

# MASTERING THE MENTAL SIDE OF SKEET

Mastering the mental side of skeet will insure that you are completely ready each and every time you call for the bird and will help control the pressure of competition. What it will not do is help you make the shots where you are not fundamentally sound. If you cannot hit high two, low five, low six (typically the shots most people have problems with), or whatever your particular bugaboo is every time in practice, then the best that mastering the mental game can do for you is to insure that you don't miss that particular shot any more often than you do in practice. If you can only hit low six 50 percent of the time in practice, or 75 percent of the time, or 90 percent of the time, then that is the best you can hope for in competition!

On the other hand, I guarantee you that if you don't master the mental side, your problems with a particular shot that you haven't mastered will only get worse under the pressure of competition. If you have a problem with a certain shot, then you need to take a box of shells—or ten boxes or a thousand boxes of shells—and practice that shot until you have mastered it. Ask your practice buddies to help you. If all else fails, get expert help. (Actually, it might not be a bad idea to start with expert help. You might save yourself 990 of the thousand boxes of ammo and a couple of years of your time!)

If you are an A or B shooter in practice, then the only thing mastering the mental side will do for you in competition is insure that you don't shot C or D scores in competition. It won't make you a AA shooter; however, it can make a AA shooter a AAA shooter. You have to master the fundamentals first!

Stop, and go back and reread that paragraph again to make sure you understand what I am saying before you go any further. If you have ever watched any of Todd Bender's tapes or read any of his articles in "Skeet Shooting Review", then you know that he is a strong believer in mental preparation — a checklist if you will, and visualization. Based on his consistently being one of the top shooters as well as one of the premier instructors in the country, he just might know what he is talking about.

If you watch his tape, he always goes through the same routine before each and every shot. Also, if you listen to his discussion on the tape, he always visualizes every shot before he steps up the pad. You have to do this if you are going to get to the next level. All professional sports teams now use visualization, as do individual professional athletes in sports like golf and tennis. Professional sports is about money. They

wouldn't be doing it if it didn't work. You need to do it too. I am not going to tell you what you need to put in your checklist except to give you the following guidelines.

For all shots, "head on the gun" and "eye on the target" needs to be part of it. Also, on all long incoming shots, "stay in the gun and keep the gun moving after the shot" needs to be part of the checklist. Other than that, you can tailor your checklist to your particular needs.

Just remember this, your checklist shouldn't be longer than seven items. The reason is beyond this discussion; just trust me on that one. Also, you might want to have a long checklist (seven items) and a short checklist (two or three items). Use the short checklist when you are "cruising." More on when to use the long checklist later. . .

The next step in mastering the mental side may sound like a contradiction of everything I have told you up to now. Just stick with me. Do all your thinking, your visualization, your checklist, before you call for the bird. Your last — **AND ONLY** — thought before you call for the bird should be "SEE THE BIRD, LOOK AT THE BIRD, FOCUS ON THE BIRD, MOVE WITH THE BIRD, KEEP LOOKING AT THE BIRD". Thinking about anything else will only screw you up!

Let your subconscious take care of shooting the bird.

**YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS CAN SHOOT SKEET BETTER THAN YOU CAN!**

That's why you spent all those hours and thousands of rounds in practice learning how to do it. Your subconscious is now hardwired to shoot the bird. Let it do its job. It can do it better and faster than you can think. In competition don't try to shoot the bird sooner or later than you normally do. Don't try to look at it a little longer than normal. Don't try to lead it a little more or a little less. Remember, we visualized what the shot would look like before we stepped up to the pad. Your subconscious brain will compare that image to what the eye is seeing and when the two match, it will tell the finger to fire the gun. If you consciously try to help, you will only screw it up.

We do all kinds of things every day that happen automatically and faster than we can think about them without a hitch. This will work for skeet too. Think about this for a minute. We rarely ever miss on station 8. You know that there isn't time for a second look on 8. Station 8 is automatic. It has to just happen. If your subconscious can handle station 8, surely you can trust it to handle that long incomer on low 2 or high 6 without any help from you!

Lastly, if you have any extraneous thought — let alone a negative thought — before you call for the bird, **STOP** and **COMPLETELY** start over again. I've already told you that your subconscious can do the job, but it can only do the job if there isn't any interference.

Skeet shooting is easy, but it's just difficult enough so that you can't do it successfully if you are having other thoughts at the same time. Obviously, thinking "I'm going to miss this one" will screw you up. Thinking "one more bird and I'm in the shoot off" is equally bad. You are straight in the last round, or you are on your way to your best HOA ever, when you suddenly



remember that you have to pick up a gallon of milk on your way home. This will kill you too.

You remember I said that you might want to have a long checklist and a short checklist. Well, when things get tense or you start having extraneous thoughts, this is where your long checklist comes in. Your long checklist works the same way that counting sheep does when you are trying to fall asleep. It will suppress other thoughts that will interfere with your performance — be they nerves, negative thoughts, or extraneous thoughts.

With your long checklist, and again, I'm not going to tell you what to put in it, what follows are just examples — just don't exceed seven items, you need to be very focused. Run it just like a pre-takeoff checklist between a pilot and copilot.

"Belly button in the low house window."

"Check."

"Left knee bent and 60 percent of weight on your left leg."

"Check."

"Left hand holding the fore end loosely, wiggle your fingers."

"Check."

"Gun at hold point and eyes looking where you expect to pick up the target."

"Check."

I think you get the point. I guarantee you that really focusing on the checklist will, the more you practice it, allow you to completely suppress your nerves and all other thoughts. Todd Bender says that half of all misses are caused by not keeping your head on the gun. Another famous instructor says that most misses are caused by not keeping your eye on the target. If you always remember "head on the gun" and "eye on the target" that should eliminate the majority of your misses. If you will use the long checklist, that should eliminate your misses caused by the pressure of competition and extraneous thoughts.

So there, now you have it. No more excuses for any misses.

Lastly, remember this, we shoot in competition the way we practice. You can joke around and have a good time with your buddies while you are practicing, but when you step up to the pad, you have to be 100 percent focused and serious. Practice your fundamentals and mental preparation every time.

Is there any other secret? Well yes, but, as Todd Bender says, if I told you, then I would have to kill you. Besides, I'm trying my best to stay one step ahead.

— Dave Lattimer

