

The “Three Ss” of Coaching

Teaching is an art. A noteworthy teacher has knowledge of the subject matter, a flair for presenting it, and a passion for the subject. While teaching certification courses for archery camp counselors I came face to face with the reality that some of these young people have little or no previous archery experience and most have never taught before. How does one impart an enthusiastic but inexperienced instructor with the skills to safely and effectively teach a shooting sport?

The NAA Level 1 instructor course materials present an excellent framework for teaching group archery classes but I found that the one thing that the new instructors went away lacking was any sort of teaching philosophy or solid idea of what they were trying to achieve. Since it was unlikely that the majority of their charges would become world class archers during an eight week summer camp program there was a need for a more achievable goal. I pondered this question and concluded that there are three objectives in teaching archery: safety, self-esteem, and satisfaction. The three Ss as the instructors I have taught now call them.

We all would agree that *safety* is the primary objective for an instructor or coach. Despite the obvious liability issues involved with injuries the reality is that, no matter how minor it is, an injury detracts from the fun and is a distraction from learning. A new archer who ends up with bowstring bruises may not be inclined to give the sport a second try. The age old wisdom of “if it hurts, don’t do it” is ingrained in us all. Instructors must be vigilant and attentive to each archer’s technique and form. In the camp programs I have set up, I have a policy of having the range run by a range captain who serves as the safety officer and supervises those present on the range while instructors work with the archers on the line. It is impossible to pay attention to coaching while attempting to keep track of enthusiastic juveniles who are waiting for their turn to shoot or to see an archer on the other end of the line doing something unsafe. It is also unfair to the archers on the line if they are not receiving the undivided attention of their instructor. A good safety program requires planning and a complete understanding by the staff of their roles and responsibilities.

Second only to safety, *self-esteem* is a pivotal part of the teaching process. Shooting sports are unique in

not requiring the participants to compete against others to be able to gauge their performance. In the case of children this is a particularly valuable characteristic for an activity. Kids and especially teens live in a world where comparison to their peers is a daily ritual. Clothes, shoes, grades, hair styles, and the level of social grace (“How cool am I?”) are constant measures of their personal self-worth. Participation in conventional youth sports such as baseball, basketball, and other team sports serve to further involve kids in comparing themselves to others. The not-so-athletic are discouraged from participating because they can’t keep up. The athletically gifted may be discouraged by finding themselves on a team of less competitive or less gifted athletes. Archery allows all to compete with a suitable opponent—themselves. They can see improvements in their own performance in real-time, even if the person next to them on the shooting line is shooting better scores—if this end was better than the last, there is something to pat one’s self on the back about.

Instructors and coaches play a big part in the development of a student’s self esteem. Anyone who has experienced the devastation that occurs when overly-zealous Little League parents rear their ugly heads at a game will attest to the damage to a young person’s self esteem. While I am not advocating the kind of 70’s teaching philosophy of “there is no wrong, just different,” I do suggest that sensitivity, tact, and diplomacy are all necessary tools for the instructor or coach to have at their immediate disposal.

NAA trained instructors and coaches are familiar with the approach advocated in NAA instructor materials as “the OREO technique.” This is a simple method of presenting criticism to a student and making it palatable. For a brief refresher, it works like this:

1. Present the student with some praise: *e.g.* “Your anchor is looking much better today!” Don’t make it up, find something genuinely good about the archer’s performance. People, especially kids, can spot ingenuous complements a mile away.

2. Present the student with some constructive criticism worded in a tactful manner: *e.g.* “Let’s try and keep your bow-arm up after you release- I think that will improve your grouping”.

3. Put the other cookie on the OREO by adding some more positive thoughts to the other side of the “sandwich,” e.g. “Your release is looking good so I think that may improve your shot (referring to the previous suggestion)”

In many ways this technique is like putting medicine in a piece of food to mask its taste. Nobody really likes to be criticized, so adding the praise makes it taste much better.

Any athlete from the beginner to world class needs to have their self-esteem intact to perform to the best of their abilities. At the most basic level, you attract more flies with honey than you do with vinegar, as the standard grandparent speech goes.

The third goal of teaching or coaching is *satisfaction*. As a coach or instructor we are providing the student with instruction which is intended to improve their archery skills and to help them meet their goals as an archer. Whether that goal is to bring home gold or merely hit the gold is inconsequential. We must evaluate our students' goals and tailor the training that we provide to help achieve them. Sometimes effective teaching requires us to know when to back off if we are to keep a student interested. This is particularly appropriate for those who teach children. While a student may have poor form, if their interest is purely in shooting some arrows at the target, attempting to push them beyond that level of interest may result in them losing enthusiasm or interest. If you were selling appliances would you show a customer who asked about refrigerators your washing machines? Respecting the student's interests in archery and assisting them to *safely enjoy the sport to the level that interests them* is key in retaining students. The student who leaves today happy with their own achievements and

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experiences in archery may decide tomorrow or next year that they would like to pursue the sport more seriously.

As a coach of more advanced archers, satisfaction is still the third element even though the goals that

will achieve satisfaction for those students are much different. In this case, the archers' satisfaction is probably in fine tuning their shooting style or their equipment to achieve competitive scores. In both cases, however, our goal as instructor or coach is to achieve satisfaction for the athlete.

Very few of us are fortunate enough to just teach world class archers. Some of us may never have (or perhaps even desire) the opportunity to teach beyond the level of a camp archery program. What we all have in common is that we are ambassadors representing the sport of archery to the rest of the world. If we keep in mind these three basic principles of teaching we are likely to better serve our students, retain and generate more interest and enthusiasm, and portray our sport in the best possible light.

Corporations have embraced a tradition of having a “mission statement” which defines their goals in very basic terms. Let us make the mission statement of the archery coaching community the three Ss—*safety, self-esteem and satisfaction*.

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