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# Skeet Is Not A Game Of Perfect

We often think of skeet as an all-or-nothing game — but that puts you in a mental state that isn't conducive to growth.



PHOTOS BY LEFTY RAY CHABA

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BY JOHN D. SHIMA

**T**he desire for perfection is insatiable. It will often rear its ugly head when I'm helping a shooter "fix" a problem station. The shooter will miss five or six "problem targets" and finally knock something off the next target. I'll congratulate him or her on a good shot, and the response will be, "Did I hit that too far in front or too far behind?"

I often refer to Dr. Bob Rotella's book *Golf is not a Game of Perfect* when a client is trying hard to break clay targets perfectly with every shot. Certainly at the highest levels of competition in skeet, a perfect score is necessary to get into the shoot-off. That being said, it is not necessary to break every target perfectly. All the NSSA Rule Book requires is that the shot causes an observable chip to come off the target for it to be scored a dead bird.

In 2005, Drs. Gordon Flett and Paul Hewitt published an article entitled "The Perils of Perfectionism in Sport and Exercise." They discovered that an athlete's perfectionistic personality traits caused preoccupation with being perfect regardless of outcome. This attitude actually undermined the athlete's performance because it fostered an underlying feeling of discontent. I paraphrase Dr. Rotella when I say, "Forget the missed targets, accept weak breaks as a gift, and savor your good shots."

## HITTERS AND SHOOTERS

My friend Murrell Smith spent much of the 2016 season recovering from knee surgery and shoulder problems. During this prolonged layoff from shooting, Murrell spent a considerable amount of time exploring the concept of mindful-



▲ Are you a *hitter* who tries to control the outcome, or a *shooter* who controls your own process and response to each target?

ness. When he began shooting practice rounds following the layoff, Murrell found joy in the effortlessness of mindful shooting. During his first registered shoot, the old habit of trying to break targets occasionally crept back into his shooting, and he didn't like the way it felt. Murrell described his two different mindsets as "hitting" versus "shooting."

Murrell concluded that hitting was about consciously trying to control the outcome of each shot. Hitting required more effort, involved more self-talk, and created more tension. Conversely, shooting was about awareness in the moment, reacting to each target when it emerged, and trusting his response. For Murrell, shooting required less effort, involved less self-talk, and resulted in less tension.

Your mindset as you approach each station on the skeet field will determine whether you will be a hitter or a

shooter during the shot. If your intention is to break the next target, you have a hitting mindset. Conversely, if your intention is to watch the next target break, you have a shooting mindset.

Hitters are concerned about the accuracy of the shot, while shooters are concerned about the precision of the process. Many readers will be think-

provide consistently accurate time no matter how often you reset it.

## ACCURACY VERSUS PRECISION

Accuracy is a state of being as close to perfect as possible. It relates to a single event. Accuracy would be necessary to hit a moving clay target with a single lead pellet. Precision relates to the repetition of a process as consistently as possible. It relates to multiple events.

Since the shot pattern is four to five times greater than the dimension of a clay target, the precise synchronization of gun speed to target speed is the key to peak performance in skeet.

Just as it is for a finely tuned watch, precision is essential for consistent accuracy. The timing of the shot sequence for each target must be set correctly at

▼ Accuracy is being as close to perfect as possible. Precision is the ability to repeat a process over and over in the same way.



ing that accuracy and precision are just semantics and they actually mean the same thing. In response to that perspective, I use a watch to explain the difference. A finely tuned watch is a precision timepiece, but it may not provide accurate time if it wasn't set correctly. However, if the timing is off, the watch will lack precision, and it will never

the beginning. Hitters focus on accuracy in the break zone. Shooters focus on precision in the acquisition zone. When an elite shooter acquires the target properly at the eye hold, a precise pre-planned move will be automatically activated to accurately synchronize gun speed and point it ahead of the target in the break zone. Hence, precision begets accuracy.

## PROGRAMMING PRE-PLANNED MOVES

A reflex action is the body's movement in response to a stimulus. It is mediated by a reflex arc. A voluntary reflex arc is initiated by the conscious mind — eating and walking are examples of this. An involuntary reflex arc occurs without conscious thought. Once a stimulus activates a reflex, it responds automatically.

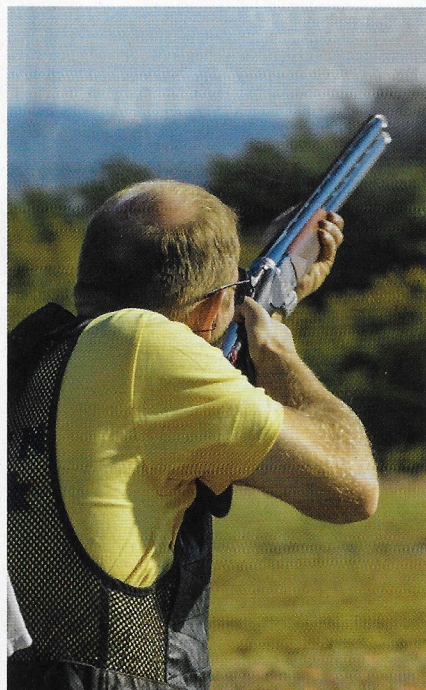
Muscle memory is a phenomenon that relates to your ability to reproduce a particular movement without conscious thought. It is acquired as a result of frequent repetition of that movement. When relating this complex neuromuscular programming process to gymnasts, E.M. Swift stated, "They practice their routines with mind-numbing repetitiveness, for hours and days, weeks and years, so that each spinning, twisting landing off the high bar becomes an act of muscle memory."

Since skeet is such a highly structured game, the emergence of the target at each station must activate a consistent reflex reaction. Malcom Gladwell described how the adaptive unconscious is responsible for muscle memory. I call these precise, automatic (reflexive) responses to moving clay targets pre-planned moves.

Pre-planned moves are programmed within the adaptive unconscious through precise repetition of the elements of the shot sequence — detection and acquisition, synchronization, centering focus and tracking, engagement and shot release, and follow-through. These mechanical and visual elements of the shot sequence must be programmed to become a precise reflex arc.

## THE SHOOTING REFLEX

The Ego Self (conscious mind) plays a game of perfection. Your True Self (unconscious /subconscious mind) plays a game of precision. Whenever a shooter



▲ The emergence of the target should trigger an automatic response. You make it automatic by practicing it relentlessly.

attempts to carefully execute a perfect shot, the Ego Self overrides the highly efficient and precise True Self, and corrupts the natural and highly efficient Shooting Reflex. This corruption ultimately affects your visual perception in the break zone.

Just prior to releasing the shot, the shooting eye of the hitter will defocus from a specific area on the target to the space between the target and the end of the gun. This shift in visual focus affects synchronization and causes the gun to slow down. The conscious reaction will be to use the forend hand to push the barrel to adjust the sight picture. The sudden movement of the barrel attracts the shooting eye and creates a visual deception that results in a miss above and behind the target, a flinch, or some other apparent mechanical problem.

The Shooting Reflex will only work with precision when a shooter employs mental discipline. The Ego Self must consciously focus attention exclusively on watching the target until it breaks.

When this happens, the Watching Reflex will automatically detect, acquire, track and hard focus on each target. The Watching Reflex enables the Shooting Reflex, and through visio-motor (eye-hand-feet) coordination, will automatically and consistently synchronize gun speed to target speed and precisely engage the target with the correct lead in the break zone — effectively, efficiently and effortlessly.

## A GAME OF PERFORMANCE

Performance is the action or process of carrying out or accomplishing an action, task, or function. Elite shooters are great performers. Their attention is focused exclusively on performing the task at hand. They have unconditional trust in the pre-planned moves they programmed through years of rigorous training. Tennis great Billy Jean King said, "Champions keep playing until they get it right."

Performance is about process rather than outcome. Shooters focus on process, while hitters focus on outcome. Undoubtedly, there is some unfulfilled emotional need that motivates an individual to focus on hitting rather than shooting. Henry David Thoreau said, "Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after."

If you get frustrated when you miss targets, you probably have a hitting mindset. Attempting to improve your accuracy will likely result in more missed targets. Therefore, the solution to the "hitting problem" is to adopt a shooting mindset and re-focus your attention on performance rather than outcome. The simple rule in the game of performance is to just watch the next target until it breaks. **CTN**

► John Shima is a five-time World Skeet Champion. To view previous articles or order John's books, visit his website at [www.johnshima.com](http://www.johnshima.com).