

## **Tournament Nerves: Can You Handle the Pressure?**

### **By John Pero**

The phrase Tournament Nerves or Mental Game gets thrown around quite often at the major shoots. What is a mental game plan, and how does it work? What can you do to raise the level of yours and reach your archery goals?

Archery has been a part of my life as far back as I can remember. My first bow was ordered straight out of the Sears catalogue, and shooting became a daily ritual for me. As I grew up, I worked on form to develop a more accurate shot, and competitive archery became a major part of my life. After I won my first 3D tournament, I never looked back. I am often asked: how do you deal with it? How do you bring your practice scores to the shoot and keep yourself in check on the line? I didn't know the answers in the beginning. My mind was as jacked up as it could be, letting my emotions and nerves hold my good scores hostage. When I first heard the term "Mental Game," I figured it was another secret I would never learn or just another way to sell books and videos. It's not a secret. The more you read, learn and practice the stronger you become mentally. I am a type 'A' personality, and I want instant gratification. It seemed like a very daunting task to learn a new aspect of the sport that will take months to show signs and years to peak at. This isn't instant; it takes time and persistence. I will not sit here and tell you I toe the line with ice-cold blood. That isn't reality. I am full of emotion as I nock that first arrow for score but am now able to use it in a positive way. These real life accounts and practices can be applied to elite, local or recreational archery. You can also modify it in your own way to raise your hunting productivity.

As a competitive archer at a tournament like the World Archery Festival in Las Vegas, knowing you must shoot clean to even compete is very taxing on the mind. Months of preparation before you even step foot on the carpet are in order. There are many ways to bring your scores up and the pressure level down.

### **PHASE 1: Knowing your Enemy**

My first piece of advice is to gain experience. Travel and put yourself out there. There is no substitute for experience. You will learn more about yourself and your shooting style at a real shoot rather than at practice. Use practice to work on form issues and bow tuning. Use tournaments like local 3D's or league where you're standing side by side shooting for score to

assess your mental toughness. You can also shoot for quarters or dinner against your buddies in the back yard. Putting yourself in high-pressure situations will show you what your weaknesses are and how they affect your game.

This process revealed three major flaws in my mental game.

1. **Shooting against other archers instead of myself,**
2. **Lack of confidence, and**
3. **Keeping score in my head.**

**Shooting against other archers:** This means glancing at competitor's targets and worrying what they shot on each end. I used to glance at the targets of the archers I felt most threatened by, and it will get you in trouble most of the time. It will induce undo pressure that you just don't need. Those archers can't change your score. This sport is individual. What one archer does three lanes down has no effect on what you score on your own target. You need to shoot each game against yourself. Look to bring your practice scores to the shoot and maybe even shoot a personal best. That is your goal right? To score better while in competition!

**Lack of confidence:** Lack of confidence has many forms. It can be in your shooting ability, or it may be your equipment that you question. If it is your equipment, then you need to find someone who has the knowledge to set it up correctly and show you how to maintain it. Having confidence in your equipment will be a major step in the right direction. You don't want to be fooling with your peep or hoping that ragged fletching holds on until that final shot.

If it is your shooting ability, then that will need to be addressed during your practice sessions. Shoot some short 10-yard games to get that confidence level up. Only move the target further back when you feel full confident in your shot and form.

**Keeping score in your head:** This will have the same effect as shooting against other archers but is primarily contained to your specific bale. After each end whether I was keeping score or calling arrows, I would flip through the cards to compare scores and see where I stood at that time. If my score was tied or close to another archer on my bale, I just added more pressure by telling myself I need to shoot all 10's on the next end to pull ahead or shoot all X's to catch up.

After sitting down and listing my weaknesses on paper, I gained a better understanding of what I needed to work on. I decided that the next tournament I attended I would choose one of

those weaknesses and eliminate it. Working on all of them at once would get me nowhere. As time went by, I eliminated them one by one. It was a hard road, but I made it a goal to work towards. For example, instead of glancing at the arrows of the shooters on lane two, I would pull out my phone and text or listen to music. I still continue to do this. If you catch me at a tournament, more than likely I will be using Facebook or texting between ends. This keeps my mind relaxed and takes the focus off of the other competitors. I keep my head in the game but give it short breaks every so often. Completing the first phase was like turning on a light switch. It all started to make sense, and I believed the power your mind has over you. I didn't feel as much anxiety on the line, and my tournament scores started to show that.

## **PHASE 2: Toughening up and Believing in Yourself**

In phase 1, we learned about our weaknesses and built a foundation for Phase 2. Ok, so you have been out on the road attending tournaments. I previously described putting pressure on yourself as a tool to assess your mental toughness. With that you have gained some experience and knowledge about your mental game and worked on your weaknesses over time, eliminating them one by one. In this section, we will discuss Positive Affirmation and Mental Imagery. What are Affirmations? They are our inner thoughts and the words you speak and believe about yourself. Your inner thoughts bear directly on your confidence and mental toughness. For affirmations to work, you must believe in them. Affirmations change your thought patterns, and you will eventually find one you enjoy using and saying daily. I tried writing positive thoughts and goals like "You are a 600 shooter" or "you will win States this year" and hung them around the house in places I frequent often like a mirror, refrigerator or a doorway. Somewhere you will see them and be able to read them aloud each and every day. For this to work, they must be realistic goals. You can't expect to write "I will win Vegas in 2011" when you aren't even a 300 shooter. Having realistic goals tailored to you and your shooting ability will be more helpful.

In addition to this, I started to admire my previous accomplishments. I displayed all my trophies, plaques and personal best targets where I would see them everyday. They don't have to be first place trophies or clean targets; as long as you are proud of them, they will work just fine. As I looked at each one individually, I could remember the emotions I felt winning them. I brought myself back to that day and positive thoughts and emotions were starting to stack up. This worked for me even better than affirmations because they were real. I shot those scores and

won those trophies, which gave me a positive emotion to fall back on. These were MY positive affirmations.

Another technique I used often was visualization or positive mental imagery. A mental image is an experience that, on most occasions, significantly resembles the experience of perceiving some object, event, or scene, but that occurs when the relevant object, event, or scene is not actually present to the senses. This involves focusing your mind to visualize yourself in a certain situation and doing well in that situation. Often used to relieve stress and improve performance, you can do this at the range or in your car. That's the beauty of it. Wherever you are, you can work on this technique.

While preparing for the Vegas shoot, I would use my last arrow for score at league. I would visualize myself on the line in Vegas and having one last arrow to shoot a clean 300. Remember, keep your goals realistic! I would imagine myself stepping up to the line and going through my whole shot process. Having been there before, I could picture the room, hear hundreds of arrows hitting the bales at once, and the sounds of the crowd in the background. It would instantly bring my emotion level up. My heart rate climbed, I began to sweat and my hands started to shake. I came to full draw, settled in and SMACK, Pinwheel X. At that moment, I knew I needed to use my imagination to place me at the scene. Doing this repeatedly at home gave me the confidence to step up to the line in Vegas 2010 and shoot my final arrow in the target for a clean 300 round on day three.

With two years of this kind of mental training, I eventually became a high-pressure shooter. I thrive on it and look for it. It made me a better archer able to deal with any situation I come across. I now enjoy the challenge instead of fearing it. Stay positive, stay focused, and you will succeed.