

Psychology

Why competitive circumstances can undermine your performance

Sports psychologist Alistair Whittingham examines why competitive circumstances can undermine an archer's ability to perform, and the questions that competitors should be asking themselves in order to get back on track why is there such a difference between the ability to perform in practice and in competition?

I get asked this a lot, and it is to do with how an athlete separates practice and the performance arena. In practice, the emphasis is on technical skills and fitting individual parts together, which will eventually allow the archer to give the best performance that they can. Performance requires the individual to understand exactly what is being measured, and how best to access their skill. In this article we are going to look at two aspects of performance. Firstly, how an individual assesses their skill, and secondly, what exactly they can focus upon to make the performance the best it can be under stressful circumstances. Assessing performance is a simple concept, but is often overlooked within the coaching or training framework. In order to access a skill, it needs to be clearly and effectively embedded within the athlete's mind. This is not just a physical routine, it is also how the individual remembers what it is they are trying to do. When we are learning to do something, we have a checklist of the steps to follow; as we get better at it this checklist is reduced until it disappears, and we have an understanding of what the overall technique is. Any skill, be it driving a car, playing an instrument or shooting a bow, can be broken down into a number of steps in order to teach it. However, each of these steps is interlinked and we must recognise where we draw the line to say what each step is. As soon as we become more skilled at this particular movement or technique, the original well-defined steps blur into one. It is important that this process of looking at the whole and seeing how each part will fit together happens and is encouraged by the coach and thought about by the athlete. Take tying shoelaces — it is a long and fairly complicated list of defined parts that don't initially fit together, but the student quickly learns that one part leads to another. Once the individual understands the parts that make up this particular skill, they simply refer to the whole skill as "tying shoelaces". For a skill to be easily accessed, it is important within the performer's brain for there to be a good set of "signposts" to it. The most effectively accessed skills, especially under pressure, have many different routes within the performer's experience laid down in their memory. Imagine that in your brain there is a refrigerator door, where we stick post-it notes to remind ourselves of things. If something is important, the more notes we put on the better it will be remembered. In practice, this means that we refine our skill checklist to something short that makes sense for us. Back to the fridge door analogy, we do not have a long list of things that must be done, all we actually have, for example, would be 'Tuesday - Meet Pete 7.30'. Because we understand what we are doing, we don't need to write 'leave work at 5.30, shower, get changed, pick up tickets' because our understanding means that short note mentally encompasses everything we must do in order for us to make it happen. This means, in performance sport terms, that a short simple reminder allows us to access everything that we need to know for that particular skill and we don't need to run through the minutiae. We trust that it is going to be the case that we know how to do the thing and we just need a simple reminder. We need, in moments of stress, to be able to go to that mental 'fridge door'. It will in a sub-conscious way trigger everything that we are going to do. If you were wondering why this is important, it's because we are trying to recognise well-learned techniques, allowing them to come to the fore without over-analysis and without looking at the infinite number

of ways that we could do that particular thing. This is what we “pay for” in practice. We reduce the cues and analysis of what we do so that it is simply trusted that what we will do is good enough. It is what we do naturally as human beings, so how do performances still fail under pressure? They fail because the performer fails to identify what the most important aspect or “question” of the performance is, which is vital in any performance. For archers there seems to be a large number of questions which we should be answering every time we shoot an arrow, which may be within our control or not. For example, that the question they trying to answer is one of feel, but that doesn’t really work as it is going to happen during or after execution, and therefore the thought process is based upon what's going to happen with respect to the result. A nice simple question that ties up all the aspects of what any competitive archer is looking for in performance, and aids in accessing those skills as we discussed earlier would be “I want to be great at full draw”. This is totally within the control of the archer, with no exterior forces affecting it, and the archer can feel completely comfortable that they can achieve that. “Being great at full draw” will be different in level for each archer, but what I am saying is they can focus on being as good as they can be at a definable, measurable point in the process. However, they are not going to stop and check they have achieved this during the shot, the level of trust that practice gives them is that they should be able to state this particular goal to themselves before the shot and expect it to happen. If they are “great” at full draw they can perform well the aspects of the shot that they most worry about. If they worry about execution, they are not answering the right question, and they will miss out all of the steps that get them to good execution. Within any performance the vital part is identifying the question which will allow the performance to be acceptable, not to look at the infinite number of ways that events can go wrong the performer’s control. Another issue is trying to control areas that are actually so specific that they will cause a failure within the performance. For archers, execution is often focused on, which means they fail to put themselves in a position where good execution can take place. The recurve archer who is concerned about getting through the clicker, or the compound archer who is concerned about how to get the release to go off, set themselves up poorly and so execution is poor. In any performance, identify the question and then look at ways of answering it, and your performance will be as good as it is when there is no pressure.