

## Elements of a successful archery practice

*By Claudia Stevenson and Steve Ruis*

If you have a goal (winning a particular tournament, shooting a personal best score, shooting a FITA round with all arrows scoring), your practice sessions should help you achieve it. You may believe, for example, that shooting arrows prepares you physically to pull your bow. But shooting arrows at a target may not be the only way to develop the muscles you need to draw your bow. Weight training or reversal training may be better. (Reversal training is merely drawing a heavier draw bow than the one you shoot and holding at full draw for a number of seconds and doing this a number of times per session. We have no idea why this is called reversal training.)

Archers often break down their shots into discussible, addressable pieces. Yes, the shot is really one continuous action, but talking about a one-piece shot is difficult. What we are talking about here is your form and your shot sequence. Some of the pro shooters we know say they are working on relaxation. What they really mean is that they are working on relaxing their drawing arm biceps muscles at full draw. Some spend several hours drawing in front of a blank bale, not shooting, just focusing on relaxing their biceps. One thing at a time indeed!

Practice sessions, then, break down into three types--form practice, equipment setup and tuning, and tournament preparation. If you aren't working on your form, or working on your equipment, or preparing for a tournament, you are probably wasting your time or, worse, practicing to get worse!

- **Form practice.** When you are practicing your form or execution, practice one thing at a time. When you are working on any particular aspect of your shot sequence, that is form practice. When you trying to relax a set of muscles while shooting, that is form practice. The majority of your practice time is generally going to be form practice.
- **Equipment setup and tuning.** When setting up and tuning your equipment, you again need to work on only one thing at a time. If you change three settings on your bow simultaneously, you won't know which of them was responsible for any improvement. One adjustment may have worked really well, but another may have offset some of that great improvement so that you got only a small improvement. Make one change at a time and see how each works. Be sure to read chapter 13, "Testing New Equipment."
- **Tournament preparation.** Everything you do is preparing you to compete one way or another, but here we are talking about preparing for a specific tournament. This may include shooting practice rounds that are identical or similar to those of the tournament. It may include trying to simulate the atmosphere of the shoot site. If you expect many distractions, for example, you may want to get a friend to talk to you or otherwise try to distract you while you are shooting. If the tournament involves a field course with many uphill and downhill shots, you may want to find some hills to practice on. If the tournament site is windy . . . you get the idea.

### Planning to Practice

Developing a practice plan isn't easy. Coaches can help, but there are some limitations. You can't tune better than you shoot, for example. So, the goal is to bring up all aspects of your shooting together. Consequently, you don't want to leave out, say, tuning, because shooting an untuned bow will give you a false impression of the effectiveness of your form. You don't want to leave mental skills practice out, thinking you can do that later, because mental skills failings can look like form or execution failings, and then you will end up practicing the wrong things. Your practice plan needs to include all of the elements of successful shooting--physical training, mental training, equipment preparation, and competition.

### Physical Training

Do you fatigue during shoots? Does your bow arm drop? Do you collapse at full draw? Again, a coach's or shooting partner's input can be invaluable in helping you to plan your physical training regime. Along with strength training, you must address cardiovascular fitness. Many competitions last all day or many days. Do you finish as strong as you started? See chapter 5 for a good idea of what is involved. Schedule whatever exercises you will be doing and then stick to the plan!

### Mental Training

Chapter 6 will help you develop a mental skills plan. Again, you must stick to the plan. This is not something you do as last minute practice; you need to practice mental skills until they are habit. This may be as simple as the technique of faking a big yawn when you get irritated or too aroused to shoot well. It works (try it!), but if you don't do it as a matter of habit, you won't be likely to think to do it when it is needed. Make mental skills part of your practice regimen.

### Equipment Preparation

If you are a sponsored shooter, your sponsors may send you a bow when you don't expect one and expect you to use it. They want feedback from you about what works and doesn't work, and they want you to be seen with their cool, new bow. Should you change? If you aren't in the midst of tournament preparation and you don't have to cannibalize your old setup, you could schedule some tuning sessions with the new gear. As long as it doesn't interfere in a major way with your practice plan, it may put a better piece of equipment

in your toolkit.

If you are buying your own bow, when is the best time to do so--right before the most important tournament of the season, or between seasons so you have time to evaluate it? We all have a story or two about some archer who got a new bow two days before a big tournament, threw it together, and won. Some people win the lottery, too. The question is, are you one of those people?

## Competition

The best environment to practice in so that you will be good in competition is--you got it--competitions. Minor competitions can be used as tune-ups for major ones. We have both shot major tournaments for the experience of being at that tournament. That is, we went without expectations and with the plan of focusing on the total experience so that when we came back we would be familiar with the format and the looks, feels, and smells of the venue. Sometimes archers go to a competition to work on just one aspect of shooting in a competitive environment. Archers with that intention have even focused so well on practicing that they shot a personal best or even won!

One of the charms of target archery is that so many of the national championships are open tournaments, which means that you don't have to qualify. If you can get there and have the tournament fees, you are in! (This is how Claudia and I attended our first national championship shoot in 1997. She came in second in her class; I came in eleventh. Hers was from the top, mine was from the bottom, but my goal was to not come in last. Hers was to win!) So you can compete at the national level! The question is, though, can you be competitive?

Newcomers can, and do, win on their first try. It helps if there is no one else in their category! This often happens to kids at their first shoot. It may have happened to you. It is not at all common for adults, though.

One of the reasons most people like to travel is to experience new and interesting things. Each of those new things, however, takes some time to assimilate. Too many new things all at once can be disorienting and no fun. The first time you attend a tournament, everything is new and different. Consequently, it is hard to turn off your brain's self-defense mechanisms to focus completely on shooting. (Your brain always evaluates anything new for its potential to threaten your safety.)

The archers who come to a tournament with a chance of winning are usually those who already have a lot of tournament experience; only part of what is going on is new to them. The biggest obstacle to success for beginners is tournament pressure.

Occasionally someone makes a big splash by doing really well at his or her first national-level tournament, but this doesn't usually happen. Typically, tournament pressure (Dang, I am competing to be U.S. Champion!) causes beginners to crumple like aluminum foil.

This is an excerpt from [Precision Archery](#).