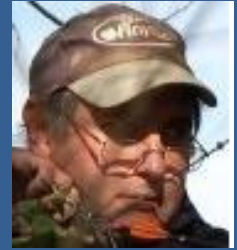


Quite often, the rapid success we achieve in the first 12-18 months of shooting plateaus out and we become frustrated by what we perceive as a lack of further progress – we have hit the archery “wall”. Clearly we need help in trying to move things forward. But who is going to provide the ongoing support we need to develop our skill - to meet our aspirations. Part 1 outlined some of the options open to developing archers and clubs. In Part 2, John Neal considers potential needs of the more elite performer, “personal coaches” and some of the challenges faced by the committed archer wanting to develop their skills to MB standard and beyond.



## How to be Coached: Part 2 – Aspiring to the elite.

### Considering a personal coach

We started this series observing that help with our shooting might take various forms but if we are really committed to becoming an elite performer – are prepared to make our shooting and coaching a major priority in our lives - then we need to start getting knowledgeable, consistent, advice and start planning our route to success. The time has come to consider working with a personal coach.

In addition to having access to someone with up to date knowledge of equipment and shooting technique, we need to be working with someone who is going to take the time to get to know us, understand our goals and aspirations and find ways of helping us achieve them. We should be under no illusions, the road to success is a rocky one and we will need someone who understands us if we are to deal with the frustrations and disappointments along the way.

We have already discussed the relative merits of being helped along by trained coaches or experienced archers so I'd like to start by airing what, for many archers and coaches, is a real misunderstanding. This is the misperception that in order to help us improve, a coach must be able to shoot at least as well as or better than us.

Let me see now - if shooting skill were somehow magically transferred to the archer, purely by the coach shooting in their presence, then there might be something in that. This clearly doesn't happen and while a coach – qualified or not – may contribute much which might help improve our performance, I would contend that their own

shooting ability is not at the top of the list by a long way. To illustrate, it's worth noting that a significant number of top archers are coached by people who don't shoot even close to the standard of the archers they work with. It's obvious if you think about it – if they could, they would be champion archers in their own right!!

Now don't get me wrong – we have already established in Part 1 that elite performers have many qualities valuable to the aspiring archer. Similarly, a trained coach who shoots, or has shot, to a good standard may bring additional qualities to their coaching than those with less well developed shooting skills.

But what we want from our elite archers/coaches, is experience, both in theory and in practice, of the physical and mental demands our sport imposes. We want them to have a broad and up to date knowledge of the technical side of our sport – in both the equipment and technique/performance areas. We want them to have a good eye for detail and be able to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of our shooting form. Finally, they need to be good communicators and have good planning skills.

So what might a personal coach do for us? Firstly the coach will want to understand what we want out of our coaching relationship. We should expect to spend a bit of time off the range talking about our goals and aspirations, what resources we are each able to put into the arrangement in terms of time / effort . . . oh, and sweat! Our coach will need to know how much shooting time we can commit to and how much time we are prepared to spend on other aspects of training. This is vital work because, even with the best coach in the world, it is unlikely we will achieve a goal of getting

onto national squad if we are only prepared to shoot once or twice a week and take no interest in fitness. We need to ensure our aspirations are in synch with our level of commitment.

It goes without saying that we would also expect a personal coach to take a long hard look at our shooting form and equipment setup. What we shouldn't expect is instant fixes. What we want next is a careful assessment of all the available information - from which we work, with our coach, to arrive at a plan. This plan takes our current position, considers what needs to change to arrive at our goals and breaks down those changes into more easily achieved, smaller pieces. We then work together, doing the "work" to achieve each of the steps in our plan, monitoring our progress and revising the plan as we go.

For me, the important process which goes on here is one of collaboration and reflection. I want a coach who acts as a mirror, articulating back to me what he/she discerns which may be unobservable or overlooked by me. I'm not just talking about what can be seen *visibly* - in addition to that, we must incorporate what can be *discovered* through careful questioning. And where I don't understand the significance of observations made by my coach I expect to have them explained and the relative merits of making a change discussed. We should expect to talk to and communicate with our personal coach about all aspects of our archery on a regular basis - this should be, very much, a two way process.

### **Embarking on the road to improved performance**

If we are content to shoot once a week, do the occasional tournament and happy to continue shooting at our present standard, little input may be required. However, if we have the ambition and commitment to get to MB standard and beyond, we may require considerably more input. So, apart from bow setup and technique, what else might we need input on?

Making the sort of performance improvement we have suggested isn't simply about shooting more arrows, though that may well be required - more frequent repetition of good form will incorporate changes to technique much more quickly. But its unlikely we will make the leap to MB in one quick

hop so we will need a programme of short term goals, leading to longer term goals which in turn lead to our aspiration. These goals will need to be in several areas; technique; score improvement; physical fitness; mental skills etc.

This needs us to be clear about *what* we want to achieve and *how* we know whether we have achieved it. Unless we make definite statements about our goals, we will continue to "participate" but never reach those undefined objectives. Similarly, we may feel we aren't making progress - but that's because we haven't decided what progress "is". It is very important that we find ways to measure progress in what we do and whether we are achieving it within the planned timeframe.

**"If you want any chance of winning an Olympic Gold . . . your chosen sport needs to be *your life*"  
- Dame Kelly Holmes**

We also need to be completely clear and honest about how much time and effort we are prepared to put into our programme and make sure this is consistent with our objectives. There is little point in working with our coach, on a comprehensive programme covering all possible elements for development, if we then only spend one evening a week in practice and one Sunday a month to shoot competitively - our programme will take a great many years to achieve. Similarly, we need to be genuinely "committed" to what we *say* we want to achieve - without that commitment, success simply won't happen.

Make no mistake, archery is no different from any other sport at the higher levels - you will need to work harder and longer if you have your eyes on the highest standards in our sport. This was amply illustrated in a 2006 BBC Horizon programme, "Winning Gold in 2012", about what it takes to be an Olympic sportsman. Dame Kelly Holmes said "If you want any chance of winning an Olympic Gold in 6 years time, then your chosen sport needs to be 'your life', now".

So, there are many facets to a coaching programme and, unfortunately, many of them get

ignored in favour of attempts to apply quick fixes or to try and solve problems through equipment changes. We should ask ourselves how much value there is in fine tuning our bow/arrows without similarly tuning our technique. I can't help feeling that for many of us, time spent fine tuning our bow and fiddling with this bit of kit or another, would be better spent tuning our shooting form.

## How to be coached!

### How do we open ourselves to coaching

We've looked at what coaches might do for us, but what sort of attributes does the *archer* wishing to be coached need? Firstly, we need to be *open to input* and this first step can be a challenging experience. Our own internal image of, say, our "perfect" release, is often viewed somewhat differently in the eyes of others. We have to be prepared for some disconcerting news as our own assessment of our technique is often inaccurate for a number of reasons. Bad habits and inefficient technique creep insidiously and unnoticed into our form over time and discovering this can be a shock.

But having got over it and pledged to do something about it, we need to face up to another hurdle – the need for changes to our technique. Our present performance is a consequence of how we shoot now. We get the scores we do now because of the way we shoot now. It stands to reason therefore, that if we want to change our performance level we must also be prepared to make some sort of change to the way we shoot and this is often difficult. The astonished reaction, "*I've reached the level I'm at now, by shooting the way I do now – and you want me to change that!*", is all too common. It might be a small change but explore it we must. And that is the way to see it – our progress forward is an *exploration* of our shooting form.

This aspect of performance improvement can be very challenging. The way we have been shooting feels very comfortable and natural – but even a small change can make our shooting feel uncomfortable for a while. This happens because in order to effect the change, we have to think about it – it has to become conscious - whereas our old style required little or no thought and was sub-conscious. So, instead of perceiving the uncomfortable as wrong, we should just accept that it feels *different*. Over time and with frequent

repetition this change will be incorporated into our subconscious and will become the new *comfortable* technique. But if instead, we shy away from such change, if we are not prepared to explore the world outside our comfort zone it is unlikely we will progress towards our aspirations.

This area of performance improvement is probably one of the most challenging of all. Too many of us "make do" with a shooting style which is a result of what we are prepared to do at present. The real challenge here is to make an honest commitment to ourselves – in effect, saying, "I'm not going to accept this limitation, I'm going to DO more to ACHIEVE more".

An example might help. Many of us do not achieve sufficient movement of the back shoulder and consequently develop a poor "anatomical line". On first discussion, we declare that we do not believe we can improve that aspect of our technique. Yet, through working with a coach who is prepared to explain the benefits of improving our anatomical line, who provides exercises and support to develop this aspect of our technique, many of us will surprise ourselves at what can be achieved.

This isn't about the coach - it is about us, the archer, it's about not simply accepting that "this is how I shoot". Remember this thinking is what is keeping us at our present standard – it isn't going to get us where we want to go.

### Techniques for consolidating change

It's very important that we learn such changes correctly and we will need to monitor them closely through the period of change. If we don't, there is a possibility we will consolidate an imperfect change in our technique and simply exchange one problem for another.

**.. how many of us are prepared to make short / medium term sacrifices in order to achieve longer term and greater improvement?**

Don't be surprised if your coach suggests you learn the changed technique on a beginners bow – if you can't get it right at low poundage, you're not going to achieve it at your full shooting weight!! Lightweight Clinibands and trainer bows are the

place to start and increasing numbers of archers and coaches now use them to help consolidate changes in technique.

In some cases the change required to technique may be so great that it can only be achieved by shooting for a while at reduced poundage - irrespective of the archers' physical strength. Remember that it is largely the brain that we are re-training here, not brawn. This process can take time, during which our performance in terms of scores may take a downward turn. Because of this it may be wise to consider reducing, or even refraining from tournaments while we consolidate significant changes. If we don't, we may put ourselves under pressure to succeed at a time when this is unlikely - we must manage our expectations carefully. If we don't, what we perceive as "failure" under tournament conditions will undermine the good work we are doing in training sessions where the pressure to perform is different.

Consolidating significant change can be a daunting challenge - how many of us are prepared to make short / medium term sacrifices in order to achieve longer term and greater improvement??

### **. . . and what about the gym?**

This is a subject which is guaranteed to get us archers debating. The fact is we need to be fit enough to shoot the last arrow of a Double FITA as solidly as we shoot the first one. But why does that mean we should have a physical training programme? The answer is very simple - we need to train our bodies to a level of strength and endurance where the physical demands of our sport, ceases to be some extra high bar we somehow struggle over, once a fortnight. We need to be able to walk away from a double FITA knowing that our fitness isn't getting in the way of improved performance.

I'm not saying that we will only be successful if we are supremely fit athletes but the fact remains that our sport is more physically demanding than most people realise. Achieving consistent MB and GMB scores will almost certainly require us to shoot several hundred arrows each week - we need to be fit enough to cope with this on a continuous basis. Our physical training programme will need to be an

all round plan covering core body stability (we spend all day standing up) as well as strength and endurance in our upper body (shooting muscles). Cardiovascular exercises - thoroughly recommended for all round health - will improve circulation of blood to shooting muscles but I know many archers achieve very high standards of shooting without this.

In a way, this aspect of our programme reflects a recurring theme in this article - if we don't explore what this area can do for us, we may never reach our full potential - the same is true for every aspect of our training and coaching.



**John Neal** is a County Coach in Essex/Suffolk and works with archers of all abilities in both group and one to one coaching arrangements. As Essex County Coaching Organiser (Performance) he coordinates the Essex Coaching Clinic scheme and was a principal organiser of the JEDI scheme. He shoots a compound bow competitively but is equally happy to coach archers shooting all bow types. John has also tutored on both Level 1 and Level 2 Coach courses.