



Olympic Clay Target Shooting Psychological Training

One catastrophic mistake.....

Clay Target Shooting is a sport where one mistake could be catastrophic and which could prevent your entry into an Olympic final. One less clay could mean the end of your journey to the podium.

Even a simple, unexpected blink of an eye, a thought that escapes the mind's control, the emotion of a moment – they can all ruin a performance that seemed perfect.

Shooters are aware of all this and that it is part of their usual sporting life. Let us think of the state of mind of the world skeet shooting champion who, at the Sydney Olympics, missed the first target, thus knowing that she would not be awarded the gold medal and that this was just a few seconds after the start of the race and she still had to shoot 124 clay targets.

Researchers in sports psychology have analysed these concepts and have been experimenting with them for years, whilst integrating different theories and searching for the best way to understand and “train” them and in order to understand what the skills of a top-level athlete are.

Some key skills:

High motivation and commitment

Motivation can be defined as an aspect of the individual that initiates, directs and supports human action towards a goal and is “a determining variable of behavior together with the ability of situational knowledge and constraints”.

In the initial stages of sports psychology, research on motivation (both with young people and with adult athletes) was often carried out by simply asking the subjects what were the reasons that pushed them to practice a specific



activity sport and who supported their commitment over time. The most frequent answer was about having fun, along with the following:

- A. Desire to form new friendships
- B. Achieve success
- C. Gain esteem and approval from others
- D. Feel valued
- E. Establish satisfying social relationships
- F. Learn skills and improve fitness

However, it was later understood that the reasons people stated were superficial explanations, underpinning the concept that there are multiple, profound reasons (of which we are sometimes less aware) such as the need for personal fulfilment (demonstrate your skills and competence) and approval by significant people (parents, coaches and friends).

In addition, there is the individual's ability to deal with competitive situations and manage stress, which are functions both of the objective importance of a competition and of personal evaluation: an example being even a game of little importance can cause anxiety if the coach or the parents have excessively high expectations of the child.

How is motivation determined?

The level of motivation of an athlete is determined by the interaction between individual factors, such as personality, needs, interests, his physical characteristics and his technical skills and situational factors, such as the characteristics of the coach, his family environment and sporty.

There are numerous studies on the motivation of athletes, such as for example the theory of self-determination, which speaks of Intrinsic and Extrinsic motivation, according to which the consequences that a person derives from the implementation of a behavior depend (at least in part) on the type of motivations that led that person towards the behavior.

Thus, if motivation is intrinsic, the likelihood of positive associates of the behavior occurring (e.g. enjoyment, ethics, enjoyment of doing the activity, experience of flow) should increase.

On the other hand, if the motivation is extrinsic, the negative emotions and behaviors associated with sports practice increase (use of substances, sense of constraint, eating disorders, compulsive exercise, anxiety, fear, etc.).



Achievement of Goal Theory

Another very interesting theory is the Achievement of Goal Theory developed to study motivation in the school context. Later it was widely used to analyze motivation in sports (Duda, 1999) in physical education contexts.

According to the achievement of Goal Theory, the perspectives people adopt in the comparisons of a purpose at any given time are influenced by three factors:

- Dispositional tendencies toward task or self.
- The perceptions of the salient objectives in the situation (i.e. motivational climate)
- The level of cognitive development

In the case of our example shooter, G, the main motivation is the desire to have fun and improve, combined with a passion for firearms of which he is a great expert.

High level of trust

The American-style sports psychology has dealt a lot with the “self-confidence”, which can be defined as the degree of certainty of possessing the skills necessary to be successful in the sport you play.

We can identify 8 variables that support it:

- master the shot
- demonstrate that you know how to do it
- be physically and mentally prepared
- feel fit
- be supported by their social environment
- feel guided by the coach
- feel at home in any environment
- positively accept what happens in the race

In the case of G, our sample shooter, his self-assessment of these 8 variables was very high in feeling guided by the coach and mastering the shot, instead it was lower in positively accepting what happens in the race and feeling fine in every environment.



Identification of objectives

Setting goals is essential in a path of improvement and the psychologist has the task of helping the athlete, in agreement with the coach, to choose the most suitable goals.

The first distinction to be made in this case is between result objectives and performance objectives. With performance, it is important to mark these objectives over time by dividing them into short, medium and long term.

The goals to reach are many, and can be divided into techniques, athletics and psychological; it is important that the athlete is aware of what he is training and how he is doing it.

Another type of distinction is that which concerns the objectives in training and the objectives in the competition, below is an example on 4 fundamental points:

Focus on the goal

- in training: the focus is on improving skills
- in competition: the focus is centered on providing an optimal performance or on overcoming the opponents.

Psychological skills

- in training: the objectives concern the improvement of skills related to mental dimension. They are about skills like concentration and its recovery after a mistake, knowing how to keep yourself motivated at any moment of training, or the building mental rehearsal exercise routines.
- in competition: psychological skills concerning the optimal management of competitive stress and feeling confident of being able to face the competitive situation.

[Translated from various Italian publications]