

Review for *Total Archery: Inside the Archer*

By [Lindsey Carmichael](#)

“There is always room for improvement,” writes two-time Olympic Gold Medalist Park Kyung-Mo in the introduction to KiSik Lee’s new book, *Total Archery: Inside the Archer*. His statement on sport and progress seems to sum up the heart of Coach Lee’s mentality, applying to the archer’s form as well as training strategy and mental game. To Lee and the archers under his tutelage, there is always, always room for improvement.

The book is a collaborative effort between Lee and archer Tyler Benner, who spent two years at the Olympic Training Center learning these techniques firsthand and watching them evolve over time. *Inside the Archer* is Lee’s second book on archery, the first being *Total Archery* which he published in 2005. Lee also plans a book dedicated to helping coaches “get the most out of talented and determined archers.” This book shows not only a dedication to detail and scientific excellence, but also a deep appreciation of the sport from the perspective of the archer. Which is not to say that it will be useful only to the archer. The authors take pains to make it a worthwhile teaching guide from either perspective.

Unlike that of his first book, the introduction to *Inside the Archer* grants the archery world a rare look at Lee’s background not just as a coach but as a lifelong fan of archery. He writes with candor about the days in his childhood where he watched his father shooting traditional Korean archery. Readers may be surprised by his motives for picking up the discipline of archery in high school. Coach Lee also shares his philosophy on the unwavering honesty of archery, pointing to the idea that an archer cannot blame equipment or other factors for his or her performance. Instead, if the archer accepts the need to learn and improve, he or she can “become a great champion.”

Out of twenty-eight chapters in this edition, twenty-six discuss intricacies of form. The remaining two, as well as numerous inserts and discussion pieces, address emotional wellbeing of the archer and overall cohesion in the parts of form. And while the book has an abundance of photographs, many of which are professional and artistic as well as instructive, the exposition in the text provides so much detail one hardly knows where they found it all.

Before reading *Inside the Archer*, many archers would be hard pressed to write even a paragraph on “drawing” or “angular motion.” Who could tell you the difference between “set position” and “setup position”? Aren’t “loading position” and “anchor position” pretty much the same thing? Rest assured; not only are these questions answered in detail, but each topic is allocated its very own chapter, most of which average at about ten pages apiece. Forget a paragraph—how many archers or coaches have studied a single piece of form so long that they could write ten pages on it? Ten worthwhile pages? *Inside the Archer* provides more information than any of us knew existed about the most minute details of our beloved sport.

If this seems like it would make for a daunting read, don't worry. The authors accounted for that as well. The vast amount of knowledge is presented logically, progressing from (seemingly) simple components like stance and posture, to the more difficult ideas of the shot sequence, such as "loading" and "transfer." They provided a section on "how to read this book" which discusses why it is important not to jump around. To approach this book looking for a quick fix simply will not provide the archer with the optimal results, because there are so many components to Coach Lee's technique.

One common complaint of Coach Lee's technique is its apparent complexity and the difficulty many archers and coaches have in duplicating it exactly. Some worry that unless you are sitting at the knee of the master, you cannot be sure you are achieving all the aspects of correct form. Coach Lee has begun addressing those complaints with his High Performance Coaching Certification Program to train coaches across the country to better teach his ideas. However, if there was ever any doubt regarding any detail of this form of archery, the answer must surely be in the pages of *Inside the Archer*. Never before has there been such a comprehensively detailed guide to shooting your best. And as the archer begins to read and absorb some of the ideas, the idea of the shot cycle comes together in a surprisingly simple, graceful way.

The authors devote so much attention to each detail of the shot cycle to provide a truly deep understanding of the form. Many coaches logically pass on what worked for them in the past when they were competitive archers, and tell their students to "do it this way because it works." However, Lee shows a desire to deconstruct each piece of form methodically. He doesn't want to simply give a command to an archer. He wants to explain the command completely so that the archer understands *why* he ought to shoot that way. The archer who knows proper shoulder alignment will prevent joint injury even at high poundages will have more incentive to obey his coach than if the coach simply says "you should have better alignment." The entire book of *Inside the Archer* is designed to deliver the "why" of every piece of form in the shot cycle.

Many archery instruction books give a list of steps to follow to put the arrow in the target. Simple, cut and dry, has been the way for Western archers for far too long. Even if people were asking questions, there simply weren't enough good answers. Lee again and again asks *why*. Why shoot this way? Why not try another way? His methodical scientific approach enables archers to trust his techniques. It also allows him to throw out old hypotheses when they are found to be inefficient. One example is the move from the "deep finger hook" to the more shallow angled hook described in this edition. The authors also take pains to point out when an alternative method does not work. For example, chapter four on "hooking" has a discussion of the gap between fingers one achieves when squeezing the finger spacer. "Notice that [the gap] isn't much, barely more than a millimeter. A wider gap is difficult to achieve, and is unnecessary." Clearly, Lee and his archers experimented with widening the gap and observed the results to be suboptimal. It is this consideration of what will help and what will hinder the archer that marks Lee's constant evolution toward excellence.

Although the writing style and level of vocabulary in the book is easily accessible, the sheer density of information implies that multiple readings will probably be necessary to truly absorb it all and apply it to personal form and technique. Hundreds of photographs bolster the descriptions. Some are artistic black and white depictions of Benner in a remote desert location, providing both informative and aesthetically interesting visuals. And though the faces of the archers in question are not always recognizable, many more photographs are clearly from the Olympic Training Center, which gives the reader the feeling of having a “behind-the-scenes look” at what really goes on there.

In these hundreds of photographs, yellow and red lines make curious dashes, lines, and shapes along the shoulders and arms of the archers to demonstrate a given piece of form. In one such series of images in the chapter on “drawing,” there are three sets of photographs, and the authors note that they may be “among the most important in the book.” The archer in the top row of pictures provides “a near-perfect example” of angular movement in the drawing elbow. The second row of pictures shows incorrect motion. The third row shows progress, but still room for improvement.

At first glance, the reader’s untrained eye may see very little difference between the three sets. Something about the angle of the second archer’s drawing arm may not seem ideal, but it is no different from what is commonly seen at any archery tournament. In fact, the average American coach or archer may not bat an eye at what Lee calls incorrect. Yet each photo is scored by yellow lines and red hash marks the way a football game is broken down on the TV screen by experts. This is where we truly begin to understand Coach Lee’s thought process. By studying the lines, you can see that the incorrect archer’s elbow takes a strange “D” shape in drawing the bow. The near-perfect archer’s elbow might as well be moving in a straight diagonal line. Suddenly, the descriptions in the book begin to make sense.

The dense text throughout the book has obviously been crafted with care, yet the photographs and the play-by-play sketched onto them are what provide true understanding of the lessons from *Inside the Archer*. Throughout the book, the pictures train you to see with the eyes of a coach to whom nuances in biomechanics are the difference between shooting well and shooting with true athletic excellence.

To make the transfer of these techniques even easier, the book provides a section on “how to shoot without a coach,” which discusses the technological options available to the archer who doesn’t have access to a coach that fits their personality well. “Long term, coaching is the ability to recognize small changes in technique, something that is now possible by examining nightly videos of a training session.” While the authors do not go into dense technical detail about how to set up the kind of video training techniques used at the Olympic Training Center, they do provide what is accessible to the average shooter. The section says that a tripod, video camera, and a monitor should be used with the goal of “historicizing” changes in the form over time.

The book also covers controversial topics, such as the “1000 arrow day challenge,” which has garnered criticism in the past as unnecessary and courting possible injury. The authors make a case for the psychological benefits of achieving such a milestone after sufficient instruction and preparation, calling it “a wonderful capstone to mark the end of a long training cycle.”

Some of the topics covered might only be controversial on an archer-by-archer basis, as Lee moves beyond personal choices of form style into what works and what has less chance of being duplicated reliably. The chapter on “timing” includes a graph showing a curve representing “the likelihood of an archer making a good shot based on how many seconds he holds.” The book admits that not every archer will have a curve that looks like the graph, and that it’s not necessary to wait a perfect 1.5 seconds to shoot the arrow. There is more to it than that, though. “The chart indicates that should an archer expand through the clicker before he has prepared his body and mind, there is a high probability of a poor shot.” There is much discussion about when each motion should take place, because as the authors note, “no archer falls outside the laws of timing.”

One of the reasons *Inside the Archer* works so well on many different levels is the authorial partnership of Lee and Benner. The voice and sensibility of each can be heard at different times throughout the book. Writes Park Sung-Hyun, the female Olympic Gold Medalist and World Record holder, “because [much of the book] is written from an archer’s perception of feeling, this book is intended to be taken to the shooting range.” She is right, of course. No matter how many times an archer or coach reads this book, inevitably it will become a valuable reference for many archery ranges, and a constant go-to-guide for archers all around America and the world. “Since neither the human body nor the recurve bow are likely to do much changing in the future,” writes Park, “*Inside the Archer* may well be the final word on how to shoot the recurve bow.”

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