

Is the Dead Release Really Dead?

I had to go to shooting with a release aid from shooting “fingers” due to contracting tendonitis in my draw arm. But having had no problems with that arm for several years I felt the urge to shoot with my fingers on the string again. Instead of going back to my old style I thought I would try a new one—barebow. Never having shot barebow before I acquired a coach and started studying all of the good finger shooter’s “looses” I could find. To my surprise, most of the good finger shooters, and we are talking world, national, and state championship level shooters, shot with a dead (or near dead) release! I had been taught that a dead release was a serious form flaw in that only a few extraordinary archers of the past were able to master it. What I realize now is that the dead release isn’t really dead!

Dead and “Live” Releases

If you don’t know the difference between a dead release and, for want of a better term, a “live” one, in a dead release the string hand doesn’t move from its anchor position when the string is loosed. The string fingers are simply relaxed and the string is away. For a much better description of the live release than I could manage, see Don Rabska’s article, *Developing The Magic Release* (AFm Vol. 6, No. 2). In short, a live release involves continuous backward motion of the drawing hand, which only slows its progress at anchor, then jumps back several inches in reaction to the releasing of the string (often signalled by a clicker). See the photo montages for examples of both kinds of releases.

So, Who Is Right?

I think the confusion over whether the dead release is a form flaw or a viable form option stems from the transmission of archery wisdom.

In the English-American tradition of bow shooting the predominant bows shot were English longbows and American flatbows (also considered longbows). The technique for shooting both was learned over centuries. Consider the following quote, “The material points to be attended to (in the loose) are ... bringing the elbow of the drawing arm round and loosing while drawing, without making any pause immediately before the loose.” (**The English**



Here is Charley Washburn, a much decorated archer, executing his release, a very effective and dead release.



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Bowman, T. Roberts, 1801). The continuous motion of the live release of the bowstring was known much earlier as Roberts is commenting on statements made by Roger Ascham in his book, **Toxophilus**, published in London in 1577 and Ascham (pronounced ass-cam, I am told) was reporting on archery wisdom he was seeing being lost!

This wisdom was passed down from generation to generation of archers and was valid when the longbow was king which was true in the U.S. until about 1950. (I pick this date because all of the photos of NAA champions pictured with their bows

show longbows before that date and recurved bows after.) After the longbow, the bow of choice became a recurved bow. The wisdom of the live release continued because the fundamental forces on the archer didn't change, although there were a few archers who did find success with a dead release. The recurve bow ruled from that point onward, especially in Olympic competition which was restarted in 1972. But, the compound bow became predominant in the 1980s to the point that over 90% of all archers shot one. Here is where the wisdom of the past became challenged. With the compound bow came letoff, that is the draw weight 'let off' from a peak value to a much lower value—first about 30% lower, then 40%, then 50%, and 60% of peak weight to where most compound bows today have between about 65% and 80% letoff from their peak draw weights. In a typical scenario, a 50 lb. draw compound bow with 65% letoff will leave the archer holding only about 17-18 pounds in hand at full draw. This allows shooters of compound bows to stay at full draw under very little tension and aim for extended periods of time. It also allows for a dead release.

The "Dead" Has Risen

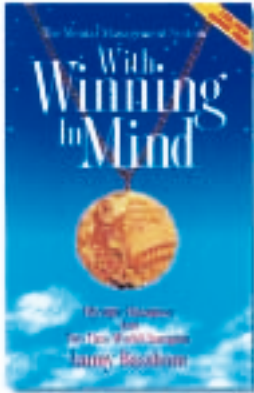
Pass the word, the dead release is back! . . . if . . . if you shoot a compound bow! The various ills of fingers shooters—letting the fingers fly forward at loosing, plucking, jerking, flinching, etc. are all solved if you take your anchor (high or low) and place it firmly on your face and *don't move it*—just, as Don Rabska says, "let the string go." If your string hand never leaves anchor, how can you have a fly away release, or a pluck? Of course, if you move your head to the string or make any number of other form mistakes, the dead release won't fix them—but neither will a live release.



Here I am with my recurve bow executing a necessarily "live" release.



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Here I am with my compound bow executing my newly rediscovered dead release.



The only heightened difficulty in using a dead release is losing back tension at full draw, which leads to creeping and collapsing, so special attention must be placed on maintaining participation of the back muscles at full draw. (I focus on moving my draw arm elbow backward in an arc.)

In many cases the danger of losing back tension is a moot point because so many modern bows have cams that aren't even near round or have only a single cam and therefore have very steep, short valleys in their force-draw curves. The consequence of this is that if you creep in as little as one quarter of an inch (half of a centimeter) from full draw the string will be pulled from your fingers. A very handy built in draw check!

Conclusion

The compound bow has made obsolete some of the accrued wisdom of archery and confirmed much else, so we need to examine critically the changes that the "new technology" of archery has on our form. In the case of the compound bow, the dead release is no longer a form flaw. As in music it is in archery, the instrument shapes the form of the performer.

Steve Ruis lives in Grass Valley, CA and, though he started out as a field archer, he now enjoys all aspects of archery.