Dear Colleagues

**Mental outlook as a rifle shooter progresses toward becoming a leading shooter**

**The Problem:**most rifle shooters agree that their sport relies upon mental factors. They are also well aware that a younger person will be likely to possess an outlook, whereby he/she appears nervous and lacks confidence. Such a mental outlook can be the greatest handicap in a competition. By comparison, a mature or experienced person appears to have an outlook behind which is a hidden ability to compete at a level unequalled by others. This shooter is both fully aware and unperturbed by the very different mental outlooks of competitors.

Little is known about the difference in mental outlook of younger and mature rifle shooters. Not surprisingly, most do not know how to help themselves. They have little or no idea how to develop the outlook needed to win rifle shooting competitions in the future. Acquiring the outlook needed to compete without a trace of nervousness is to many a complete mystery.

Sports people regularly read articles by media journalists and the works of literary writers, who blithely discuss nervousness and how to overcome it. This is also encountered when listening to television commentators describing a competitordrawing upon inner strength, rememberingthe example of a famous parentor beingroused by the words of members of their team. These writers have probably never done this themselves, nor have they the first idea what they are talking about. Hollywood movie directors typically depict a young person with a mature outlook, when faced with adversity, indulging in verbal outbursts and throwing things about a room. In fact, when winners of the Queen’s Prize from many countries are at Bisley, their verbal behaviour is controlled without signs of stress, nor do they indulge in tantrums and outbursts of bad temper. They do not resemble any of the descriptions by journalists who have never attained what they write and talk about with apparent authority.

Before the start of the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, the writer and world champions in several other sports were interviewed on ABC television by a well-known commentator. He did his best to put words in my mouth and admit that my mind was preoccupied withGold, Gold, Gold. In the nationwide interview he sought to have only his naïve ideas go out to the television audience, rather than the actual thoughts of the champions he was interviewing. He clearly showed that he had no understanding of the outlook of each of us as sport persons. As it turned out I did win a gold medal, which would never have occurred if I were to follow his thoughts. His audience was none the wiser after watching the television program.Gold, gold, goldnever crossed my mind nor that of any other Games competitor!

This article outlines the tried and proven approach taken by rifle shooters and many other sports people, who develop the mental outlook of a leader in their sport.

**Discussion:**there are various ways of describing the mental outlook of a sport learner. Probably the most easily understood is based upon self-esteem and internal locus of control (or sense of self-direction). When an independent and advanced shooter is available to assess a beginner, this will involve objectively considering the person through these two concepts.

The advanced shooter will recognise a shooter’s level of self-esteem or self-worth, from the way the person is progressively less affected by tension and nervousness in serious competition. As well, a leading shooter will immediately recognize the shooter’s independence of thought. That is, he/she will have less reliance upon the thinking of others when making important decisions. To undergo the change from a person with a younger person’s mental outlook requires routine practice of shooting techniques. While learning, a coach must be available to recognize the difficulties and observe the mistakes, then advise upon the cures needed. Through this process a learning shooter can advance quickly as techniques are mastered. Without supervised learning and practice, a shooter will not advance, but continue encountering the same technique difficulties, e.g. a group as wide or wider than the bullseye due to a tremor generated the moment each shot is released.

Within months of commencing practice under supervision, a shooter will change noticeably from a person with the outlook of a nervous beginner. The change does not rely upon the number of hours or days of practice, but the period when nervous system connections grow within the brain. Such growth depends upon the complexity of the practice undertaken, not the number of days at the rifle range. Within months the rifle shooter will become a mature exponent of techniques, e.g. holding the rifle dead still while monitoring the release of a shot (TR and F Class), averting change of the natural point of aim (TR and F Class) and different strategies for managing changing wind

**Practical:**to enhance the outlook of an inexperienced shooter, a coach is needed who is able to specify the techniques needed and supervise the learning shooter. The coach is absolutely necessary because a learner must become familiar and then competent in all the techniques that must be mastered. The coach must be able to advise and supervise the conditions and skills with which they are practised, so that they can be used most effectively. The coach must as well emphasise the strategies needed for the use of many techniques (e.g. for changing wind), while independently measuring the level of success attained. The shooter must acquire the independence of thought to be able to finally shoot without supervision.

The mental outlook that appears at various stages of this process, needs to be monitored by a coach who understands self-esteem and internal locus of control. At low self-esteem it is expected that the shooter will possess a degree of nervousness, which can be aroused by stressful circumstances. Likewise, at lower internal locus of control, the shooter still relies upon the views of others when deciding upon a course of action. Teenagers without this feature developed are described as following each other like sheep.

As techniques of shooting are successfully worked through, both self-esteem and internal locus of control follow a definite increasing path. This is helped greatly by relationships with others in an effectively managed rifle club. In club life a learner is encouraged byacceptance and a sense of belonging. Likewise, the running of a club needs to involveenhancing the self-efficacyof every member, through generously congratulating each upon achievements. On the other hand, behaviour which denigrates an individual will greatly reduce self-esteem. The authoritative loud-mouth is one of the worst offenders. Poor behaviour in all ways toward one another can be a source of considerable damage for club members.

Finally, a shooter who works under an experienced coach, advising on the full range of techniques and strategies, will almost inevitably become a leading shooter matched by a higher level of self-esteem. During the final range of a Queen’s Prize, this shooter’s mental outlook will be absolutely unmoved by changing wind conditions or competitive stress. At least a century ago, a writer coined an expression which described such an unmoved person as havingice in the veins.

**Conclusion:**the mental outlook of the winner of a Queen’s Prize results from having been taught all the required techniques. A coach is needed to supervise the learning and use of all the techniques as they are mastered, together with the practise needed to become effective. As the shooter progresses from an early mental outlook where nervousness is apparent, it is found that self-esteem increases, to the point where nervousness is no longer apparent, even under the most extreme conditions of long range shooting. Note that this process requires a process with participants, not a collection of psychological tricks such as visualization, which was at one time advocated as a replacement for the practice of techniques.

Best regards

Geoff