharpening your competitive edge during practice. These simulations open the door to your inner game.

MASTER THE INNER GAME

Timothy Gallwey introduced the classic guide to the mental side of peak performance in his book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*. Gallwey used the terms Self 1 and Self 2 like Kahneman described System 1 and System 2 thinking. I describe the

conscious mind in terms of Ego Self and Conscious Self and the unconscious mind as the True Self. Using my terms, the inner game is played between the Ego Self and the Conscious Self with the True Self just waiting patiently to be called upon to automatically execute the task at hand.

The Ego Self wants to control the execution of every shot because it believes it can control the outcome. The Conscious Self is responsible for creating a dynamic balance between the Ego Self and the True Self in an effort to achieve consistent peak performances. Hence, the Conscious Self assigns the Ego Self to watch the target (manage your watching reflex) and alerts the True Self to execute the pre-planned move (manage the shooting reflex) efficiently, effectively and effortlessly.

Making the transition from practice mode to competition mode is purely a psychological approach to mastering your inner game. The 10 dollars in the envelope is a metaphor for the emotional attachments to previous and future outcomes that become distractions and a source of performance anxiety for shooters during competition. If you design competitive shooting games to play during your practice sessions that simulate the anxiety you experience during competition, they will be effective in helping you master your inner game and sharpening your competitive edge. *CTN*

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