

THIS ISSUE

One Thin Wire...

Conclusion of the story about shooters reaching past their limitations to new levels of success, originally published by Precision Shooting.

Toughness Training...

A synopsis of an article by Ben Kallen about how top athletes triumph under pressure.

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Linda's Rule of Thumb...

A surefire way to fit a rifle to a shooter.

Peaking for Major Competitions...

A synopsis of an article by Dr. Tudor Bompa.

"Knowledge is the only instrument of production that is not subject to diminishing returns."

J.M. Clark

**ONE THIN WIRE
(CONCLUSION)**

Thin Wire #3: "I get nervous in shoot offs."

Antidote: "I love shoot offs. I really perform well when I focus on shooting each shot perfectly. Shoot offs give me a chance to show myself what I'm really made of. I always do well when I have an opportunity to prove myself."

Story: At this year's Ontario Provincial Championships, Keith tied with Jamie Feehan in the Brassey Match. We walked with Jamie up the range road to the 500 yard firing line. Jamie was clearly excited, talking in bursts, striding rather than strolling, and remembering a previous occasion that Keith had bested him in a shoot off.

At the firing line, Jamie continued to talk loudly as he prepared his equipment for the shoot off. Keith, in contrast, focused on getting ready, and when he spoke, did so quietly and calmly.

During the 5-shot shoot off, Jamie fired five perfect shots. He would have won, except, one of his shots was unfortunately on the wrong target, and so was scored as a miss. Keith won the shoot off and the match.

After the shoot off, we walked back down the range road together. Jamie shared some of his personal thoughts on his own behavior. "I'm a high strung person. When I have to shoot a match, I get wound-up. I'm always this way and especially in shoot offs." We challenged him to change his thinking. We asked him to consider saying, "When I shoot, sometimes I am excitable. Sometimes I am not. It's my choice and right now I choose to get down to business."

The very next match that we all had to shoot was the Lieutenant-Governor's Finals. If there was a match that he could get excited about, this was it! Coincidentally, Jamie was paired with me on the mound. During the course of the match, Jamie's ammunition jammed in his rifle and he had to remove spent casings with the aid of a cleaning rod. After the first jam, he was starting to lose his cool, and he lost a point on the next shot. This continued for 3 shots in a row. Then Jamie did something extra-ordinary. He decided not to let the ammo jams get to him. He decided to take full responsibility for all of his shots. He took control of himself and the situation. He finished the match like a champion.

After the match, Jamie was as happy as he would have been had he won the Lieutenant-Governor's prize. He had shot very well, but

more importantly, he had broken his "one thin wire" and freed himself to perform like a champion from then on.

Thin Wire #4: "I haven't been training lately."

Antidote: "I have prepared as well as I have been able to. I set aside as much time as I can to practice, to load ammo, and to prepare my equipment. I have a plan: I'm going to do everything I can at my end to fire perfect shots, and let the rifle take care of what happens at the other end of the range."

Story: There's an interesting phenomenon among new shooters. When the coach first sets them up and talks them through every shot (without scoping the shots), a new shooter will often produce beautiful little groups. Why? I think it's because all of the focus of both coach and shooter is on the correct end of the firing line. The shooter is new and has not prepared for this shooting practice. But s/he can shoot beautiful little groups. So the next time you think, "I haven't been training lately," think about the new shooter and where your focus should be.

There's no doubt that preparation and training will improve your chances of shooting well. When we run our Level 1 Police Sniper Course, we take

shooters from shooting 2-3 inch groups at the beginning of the week, to shooting sub-1 inch groups at the end of the week (which is usually the full capability of their rifle-ammo system). We do this by focusing their equipment, their bodies and their minds on firing perfect shots. This little bit of training (one week) makes a very big difference. I grant you that this one week is intense, focused, coached and very productive... as all training should be. So the next time you think, "I haven't been training lately," think on the value of even one good week of training and where you should be focusing the training time you do get.

One person who is known to have trained a very great deal is Lones Wigger. There's a story told about Lones in one phase of his military training. He didn't have easy access to live firing ranges for two years. He spent as much time as he could holding and dry firing in his room in the evenings. Then he made the US National Team and won medals at the Olympics. So the next time you think, "I haven't been able to train lately," think on the value of the training you **have** been able to do and focus all of your attention on performance.

One of Canada's Olympic shooters always "shoots a lot of volume" (i.e., shoots as much live

fire as possible, preferably full matches) prior to big matches. To my way of thinking, this is akin to cramming before an exam. What you learn in those last few minutes of cramming is mostly a lesson in self-confidence. Especially for a complex skill like target shooting, the body-mind-rifle system must be trained over time so that most of the things you have to do can be put on 'auto-pilot'. So the next time you think, "I haven't been training lately," think about the history you have in your sport and maybe you'll be able to break through that 'thin wire'.

Summary

We've heard lots of "thin wires"... everyone has some. Here's a few more you may have heard:

- "I haven't worked up a great load for this gun." This is a variant of the "I'm not as prepared as I could be." The shooter is not prepared to shoot well and therefore can expect not to.
- "I'm shooting my average". This "thin wire" tends to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The shooter has established a 'comfort zone', and does not plan to step outside of it.
- "In these conditions, no one will be able to shoot a possible." Again, this "thin wire" tends to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The shooter has decided that a perfect score is not possible, so

before s/he begins the match, the shooter is not shooting a score out of 50, but out of 49 or 48 or 45.

➤ "Everything was going good, until ..." This "thin wire" takes a particular adversity and generalizes to cover all of the events following.

Why do people start with an explanation of their immanent defeat? It seems to me that most people fall into two camps. Either they are afraid they **will not** measure up and will not be respected or they are afraid they **will** measure up and will be expected to repeat the performance in future.

Fear of not 'measuring up'
(Fear of failure)

When I hear any of these thoughts welling up in my mind it is usually because I feel inadequate in some way, and I'm trying to justify a bad performance even before it happens. The best remedy for me is to do everything that I can so that I feel not only just adequate, but very capable. Part of the solution lies in preparation and part of it lies in separating the things I can control from the things I can't control.

I will not be less respected if I shoot a bad shot. I will not be fired from my job if I shoot a bad shot. I will not get sick and die if I shoot a bad shot. People

will not think I am stupid or unworthy if I shoot a bad shot. So what is the real consequence of shooting a bad shot? Well, it is the waste of a perfectly good round of ammunition, a waste of the limited time I have to shoot good shots and it is an unfortunate reinforcement of a behavior I would rather not repeat. But mostly, it is just a waste of not getting the information about the conditions that I would have gotten if I had fired a good shot.

Fear of having to 'do it again'
(Fear of success)

Years ago, I had a fear of success in shooting. I had overcome this same fear in school and in business, but when I started to climb the scoreboards in shooting, that old familiar choking feeling returned. For me, it was entirely because I was uncertain why I was successful in shooting. It was as if some magic wand was waved over me and I was unbeatable. Other matches did not go well and I did not know why. It was not knowing why that made me fearful. It was not knowing how to make the "magic" happen that made me anxious. How in heaven's name could I repeat the performance if I didn't know how I had made it happen in the first place?

The solution of course is obvious, if not simple. I had to learn how

to produce a top level performance on demand. The way that I have done that is to start recording all of my observations about my own successes and to read about and talk about everyone else's. Analyze and record the good shoots.

I'm still not producing a perfect performance on demand every time out. But I am producing a very good performance more and more often, and more importantly, I know what I need to do and what I need to learn to continue on this path.

I've gone from thinking, "How the heck am I going to do that again?" to thinking, "I'm really looking forward to my next chance to do that again!"

Last Word

The piglets at the beginning of this story continued to spend a very nice summer in the old orchard. Once they had adjusted to the electric fence, they focused on what pigs do best... eating. They had a good life. By autumn, they were ready for their final destiny. They never really knew what was beyond their "one thin wire".

Is there a "thin wire" holding you back? Are you spending the summer of your life in the old orchard contented with mediocre scores? Are your scores smaller than they need to be because of

a "thin wire"? What is it that is keeping you from a bigger world and more success in life and on the range? Have a serious look within. And start with listening to your own self talk!



Editor's Addendum -

Dave Brennan, Precision Shooting

The cover letter from Linda Miller and Keith Cunningham that accompanied the manuscript submission had a rather interesting paragraph. If you're nice... we'll share it with you...

"The enclosed illustration, to go with the story, was done by a friend of MilCun who has been helping us with the construction of our ranges. His name is Craig McLeod and although he loves to shoot, he had never shot in a competition until recently. I built him a rifle in 6 mm BR, helped him with load development and took him to his first Target Rifle match where he competed in F-class. Despite the cold rain and the fact that he had never shot beyond 300 yards, we started the day at 500 yards and he finished with a silver medal. His first ever shot fired at 1000 yards was a v-bull. With his question as to when the next match would be, it would seem

that we have him hooked and netted."

CoachNet Editor's Note

I promised I would tell you this story. I gave One Thin Wire to a friend of mine who is not a shooter (at that time, had never touched a real firearm). She read it and told me that it was a great story and that it applied to lots of "thin wires", not just the examples given in the story. A few months later, my friend had a new job. A few months after that, there was a new man in her life, unlike any other that she had ever been with. And a few months after that, she started her own business, which she runs successfully to this day.

She told me that when she read One Thin Wire, she realized that because she had dropped out of university, she had always felt intellectually inferior. She had chosen jobs that did not challenge her, and she had chosen men that did not challenge her. When she realized that it was a Thin Wire that was holding her back, she changed her internal representation from "inadequate university dropout" to "smart person, not yet educated." It changed her life.

A few years later, she came to us and asked us to teach her to shoot, even though she was afraid of guns. One more Thin Wire, gone.

TOUGHNESS TRAINING

A synopsis of and commentary on an article by Ben Kallen, published in SHAPE magazine, January 1996.

The author begins by asking whether the reader has ever wondered how top athletes seem to thrive on stress, how they seem to be wired to work harder when they are under more pressure.

He then gives examples of several athletes who overcame personal setbacks (such as a string of losses or a family tragedy) to triumph in their chosen sport. He says that they all learned how to be 'tough' with performance psychologist James E. Loehr, Ed.D.

He quotes Loehr as saying that toughness is the ability to bring the full measure of one's ability to bear, on demand, regardless of what else is going on at the time. That is, they can control the Ideal Performance State.

Loehr professes that the same techniques that can be used to elicit the Ideal Performance State in sport can be used to get us through hardships in everyday life... in family, social, and workplace situations. These techniques not only get people through the situation, but also

help them become stronger in the process.

Loehr says athletes often call it being 'in the zone' and he characterizes this state as follows:

- "The most effective and reliable mental, emotional and physical state for performing at one's best."
- Very relaxed and calm, virtually feeling no pressure even though you are in an enormously stressful situation.
- A sense of high energy, confidence and focus.
- Being in control and enjoying oneself.

Loehr says that the biochemical state that we are in during peak performance situations is very similar to the biochemical state that we are in when we are having fun. He conjectures that is why top performers need overall health and happiness, as well as situational well-being. The more fun the athlete is having, the more likely s/he is to reach full potential and have a peak performance.

But being happy and enjoying oneself during a stressful situation is sometime elusive for even top athletes. Loehr says that athletes can use the following four techniques to improve the likelihood that they will be able to be "tough" in a tough situation:

1. Think positively - imagine yourself succeeding.
2. Recall successful moments.
3. Become an actor: pretend to be the person who can perform the task - both mentally and physically.
4. Replenish energy: when stressed, make sure you recover from it.

Think positively - imagine yourself succeeding

Loehr says that only you can control your thoughts, but that in order to do so, you must first become consciously aware of them. At that point, you can make a conscious effort to change your thoughts in a positive direction. This is the purpose of positive affirmations (e.g., "I love shooting in windy conditions") and visualization (e.g., "I can see myself raising my pistol and just as the sights align on the target, I hear it fire.") Another technique that can be used here is the "happy place" idea - a particularly vivid mental image of a place where the athlete can relax and feel confident and capable.

Recall successful moments

Recall how you felt at a particularly successful time and replay that experience over and over in your mind.

The article advocates that you try to recall your emotions on the day of your best performance and use those feelings to help you create the state that produces a peak performance. For some people, the article suggests, it is best to write down how this moment of excellence felt, physically, mentally and emotionally.

When we are coaching at MilCun, and someone has a particularly good performance, we tell them that they have just recorded a little movie in their brains, and they need to play that little movie over and over again to reinforce their good performance. This improves the likelihood that they will reproduce this good performance in the future.

Become an Actor

Pretend to be able to perform your sport with excellence... pretend you able both physically and mentally. You don't have to be there yet, you just have to project the image. Projecting the right image not only affects how other people see you - and treat you - it affects how you feel inside.

It turns out that the old song lyric that said, "Put on a smile and cheer up" was exactly right. When we put a smile on our faces, our body chemistry

actually changes and releases "happy" chemicals. Similarly, when we want to feel confident, we need to make our body look confident (shoulders relaxed, head up, smooth even motions) and the body chemistry will produce the supporting chemicals.

Furthermore, Loehr says that if you improve your body's response to a situation, you will actually change the way you perceive it.

Loehr says that when they studied professional actors, they discovered that they can summon a targeted emotion on demand... and isn't that exactly what we attempt to do in achieving a peak performance in sport? Further, he says, if they are really good, they can summon all the physical characteristics that accompany the emotion, so that the "acted" and the "real" emotions are impossible to differentiate. When the athlete learns to do this, the athlete is in control of his own emotions.

To be confident, then, the athlete needs to model a confident person in his facial expression and his posture, as well as in the way he walks and talks. As I write this, I have just watched the Liberal party leadership convention... I did not need to audio portion of the coverage to know who was leading or expecting to lead in each vote;

it was clear from the body language of the candidates. If you study the physiology of a shooter who is shooting well, you can see that he looks very different from the shooter who is struggling. The technique that Loehr is recommending is to copy that winning physiology on the outside in order to produce the internal state required for peak performance.

Replenish Energy

The article advocates repeated stress and recovery cycles to build toughness. The point is not only how much you can take, it is also important to be able to recover quickly.

In other words, as we instruct in our leadership (Executive Challenge) course:

I
don't
measure
a man's success
by how high he climbs,
but how high he bounces
when he hits bottom
- Patton

For improving physical toughness (an important component of mental toughness) the best training is interval training, where the body is stressed and allowed to recover over short intervals (a few minutes of stress and a few minutes of recovery). This also happens to

be outstanding training for shooters as it also develops anaerobic capacity, which is exactly what we need when we hold our breaths while firing. Loehr says that most of us don't stress ourselves enough physically, and when we are stressed, we don't allow ourselves to recover effectively. He cites the components of recovery as follows: sleep, nutrition, active rest (such as walking, stretching, fishing), passive rest (such as reading, meditation, social interactions). Loehr classifies these activities as "essential luxuries"- things that we see as luxuries that are really essential to a high performance person.

Loehr says that slumps are more often caused not by working too hard, but by not allowing enough (or effective) recovery time.

Our athletes often suffer from this, particularly when we travel to a major competition. Most of the shooters tend to congregate at the range and use as much range time as is made available. This is the equivalent of cramming before a major exam... and as Mom always said, "You'd be better off getting a good night's sleep than staying up all night and studying." Similarly, most of our shooters would be better off taking a day off and relaxing just prior to the major match. Loehr says that tough people are above all, resilient. They work

hard and then they recover effectively. They always manage their energy and intensity, spending it well and then regrouping and gathering strength again.

Loehr says that most of the methods of doing this are well known, especially to athletes. As coaches, we have all emphasized healthy nutrition and hydration, physical exercise for strength and relaxation, adequate sleep, a balanced social life and a calm attitude of acceptance. Loehr emphasizes that the way to develop toughness is to cultivate these techniques as part of a cycle of challenge and recovery, and to purposely make the challenges greater and greater.

Strategies for Mental Toughness

The article quotes these strategies from The New Toughness Training for Sports by James E. Loehr (©1994, printed by Penguin Books USA Inc.).

1. Change your thinking to change the way you feel.

I remember the first time I was introduced to this idea explicitly. It was 1985 and I was working with a business start up company. The Marketing/Creative VP was very good at her job, but as is often the case with creative people, allowed her life to be

driven by her emotional state. The boss gave her a book that basically said, "What you feel is determined by what you think. What you think is completely controlled by you." She thought this was a horrible way to manipulate your "natural" way of living. I thought it was normal, and empowering, and had been doing it without realizing it for many years. Seeing it laid out explicitly though, helped me to apply it more consistently, more often and in more difficult situations.

2. If you don't like the feeling you are feeling, change the picture.

Loehr recommends that you play one of those "success videos" that we discussed earlier whenever you feel bad feelings. I have also found it effective to put the situation in perspective by imagining how I would coach someone through it. Sometimes athletes are much harder on themselves than they need to be... and if they thought about what they would do as the coach in the situation, they would come up with a much more effective plan.

3. Practice positive thinking.

This is not news to CoachNet readers, or again to anyone raised by my Mom... who read Dr. Spock, but then raised us by

Norman Vincent Peale (The Power of Positive Thinking).

4. Never think or say "I can't" or "I hate".

After one of our Mental Marksmanship Seminars, a police officer told us that in his house "I can't" is not allowed... not for his four kids, his wife or himself. He said that this led to a positive, constructive attitude of "Here's how..."

5. Think vividly and positively about challenge.

Loehr suggests positive affirmations or self talk statements like: I will not surrender.

We agree with the sentiment, but we would use a more positive statement, in the usual form for conditioning the subconscious:

- I always fight the best fight;
- I am always my own best friend and best ally;
- I always bring my best to every challenge.

6. Keep a sense of humor.

There is a lot of evidence that a sense of humor (and a lot of laughter) helps people in stressful situations. Studies of patients with serious illnesses show that they are liable to recover more rapidly when humor is used as part of their

treatment. The "feel good" hormones that are released when we smile or laugh help us relax and regain control.

7. Learn to keep a here-and-now focus.

The way we say this in the Mental Marksmanship Seminar is this: Where ever you are, be all there.

For the shooter, this means that when you are firing a shot, you are thinking only about firing the shot. You are not thinking about previously fired shots, you are not thinking of scores or standings, and you are not thinking about friends, family or planned social events. Your whole mind is fully engaged on firing this one shot that you are firing right now.

8. During critical moments, focus your attention outside yourself.

This is a fundamental skill for sport, and for life. I first learned it in public speaking. As Loehr says, you need to be aware of yourself, but not self-conscious. Too much inward attention can make you choke. You need to be completely absorbed in the activity... whether it is public speaking or target shooting... and the more successful you are at staying "with" the activity, the more successfully you will perform it.

9. Practice strategic visualization.

Again, this is something very familiar to CoachNet readers... it simply means to mentally rehearse a successful performance, whether it is the one shot you are firing now or the whole match or the whole event or the whole season.

10. Think about your mistakes differently.

Again, we have discussed this point before in the pages of CoachNet... it is simply to apply "solution analysis". You figure out what you should have done (and write it down as an "I always..." statement) and let it go.

Similarly, the results of the shot on the target is data, pure data... learn from it and move on.

11. Use adversity to get stronger.

Again, we couldn't agree more... one of the stories previously published in CoachNet was called "The Challenge of Adversity"... where we focus on adversity as an opportunity to rise to the challenge, and to greater heights.

12. Use brainwashing to break habits.

This is the same idea as the "self talk" statements that we have

often discussed on these pages. For example, if you are overly challenged (overwhelmed) by difficult wind conditions, you say to yourself (and write notes all over the house and in your shooting kit) saying, "I love shooting in the wind" and "The windier it is the more I love shooting". You say it to yourself often enough and over a long enough period of time, your attitude will change. As you attitude changes, your approach to learning to read the wind will change and become more effective. Once in a while, you'll catch yourself doing something really smart and effective in response to the wind conditions... and you will start to really like shooting in hard wind conditions.

13. Focus on "just for today".

As a coach, this is one of my favorite techniques. Shooters are often very nervous about trying a new approach or a new technique, especially police snipers whose performance may affect a life-and-death situation. What I say to them is this: just for today, try this. If you don't like it, you can always go back to what you were doing before. This helps them relax and enjoy trying the new technique... and makes it far more likely that it will work for them.