Lanny Bassham

Pressure — Is It *Friend* or *Foe*?

Mental Skills

"How can I avoid the pressure that I feel when competing?" This question, or something like it, comes up a lot from shooters. In fact, I might have asked that same question early in my career. We are conditioned by the commonly held idea that pressure is a bad thing. If it's bad then we need to avoid it.

Pressure presented a problem for me because every time I competed in a big competition I felt it. I didn't feel pressure in training very often. Interestingly enough, it did not seem to cause my scores to go down but I was concerned and anxious when it occurred. In my more than forty years as both a competitor and a coach I have known only a few shooters that say that they do not feel something different in competition. For many, the effects of pressure are so destructive that they cause loss of points at critical times at best and the premature termination of careers at worst. However, many elite shooters find that the pressure of competition is useful, even essential, to the attainment of their best performances.

Today my answer to the question of avoiding pressure normally sounds something like this, "You should not want or need to avoid pressure. Pressure, or the stress of competition as some call it, is not something you need to avoid. It is something you need to use."

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The first thing we must do to control a thing is to understand a thing. The negative effects of pressure seem to be more prevalent in shooters who have trouble winning. You can hear shooters talking about butterflies, being tight and the infamous choke. By the way, what is the opposite of choke anyway? We seem to have a great vocabulary for the dark side of pressure and few words for the good side. Oh, there is "Use the force, Luke!" but I don't hear that much anymore. The good side of pressure just doesn't make it as topic of conversation in a negatively charged world, but it should. Pressure, simply put, is neither positive nor negative. Pressure is like air. Too much and you have a hurricane. Too little and you suffocate. But in the correct amount it is the breath of life.

The fact is we need pressure. We just need it in the right amount. I've spent 30 years trying to understand it so I can use it to an advantage. Here's what I've come up with. Pressure is two things at the same time, anxiety and arousal.

Anxiety is fear. It is almost always viewed as a negative but, think about it. Fear is what keeps me from driving too fast, following too close to the car in front of me and not paying my credit card on time. Fear in a competition however can be paralyzing. We can be afraid of not shooting well which usually means that we will not be happy and we will have a long ride home. Bummer! Here is the good news, fear is overcome by experience. I've got to admit I was scared in my first nationals but the fear dropped with exposure to pressure situations.

Someone once said that the final in the Olympics is the greatest pressure situation a person can face short of a loss of life encounter. I might add that pressure also increases in direct proportion to your chances of winning. I've been there and I agree. When I won my Olympic Gold in Montreal I was the favorite and I felt the pressure but I did not feel fear. I did feel arousal.

That is the other side of pressure. Arousal is

your level of excitement. Everything we do best has a corresponding level of arousal. If we are too relaxed, we might lose focus. If we are too nervous we might rush the shot or over-hold. People have a natural arousal state. Some are calm by nature while others are bouncing off of the walls. Sports also have different natural arousal states. Sports like fencing and downhill skiing are high arousal sports. These athletes are excited and full of adrenalin from the start. Shooting and golf are low arousal sports. Shotgun and archery are medium-low in arousal while International Rifle is just above coma. Adrenalin increases the pulse rate and moves the arousal level up. Way up! However, again this is not all bad. An adrenalin push can cause increased endurance, added strength, and increased awareness of the senses.

"Remember coal under pressure produces a diamond. Shooters in control, under pressure, produce winning scores."

So, if you are a naturally high arousal person in a low arousal sport you may have more trouble with arousal control than someone more naturally balanced to their sport. If that is the case some proven arousal control techniques must be learned, practiced and mastered.

If you are too nervous in a competition I have three suggestions that can help to match your excitement level to your sport.

Recognize that pressure is positive and something that you can control. First, pressure is not in your imagination. It is a good thing and you can use it to your advantage. You must accept that it is normal to feel something in a pressure situation. This is your body saying, "This is important. Pay attention!" Accept the advantages of stress and expect that your scores will be better for having felt pressure. Also, do not be surprised if you occasionally do not notice pressure's effects even in a big competition. Pressure does not always make itself known to the conscious mind.

Focus on what you want to see happen not on what is stressing you. Most of the time when shooters experience point-reducing arousal levels it's because they are thinking about something that causes the arousal level to rise. "Boy, I really need this one!" "What am I doing wrong?" "If I finish this series clean, I win the match." These thoughts are on outcomes, not on the process of shooting. Thinking about what you are doing wrong or counting your score just increases the negative effects of arousal. Keep your mind on the process of shooting well and the score will take care of itself.

Sometimes the pressure seems to increase just after a poor series and you might need a way to recover. One effective technique is to have a planned and trained recovery strategy. All recovery strategies have two important things in common. First you must get your mind off of the things that are increasing the arousal/anxiety response. Secondly, you must do something that you can absolutely control. Here is an example. You've had a bad series of shots, you begin to think about your score and you need to recover. First, concentrate on your breathing. Breathe in a practiced pattern for say three breaths. Then relax a specific muscle group such as your neck and shoulders. Finally, visualize being in complete control of shooting a perfect shot. You can only think of one thing at a time so while you are thinking about these things you cannot be still thinking negatively. Also, you can 100% control your method of breathing, the relaxation of your muscles and the visualization so the second step is accomplished as well. Now, when you refocus on your next series you should be recovered and should shoot well.

If you catch yourself becoming a bit too aroused and need a quick tool to get you calmed down try yawning. This third recommendation might seem strange but this really works. If you catch yourself becoming a bit too aroused do a fake yawn. The same chemicals that cause your muscles to relax when you yawn naturally also seem to work just the same when you fake a yawn. Next time you watch the Olympics on TV watch for this technique. You will see someone in a pressure situation yawning. Everyone else will think he is really in control. You will know the truth. He might be using the fake yawn to control unwanted arousal.

In our next session we will look at some of the elements that your mental system should contain to achieve consistency in competitions.

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