

September 2002 - The role of the coach

For any sports person to improve to an elite level, no matter what the sport, at some stage you will have to put your entire faith and trust into one person - a coach. I have never seen any person make it to the top in anything, whether business, academics or sport, without getting some help at some stage. The hardest part is deciding what and who makes a good coach.

With the shooting sports, the makeup of an 'AA' class competitor in any of the disciplines is probably 40 per cent good technique and 60 per cent mental toughness. You may think that is a ridiculous statement because everyone strives for close to 100 per cent perfect technique. The next time you get to watch an Olympic or Commonwealth Games shooting final on television, have a good look at the vast array of styles being used. This is particularly noticeable in the shotgun events, where there is significantly more body movement required than in the pistol and rifle events; therefore, a more varied technique is evident. My point here is that these shooters have mastered their own techniques to the point that when they are under extreme pressure they are confident and tough.

A good coach needs to let his pupil have some scope in his or her individual style. Of course there will always be parameters, but to a large extent if the coach is confident that their pupil's technique will hold up under pressure then let them go.

Gun fit is an area where there must also be some room for shooter's individuality. I have covered this topic in a previous article so I won't go into details here - except to say that what suits the coach will hardly ever fit the student. One thing I really hate seeing is a coach point their student's gun and then tell them that the gun is all wrong. Wrong for whom? The coach or the student?

I am always asked how much training you should do. This nearly always depends on the individual, but the emphasis must be placed on quality and not quantity. My partner, Lauryn Ogilvie, arrived in Australia from the United States a couple of years ago. She was a member of the USA Women's Skeet Team, received her Australian citizenship and shot for Australia at the Commonwealth Games this year. When she arrived to live with me in Australia, we would go out to the range at Werribee to train and often she would shoot three or four times a week, 150 to 200 targets a session.

By most people's standards this is a lot of training. Lauryn said that is how she did it in the States so I let her go. For the first year Lauryn was here she followed this same routine and to be honest she never really improved. She tried out for the US Olympic Team in 2000 and missed out poorly. After the Olympics I sat down with Lauryn and had a long talk about her shooting and I suggested we change the way she had been training. We cut back to three quality rounds (75 targets) per day and no more than two training sessions per week. However, we diversified her shooting into some other clay target events to give her the feel of more competition and less practice. In essence these new competitions substituted her previous wasted practice rounds. For the past 12 months her practice and competition scores have skyrocketed. Quality, not quantity, is always better.

Bombarding your pupil with too much information is a common fault of many coaches. When you learn how to drive a car you don't need to know how the motor works; it is far more important to have a feel for the engine and how it performs. It is exactly the same with shooting. It is the feel for your firearm and the personal emotions you are experiencing while performing well that are invaluable to improve yourself.

When Lauryn had performed badly, we would often have lengthy, heated arguments about what she believed she was doing wrong. I could never ask her what her score was for the day without getting a 15-minute synopsis on weather conditions, background contrast and often moon and tidal movements. She was so technical it was frustrating me - to the point where I had my good friend, 1984 Olympic Skeet bronze medallist for Italy, Luca Scribani Rossi, have a look at her shooting.

When she missed, Lauryn would offer Luca ten minutes of excuses. In the end, Luca gave her the best advice I have ever heard anyone get on a shooting range. He said, "Lauryn, when this next target comes out to the right, I want you to shoot to the right-hand side of it, when the target after that comes out left, I want you to shoot to the left-hand side of it. Don't dare think about anything else!" The results were instant and she really has never looked back or offered an excuse since. Real champions all make mistakes. Real champions learn from their mistakes so they don't need excuses.

Shooting, for the most part, is technically not very difficult. It certainly does not command the same technical difficulties as a game like golf. The best shooters have all experienced failure along the way. Shooting at elite levels, like life in general, is about learning from your experiences. Learning about those experiences for yourself is often half the battle and more importantly half the fun.

You do not have to be an Olympic gold medallist to be a good coach. Indeed there are many examples of great shooters that are technically poor coaches. I will say, however, if you are at an 'A' class level and want to get to 'AA', go and find a shooter who has been able to compete consistently well under pressure. Ask them what they believe the difference is between performing in competition as opposed to practice. Without any shadow of a doubt, they should be able to tell you to go and perfect your own style in practice to the point that you can duplicate it in competition without having to think about it.

Try and keep it as simple as possible and most importantly try and only use one coach to extract any technical data from. If you have two people telling you things about technique then you have one person too many. Rarely have I found two people in the shooting world that agree on any one topic when it relates to technique. Often what one person will be telling you will be in complete contrast to what the other is trying to achieve.

Above all else, enjoy the sport. Shooting is one of, if not the most, mentally demanding sports on the globe. If you can unlock the answers here, the rest of your life should be easy.

Until next time.