

David Clink

Coaching Archery

Zone Mechanics

Over the last few months I have been struggling with relieving tension in my student's shooting as well as my own. The typical student complaint was "How can I relax when I have to pull this bow back?" Usually, I begin by dropping the draw weight for those who are still having delusions of grandeur about being Sampson. Others struggle because they have been hit by a string and are ever vigilant against the mighty sting of the HMPE hornet. Basically, I really want people to enjoy archery or otherwise why do it, right?

Do you ever wonder what folks are talking about when they say, "Man, I was in the zone today on the golf course today?" I used to hear that said when I played softball or racquetball and even on the ski slopes. At first I just assumed they stopped by the Auto Zone automotive parts store and bought some new windshield wipers. (Of course, they could have been talking about a Gentleman's Club someplace, but that is a topic for another time)

In archery, more so than other pastimes I have been involved in over the last 35 years, I have discovered this elusive zone. Unfortunately, it was often a one chance in every ten phenomenon that just seemed to occur on a given day. I knew what it felt like but had no clue how to get there on command. Was it the weather, or a breeze, or some sound? Was it related to something that had occurred earlier in the day or week? I was sure it was not tied to something stressful or negative, but beyond that I was clue-

less. All I was sure about was that being in the zone was definitely a good thing for the arrows just seemed to go to the right impact point time after time.

It wasn't until I started offering private lessons that I started to believe that getting in the zone was actually controllable and was brought on more by a Zen-like approach to things versus some conscious endeavor. I went back to some of my soccer coaching materials and reviewed the concept of visualizing that I had taught players wanting to improve their shooting accuracy. I had first read about a thing called the "success mechanism" in books like *Psychocybernetics* by Maxwell Maltz. In this concept you learn about the subliminal capability within each of us to

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achieve success in many things by actually seeing or visualizing the end result. The trick is to be able to see it perfectly every time. This in turn programs this success oriented computer in all of us with a specific objective. The reason it works is that your mind can not tell the difference between a vividly imagined experience and an actual experience. Ben Hogan practiced

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this—as a child he ached to play golf but didn’t have the resources to actually play. He would pretend to hit shots over fences and such while running errands for his mom. When he got a chance to caddy at a golf course no one could believe he had never played golf when he hit his first golf ball. Hilton (of the Hotel fame) did the same thing with hotels and by the time he built his first hotel he had the entire structure designed in his head down to the drapes and carpet. Later in the 1970s the concept emerged in books such as Inner Tennis, Inner Golf, etc. The better you become at visualizing what you want to do, the better you will be when actually doing the activity.

I started using this concept in archery before learning about “blind baling.” Initially I recommended shooting at an empty bale when trying to get students to master the feel of a surprise release as part of teaching them how to shoot with back tension. Later I implemented the visualization concept by having them close their eyes and visualize the arrows flying to the target and hitting the X. I had them see the arrow flying in slow motion and even “Robin Hooding” the previous arrow. Part of this was to get them to achieve a surprise release by not thinking about the release and instead thinking about aiming. The mechanics of how the arrow was released and all the other mechanical things that happened in a given shot sequence were kept to a minimum or just enough to correct really bad form from becoming a habit. I actually changed the shot sequence I had been teaching to include a pre-visualization of the entire shot so that when the time came, they simply xeroxed the process in their task performing mind.

Okay, so how does the average archer get himself into this Zen state or the zone? I am sure there are as many processes to do this as there are archers, but I seem to have a method that others have found a good start and I make sure they know that it is an individual thing they can modify, as necessary, so that the zone methodology doesn’t become yet another conscious activity. Once they commit to the shot, then the entire aiming effort lies in the realm of the success mechanism. The success mechanism couldn’t care less about wrist angle or elbow placement. The success mechanism is totally immersed in the X or the end product of the arrow launch.

For those that shoot in competitions this can be a valuable process to learn because it can completely

remove you from the conditions around you that can detract from a good shot. For another of my students I am hoping that it will help him with his buck fever which happens every time he gets an 8 or 12 pointer within range.

Some preliminary techniques must be taught for those just learning to shoot a bow. For this reason I consider the zone elements a second or third lesson concept. This allows new students to get over the excitement of new gear and the initial thrill of shooting their first arrows. Usually by the second or third lesson they are already wanting to know why the arrows aren’t piling up on the butt in dime size groupings. It is also enough time to see if they are really hooked on archery and whether they can deal with the discipline it takes to master it. Once they have committed to the sport and understand how it differs from other sports, then I can teach the blind baling and visualization ideas.

Here is a process to train yourself to get into the zone and stay there for the duration of a given shot or an entire tournament:

1. Never shoot when you have had a really negative day with a lot of unresolved issues from work or at home.
2. Perform the correct warm up and stretching exercises. You cannot stretch a cold muscle. Light aerobics are sufficient to get the blood flowing so that the muscles can be easily stretched.
3. If possible get 6-8 feet from the target such that you can close your eyes and not fear twanging an arrow into a light fixture or the neighbor’s dog. (The next part will be much easier if you have a place that you can mentally go that is your paradise. A deserted warm beach with nothing but the sound of the ocean in the distance, or your favorite secluded fishing spot with no one there but you and some 15 pound large mouth bass.)
4. Once you have assumed your stance, nocked an arrow, and hooked up your release, close your eyes and take in a deep breath through your nose and as you are exhaling slowly through your mouth, go to your special place. You can also develop a mantra to say on the exhale. One example of a mantra is “relax”. Repeat this process twice. It is a good idea to have a belt quiver equipped with a bow holster to carry most of the entire weight of the bow while executing the breathing steps.
5. After the second breath then place bow in the ready

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position with your bow hand set in the correct spot on the grip. Raise the bow above the target while continuing to silently repeat your mantra. This is important because it is helping you to achieve a relaxed state so necessary to getting into the zone.

6. Draw the bow and begin the calibration phase of the shot sequence. This is getting the bow level square and aligning the peep and settling into the rear touch point (anchor). Here it is worth mentioning that, if you are doing this with your eyes closed, it is more important to practice the relaxation technique than the calibration. Obviously when you are practicing this without your bow (using a string bow) you will be able to dedicate more of your effort to the relaxation elements.
7. If you are feeling a slight tingling sensation during the inhaling and exhaling phase then you are getting it right. You will actually feel a type of euphoria which is, in essence, putting you in the zone. Tension in your muscles or an excessive amount of adrenaline can impede Zone Mechanics.
8. When you are practicing remember to exercise your mantra with your journey to your special place that keeps you relaxed and calm. The phase for this is after the calibration step and after you have committed to the shot, when you are committing every ounce of your conscious mind to aiming. This phase is not over until you have completed your followthrough. If you do not have a destination for the followthrough, I would suggest the touch of your thumb to your shoulder for release shooters or the fingers across your neck for finger shooters. Whatever it is, it is the actual destination of your shot, rather than just loosing the arrow. The shot happens on the way to your touch point. This allows the arrow to leave the bow before any body movements can interfere with its flight. You will know it was correct if you see the arrow hit the target via your peep sight or aiming device. (David, are you saying you can see the arrow hit through the peep or the sight? This seems impossible.)

The objective here is to get your archery muscles in a relaxed state and keep them there from the first arrow to the last arrow. If you can do this you will not tire as quickly. Tense muscles burn more oxygen and tire faster than relaxed muscles. Compound shooters have an edge in that they only have to momentarily overcome the bow's full force, then they are holding only a fraction of that pull. Traditional shooters will need slightly more conditioning since they are experiencing increased resistance throughout the shot process. The good news is that

the human body is a marvelous machine and will quickly adapt to the demands placed on it.

There is much more to Zen concepts as they apply to archery and I in no way consider myself a Zen master. I have dabbled in the martial arts long enough to appreciate those who have a mastery of their inner self and the ability to bring a sense of peace and calm to their spirit. My oldest and dearest friend is a soft style Aikido instructor and has helped me understand better the body's energy flows and methods designed to stay centered and relaxed. I have been applying these methods with my students for two reasons: to help them become better archers and to have a pastime that they can do for a lifetime that brings them pleasure and sense of peace.

Dave Clink is a NAA Level 2 Instructor and Advanced Archery Instructor (Pellerite School of Advanced Archery). He retired in April 2006 after 15 years as a Test Engineer for the U.S. Navy Tomahawk Program. (He is a rocket scientist! Ed.) Dave and his wife Karen own and operate David Charles Photography in Fort Washington, Maryland and both enjoy archery. Dave is a member of Southern Maryland Archers Club, the NFAA, NAA, and Maryland Archery Association. He also enjoys building electric guitars and dabbling in woodworking.