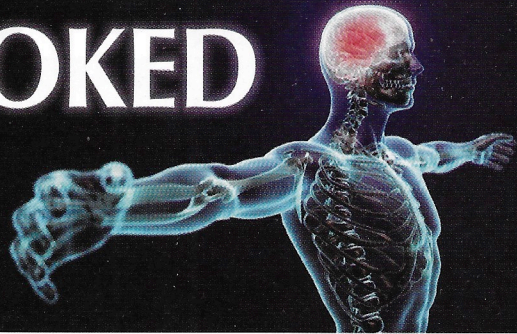


DON'T GET HOOKED ON A FEELING

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During a recent *Shima Shooting Experience*SM session at the National Gun Club in San Antonio, one of the participants stated that he liked the way he felt when he hit a target really hard. The comment made me realize that some shooters may not understand what I mean when I describe them as being more visual or more visceral during the shot. I've opined in several articles that visual shooters tend to *see the speed* of the target during the shot, and visceral shooters tend to *feel the speed* of the target.

Later that day the lyrics "I can't stop this feelin' deep inside of me" popped into my head. That refrain is from the song *Hooked on a Feeling* by BJ Thomas. The distinction I'm attempting to convey is that feeling the speed of the target (a physical sensation) should not be confused with the feeling of accomplishment (an emotional gratification) that is associated with a perfect shot. The purpose of this article is to *caution clay target shooters against getting hooked on the feeling of a perfect shot* because the awareness of feeling during a shot distracts the shooter from watching the target continuously.

Feelings are Distracting

There are physiological and emotional aspects to the way a shot sequence feels to some shooters. When I describe a shooter as more visceral, I am referring to the

shooter's ability to feel the speed of the target physiologically. They usually feel target speed in their lower body as they rotate to track the target. They may also feel the weight of the muzzle in their forehead to sense where it is pointing. Regardless, *visceral*

shooters experience the feeling during the shot.

Conversely, emotionally engaged shooters experience feelings of tension before and during the shot, and then experience a surge of exhilaration or frustration depending upon the outcome of the shot. Their desire to break the next target becomes a persistent distraction for emotionally engaged shooters.

Dopamine is described as the "feel good" neurotransmitter that is released to activate the pleasure center in the brain. Hence, dopamine plays an important role in motivation, reward, and the reinforcement of habits. Shooters who become hooked on the dopamine surge associated with perfect shots tend to become biochemically addicted to the desire to break the next target. This addiction supports a craving (emotional attachment)

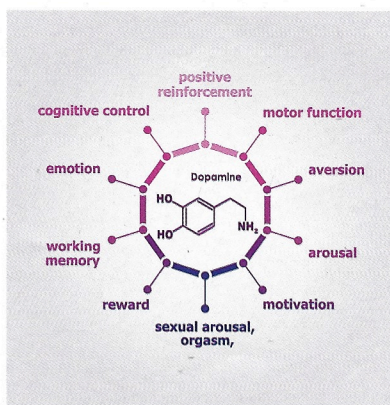
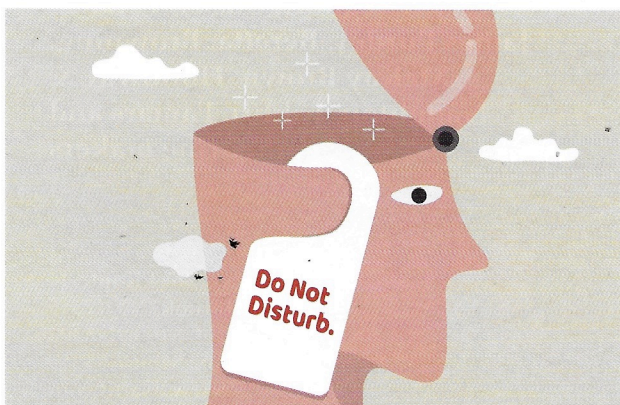
that becomes difficult for many shooters to overcome.

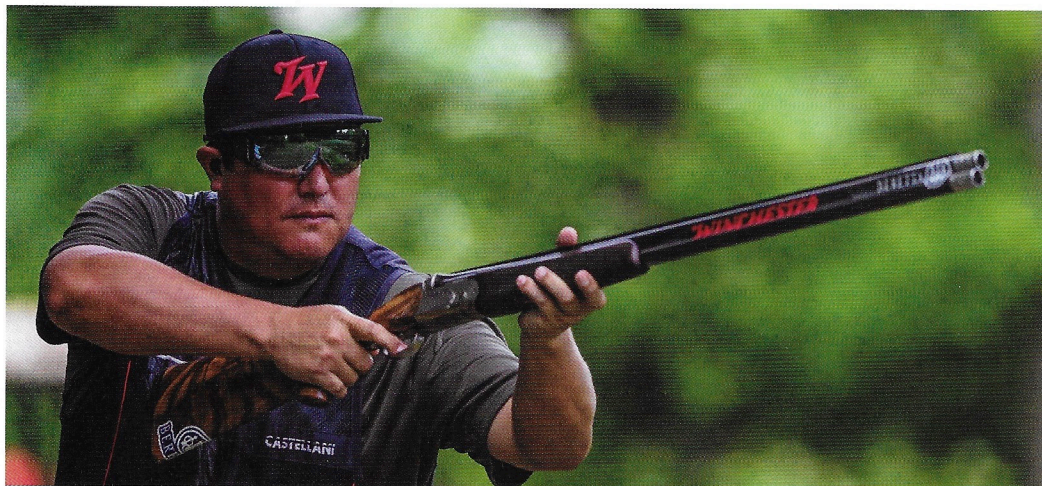
Power of Habit

Most bad habits have their roots deeply embedded in unmet emotional needs. Short of psychotherapy it is impossible for most shooters to develop the introspection necessary to discern these tenacious emotional connections. Fortunately, in his book *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg identified the mechanics of habit formation so it is possible for shooters to consciously program good habits as a substitute for a bad habit.

The habit loop described by Duhigg involves a cue, which triggers a response, that is reinforced by a *reward*. One of Ivan Pavlov's research studies on classical conditioning demonstrated that *intermittent rewards reinforced habitual behaviors more than consistent rewards*. This is why inconsistent perfect hits make existing shooting habits difficult to change.

After more than 30 years as a shooting instructor I've come to believe that the way people pursue a clay target sport is usually a metaphor for the way they pursue life in general. In other words, a shooter's personality is revealed in the way he or she shoots clay targets. Therefore, changing habits to





improve the way you shoot usually involves changing the way you think about shooting.

According to psychologist and researcher Sian Beilock, author of *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To*, we use different types of memory to perform specific kinds of tasks. We rely on attention and *working* memory to analyze problems and create solutions in order to thrive in our daily lives, and allow our brain to relegate mundane, repetitive behaviors to our *procedural memory* to manage them automatically. Hence, procedural memory is responsible for all habitual behaviors.

Albert Einstein wisely concluded, "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." Almost anyone can become a good clay target shooter by using their working memory to execute the shot sequence. Good

shooters who aspire to become great shooters must learn to *change the way they think* and rely on their procedural memory to execute the shot sequence automatically. We

perform habitual behaviors more efficiently and effectively than conscious behaviors.

Hans Hofmann stated, "The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak." Beilock's research demonstrated that people who attribute their success in life to their powerful working memory find it very difficult to simplify a complex process, like a shot sequence, and simply trust their procedural memory to complete the shot automatically.

Shooting Identity

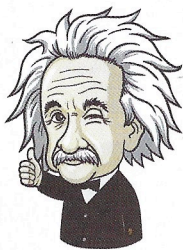
I usually introduce the concept of shooting identity to the clients in my *Shima Shooting Development Program*SM. I explained the importance of shooting identity in *The Moment of Truth* (pp. 181-183). Therefore, clay target shooters with personality traits that create a barrier to realizing their optimal shooting potential must be open to changing aspects of their personality.

The Big-Five Model of personality traits is a commonly accepted model used in psychology. A study of the relationship between personality traits and sport performance demonstrated that athletes with

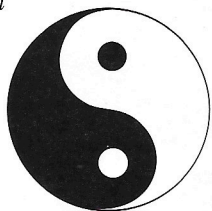
(anxiety, fear, depression, and aggression), and extraversion (sensation seeking, risk taking, and distractibility) characteristics were *not able to control their emotions*, which compromised their athletic performance.

In his popular book *Atomic Habits*, author James Clear explained that changing an unwanted habit is a difficult process for most people because they attempt to change the wrong thing, or they try to change the habit in the wrong way. According to Clear, there are aspects of behavior involved when an individual attempts to change a habit: a change in outcomes, a change in processes, or a change in identity. Clear opined, "With *outcome-based* habits, the focus is

a conscientious personality that demonstrated high discipline, responsibility, achievement, motivation and goal orientation correlated with higher athletic performance. Conversely, athletes with neuroticism



on what you want to achieve. With *identity-based* habits, the focus is on who you wish to become."



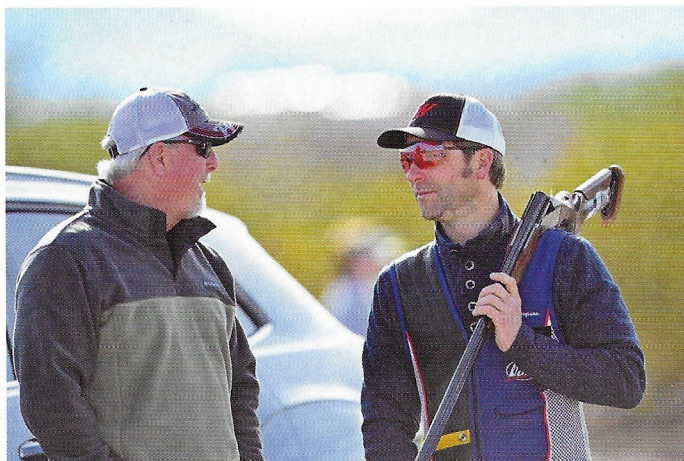
Emotional Freedom

If I am guilty of preaching one sermon too often it's that clay target shooters must *develop the ability to become emotionally detached from the outcome of each shot*, and the outcome of the competition. This is what I mean by avoiding the habit of getting hooked on the feeling of whether a target breaks or not.

Dualism (yin and yang) relates to the belief that two fundamental opposing concepts co-exist. The concept of dualism applies to clay target sports as well. Shooters who attach a "good" feeling (surge of dopamine) to a broken target must accept that a "bad" feeling (lack of dopamine) is attached to a lost target. The fear of missing out on the dopamine fix creates emotional tension.

I describe emotional freedom as the ability to become *emotionally detached from the outcome of each shot*. Yes, I mean give up the craving to break the next target. When shooters achieve emotional freedom, they are able to use their powerful working memory to concentrate hard enough to avoid distractions, which allows their eyes to focus on watching the next target continuously until it breaks.

The simplest way to become emotionally detached from the outcome of the next shot is to settle the eyes into expanded soft focus, just prior to calling for the target. Joan Vickers calls this the



"quiet eye phenomenon." Vickers' studies demonstrated that a quiet eye promotes a quiet mind. A quiet mind does not attach feelings to random thoughts.

Vision Trumps Precision

Although a shooter's bad habits are usually obvious to a competent instructor, they are usually obscure to the shooter. The role of the instructor is to help a shooter develop insight, which is necessary to gain an accurate and deep intuitive understanding of his or her self-defeating shooting habits.

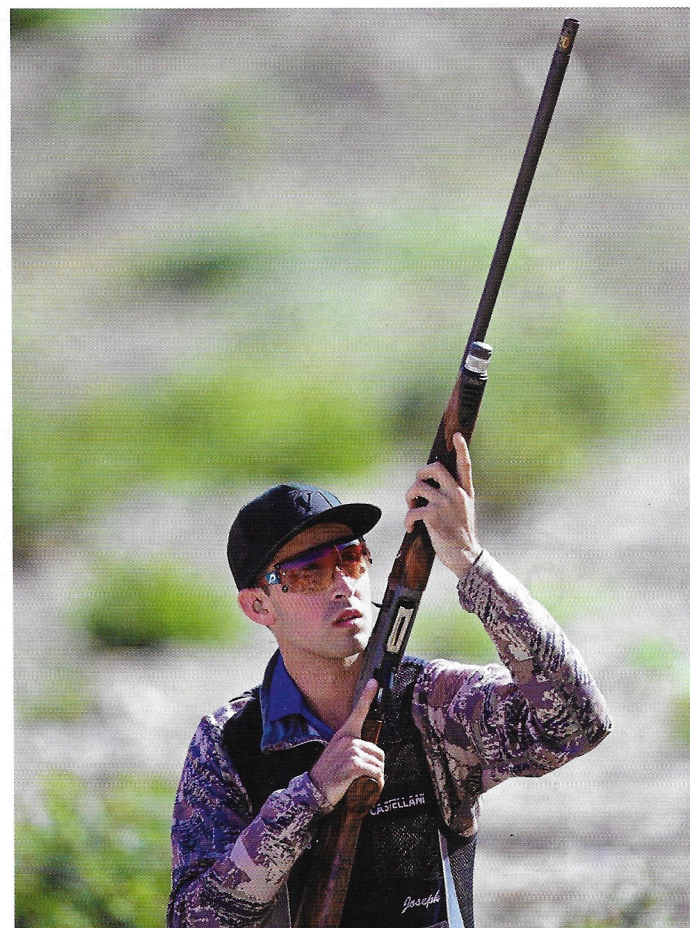
Since the clay target sports rely heavily on visual perception, the shooting instructor must be able to communicate to the shooter the reasons specific changes in their mental game are necessary. The shooter must be open to adopting a new mindset because his or her *eyes cannot perceive what his or her mind cannot conceive and believe*.

My admonition for shooters to override their desire to break the target with the intention to watch the break encourages the need to simplify the process. Nevertheless, watching each target continuously until it breaks is not simple! There are various psychological issues and personality traits that prompt most shooters to add more things

disciplined shooters because it directs their attention to consciously managing their *watching reflex* so their adaptive unconscious can automatically manage their *shooting reflex*.

The visual approach has four distinct elements:

- 1. Mental Discipline** - Prepare your eyes to perceive the emerging target the way it will be rather than the way you want it to be. Use kinetic visualization to see and feel the speed of the target. Identify the ideal break point.
- 2. A Quiet Mind** - Seek awareness of the target by settling your eyes into expanded soft focus at the eye hold. Be patient and allow the target to emerge into your field of vision in order to optimize



early detection and acquisition. Use working memory to watch the target and trust procedural memory to make the appropriate pre-planned move to the break zone.

3. Visual Discipline – Expanded soft focus enhances the peripheral visual field, which optimizes detection and acquisition of the emerging clay target. Transitioning to absolute (hard) focus on a specific piece of the target provides the visual data, which directs the procedural memory to

automatically make the correct pre-planned move to engage the target and fire the shotgun.

4. A Commitment to the Break Point – By settling the eyes to quiet the mind the shooter can enter the moment of truth in the present. This state of awareness allows the shooting eye to watch (detect, acquire, and track) the target until it breaks. The commitment to firing the shotgun at a specific break point disrupts the twinge of uncertainty and improves consistency.

These four elements should be

simplified to: watch the target, hard focus on it at the break point, and fire the gun. All other thoughts or feelings that occur during the flight of the target are unnecessary distractions.

Just Focus and Fire

Most shooters become more visual with age and shooting experience. Shooters who learn to use their eyes correctly can overcome a variety of mechanical faults and physical limitations. When shooters use their eyes correctly to acquire targets, so they perceive actual lead pictures instead of visual deceptions, they improve their consistency.

People tend to believe their emotions and senses are telling them the truth. Nonetheless, feelings are not facts. Whenever shooters are striving to change from old habits to new habits, *they never like the way the new process feels* because it hasn't become an unconscious habit.

A simple fact holds true in all shotgun sports - the visual input from the shooting eye tells the shooter's unconscious mind (procedural memory) where to point the shotgun. Shooters who make watching the targets continuously a conscious habit will avoid being hooked on the feelings that promote visual deceptions and inconsistent results. Striving to become detached from feelings during the shot sequence is the key to achieving visual consistency. ■

John Shima is a former five-time World Skeet Champion and was high average in 12 gauge for two years. John is the leading authority on detection of visual deceptions and prescribing appropriate visual training to unleash the power of reality for clay target shooters. For more information about the Shima Shooting MethodSM, the Clinic Schedule, his new Shima Shooting ExperienceSM, or to arrange a Private Consultation, contact John via email at john@johnshima.com. To order his books or view previous articles go to www.johnshima.com/publications.

