

Mental Program *or* Pre-Shot Routine?

When we first began shooting we were told that progress can be accelerated by following a pre-shot routine just before releasing the shot. This routine aids us in remembering to follow the steps of proper form in the correct order. Here is an example of a pre-shot routine—

- Nock the arrow
- Grip the string
- Hang the bow
- Take a grip
- Check posture while raising the bow
- Draw the arrow smoothly
- Aim
- Push and pull (release occurs subconsciously)
- Follow through

You might have used a routine like this when you started shooting. Notice that all of the items in the list are physical steps and conscious thoughts. They remind you to perform the next step and keep you on a consistent track. That is a good thing. Running a pre-shot routine also occupies your conscious mind, keeping you from becoming distracted by those around you or worrying about your score. The process aids you in both remembering to perform everything in a certain order and in maintaining focus.

I like the pre-shot routine and recommend that you do it when learning to shoot. However, once you have developed skill you may find that the thinking about what you are physically doing becomes the wrong thing to do when you are drawing the bow. Let's look at why.

The pre-shot routine describes what you are physically doing while shooting. The thoughts are conscious pictures and therefore are left-brain

in origin. This presents a problem. Do you really want to shoot the shot in the left-brain? No! You want the shot to be released subconsciously. That's right-brain stuff. In fact, I've observed that skilled shooters often shoot best when they do not think very much at all about the act of shooting while drawing, aiming and releasing the shot. Consciously thinking about the shot-routine requires you to stay in the left-brain, the analytical side of your grey matter. So, how do you solve this problem?

It has been said that the conscious mind can only think of one thing at a time. I believe that is not only true, but a principle of conscious thought. The subconscious mind can think of

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thousands of things at once. That is the side of the brain we want shooting the shot. So, how do you make the hand-off from the conscious mind to the subconscious mind just prior to shooting? You do it by running a mental program while simultaneously executing a shot routine. The mental program is what we are consciously thinking while the pre-shot routine is what we are

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physically doing. In fact, if you find the correct mental program your transition from left-brain to right-brain can become just as automatic as blinking your eye.

So, when do I need to move from the pre-shot routine way of thinking to using a mental program? I find that once you have automated the steps in the pre-shot routine that it is time to look for a mental program. Once skills are automated you may find that the pre-shot routine will not hold your focus during the shot sequence and you may find yourself day-dreaming on the shot. This error can cause over-holding and moving as you shoot. That's the last thing you want.

A mental program is a planned, practice sequence of thoughts that you think about as you are performing your pre-shot routine. The length of the mental program depends on how quickly you execute your routine and when you start the mental program. The initiation point may vary quite a bit from shooter to shooter, but the end of the program is always the same; you release the string.

Almost any series of thoughts will work as long as they meet the following criteria. First, the mental program should occupy the conscious mind while you execute the shot. If the conscious mind is not occupied, it

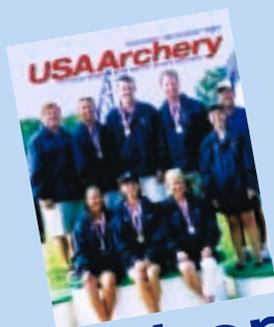
“The mental program should be simple. It should not be a burden for you to have to do.”

will fill the mental screen with something and, much too often, the picture is counter-productive to proper shot execution. Next, it is advisable to select thoughts that

trigger the subconscious. A common method is to rehearse the feeling of shooting a perfect shot somewhere within the mental program. Next, a mental program should be duplicable, allowing you to run the same program on each shot. Finally, the mental program should be simple. It should not be a burden for you to have to do.

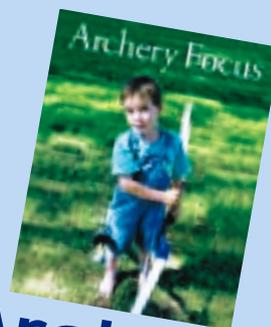
Remember we are moving the mind from the conscious to the subconscious during the time the mental program is running. This transition causes the left brain to quiet and allows the right brain to execute the shot. We want the subconscious to shoot the shot, not the conscious.

What does a mental program look like? This is an individual thing and I resist offering much in the way of advice in an article, but here is what some good shooters have used as steps in their mental programs. All mental programs have a defined start point. It might be drawing an arrow out of the quiver or nocking the arrow on the



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“Some shooters actually run song lyrics in their program.”

string. The next thought might be to rehearse the feeling of shooting a perfect shot. Some shooters have good results with focusing on breath control, while others focus on a certain muscle group during their mental programs. Some get good results with a relaxation step while a clearing of the mind step just prior to releasing the shot works well for others. Some shooters actually run song lyrics in their program. See, I told you it was an individual thing.

I find that most shooters haven't developed a consistent mental program, haven't practiced it in training, and suffer frequent losses of focus in big competitions as a result. The program should be practiced. Always finish a training session with a few ends of match simulation. Rehearse that this is the upcoming competition and you are shooting well. Run the mental program that you plan to use in the competition during this time. Then, when you get in the competition you should have little trouble running the program consistently.

If you are inconsistent in your shooting I suggest that you first revisit your shot routine. This going-back-to-the-basics method just might reveal that you are inconsistent in a critical step of your form. Then check out

your mental program. Do you have one? Do you train with it so you can trust it in the competition? If so, you will minimize your chances

of loss of focus and points.

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