The Launching Pad

Collected by Ross Mason, uploaded and borrowed from SSUSA 2014

> **"It is no good wishing for bullseyes. My attention must be 100 % on what I am doing. I am the *launching pad* for the shot. The target is simply the vehicle to show I've performed correctly."**

So said Malcolm Cooper. One of our sport's greatest competitors.

After all, this is what it is all about.

A shooter recently asked what might be useful to consider for training to improve his shooting. I offered a few suggestions. Very limited suggestions because the subject - contrary to some perceptions - is rather large. There is no Magic Bullet,

This morning I came across some articles on Malcolm Cooper I had collected when I was fully into competitive shooting. Looking back it is clear the articles influenced my coaching career as well.

They are from 1989 but such is the significance of them they were reprinted in 2014. Maybe it is time for another airing.

The three articles are included here.

Ross Mason

MALCOLM

Editor's Note: *Great Britain's Malcolm Cooper won gold medals in the 1984 and ever to win this Olympic event twice, and only the twelfth shooter since 1896 to w 300 meters. Mr. Cooper passed away in the U.K. on June 9, 2001. This series will*

Known to shooters as "Cooperman" for his super performances, Great Britain's Malcolm Cooper dominated international free rifle shooting for several years. In addition to his Olympic gold medals, he won several European and world championships and held four world records in 300 meters: Prone—599, Standing—387, 3x40—1174 and Standard rifle—586. *InSights* magazine talked with Cooper at the 1989 SHOT Show in Dallas, TX, where he was representing his company, Accuracy International.

You started shooting position when you were 18?

I didn't even know there was such a thing. I read an article about the 1968 Olympics in *Rifleman* magazine about three-position shooting. Discovering something besides prone was a revelation. I borrowed a club rifle and started standing up during lunch hours to try it out.

Did you just teach yourself how to shoot standing?

I started with a Martini Mark II and found I wobbled all over the place. Coming from a prone-only background and not having any tuition [instruction], I simply tried to hold the rifle still. The business of keeping it still is something I tried to achieve from day one. Some coaches say that you must accept some movement but that's bull. You simply can't accept movement. My prone background made me believe I could hold the rifle still.

I dredged through old magazines and found a series of articles in *Guns Review* that included photographs of famous shooters of the day. They were from the late '50s—mostly of Russians.

I adopted positions as described in the magazines. I trained every day and swam and ran as the articles suggested. I set my goal to make the 1972 Olympics. I started to fire 40 shots every day at lunchtime, standing with my Martini Mark II. I would go again in the evening.

In 1969 I found a group, the British Free Rifle Club, that specifically promoted three-position shooting. Before I could join I had to shoot a standard, 168 x 200 on one standing and one kneeling card at 25 yards. I made the club and that summer went to my first 50-meter three-position shoot. I shot a 991, or so, of 1200. The next shoot I had a 1050 and it was the end of the season.

What was next?

In 1971, I raised my averages and knew I would make the Olympic Team. So I changed my goal to achieve something in the Olympics, not just to be "up there somewhere." In 1971-1972, I trained every day and I was the

M COOPER

l 1988 Olympics in the smallbore three-position event. He is the only competitor vin two Olympic gold medals. He held or shared five world records at be presented in three parts, leading up to the National Matches this summer.

fittest I've been in my life. At lunch I used the track and, under the guidance of a top British decathlete, I did circuit training.

How did you do in your first Olympics?

I finished 12th in 300 meters with an 1139, one point below my British national record, which was really not too bad. I had only had my own rifle one year. I finished 14th in smallbore, a little disappointing because I had peaked at the right time, but it was to be some years before I was psychologically ready.

What happened between 1972 and 1984, when you won your first Olympic gold medal?

I took 1973 off and really had post-competition depression. I went to the European Championships that year, but didn't care and didn't really do very well. I trained for the 1974 Worlds but had a disappointing performance overall, although I shot my best standing and learned from it. I made up my mind to train for 1976. I came to the United States to train for five weeks and went directly to Montreal for the Olympics. I was so knackered [tired] from training that I had nothing left to give. I've never approached a match that way since.

After the 1976 Olympics I was going to quit shooting, buy a boat, and go to the Pacific. Then in 1977 the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit gave a clinic in England. Lones Wigger and Bill Krilling, the Army coach, and Bob Alyward were there. Everyone on the American side really inspired me by openly encouraging us. In the evenings, the subject of shooting always came up. Wigger described the way he thought and prepared for matches. It wasn't anything new to me. In fact, it confirmed what I had worked out on my own. What I had thought for years was proved to be right. This was a breakthrough for me. My confidence went up in leaps and bounds. I went on to win two golds at the 1977 European Championships in .22 free rifle and in 300-meter free rifle. My 300-meter standing score equaled the world record.

The 1980 boycott was a big disappointment. I had won most of the matches in Europe that year. It made me angry, which is probably why I did so well in 1984. I also felt 1984 would be my last Olympics, so I really gave it my all.

What adjustments have you made since 1977?

Training breaks form an important part of my regime. I have found that if I don't train for two weeks, my form doesn't disappear. On the contrary, I am often better off when I restart. As soon as I feel my performance starting to slip, I immediately take a break and restart one or two weeks later at top level. In the past, if scores were going down, I aggravated the problem with more training. I would be in a slump, trying to get out of it, and not be able to. By taking a break at the start of a decline, or when I am having difficulty focusing attention on what it should be on, the dip in scores that used to inevitably follow didn't occur.

This only works if you are motivated and train a lot. If you are lazy and use this as an excuse, it won't work. I also caution juniors about using this technique since there are few shooters with enough years of intensive training under their belts to benefit from this. It takes some time before one can spot dips due to bad technique, as opposed to overtraining in the above sense.

How much did you train while getting ready for the 1988 Olympics?

As I've gotten older, I don't have the same energy. Also my business was more demanding through 1988. I generally would run three times a week, 2-1/2 to 3-1/2 miles in the morning and exercise for 15 minutes. I would go to work from 8:00 to 6:00. Then I would go to the range in the summer and put three to 3-1/2 hours in. Or I would shoot 25 meters at home. I did this regime the 12 months before the Olympics and shot 40,000 rounds. I generally shot 20 hours a week in training and I would shoot three weeks on and one week off. I also went to Australia for five weeks of training and spent about four weeks travelling and competing in major matches. This was much less than I did in 1984. I have never had full-time training. My training has never been perfect. I have always believed I could be a world beater with 12-18 months full-time training.

Why do you think you've succeeded with nothing, when the Russians and other Eastern bloc countries have had every advantage?

We always thought the U.S. did quite well, too! I've had to fight for all I have. I call it the "alley cat syndrome." We had no coaches and had to earn money for ammo and petrol. Now I am grant-aided, which is a result of a charity for athletes in Britain, formed by businessmen.

I don't believe any system is totally conducive to development. It is up to the individual. A shooter has to ask himself, "Am I willing to make the commitment?" When I saw that article on the Olympic shooting events in 1968, I decided I wanted to achieve something. I set my sights on the 1972 Olympic team. At the beginning of '72 I saw I would easily make the team, so I raised my goal and the result was coming close to world class scores.

A lot of shooters become world class but never make the break to winning. You've done what no one else has done. What's been your secret?

The secret is, there is no secret. After 1976, when shooting wasn't my whole life, I started to do better. This was a significant realization. Secondly, I realized that all my emphasis on the psychological training had been correct. As soon as I knew this, it was like a weight being lifted off my shoulders. I could stop trying and not getting there. A lot fell into place that year. Since then I have been refining technical things and the way I think. I also pay a lot more attention to tactical things and preparing for matches many months ahead. I thought about the Olympics in L.A. for years beforehand. I thought about the heat and the effect it was likely to have on my performance, on the accuracy of the ammo, etc. I actually went to Adelaide, Australia, in January that year because I knew it would be almost identical to L.A. I practiced my diet, fluid intake, everything.

A shooter has to ask himself, "Am I willing to make the commitment?"

 BY MALCOLM COOPER

SHOOTER'S DIARY 1:
CONTINGENCY PLANNING

My version of "Murphy's Law" is that if things will go wrong, they'll go wrong on match day. But with contingency planning, even the worst catastrophe can be handled as just another incident in a day's shooting.

Contingency planning means having a response ready for everything that might happen to you in a match. Before you travel to a match, particularly if you're going abroad, you should have a plan ready for coping with every possible thing that might happen. In addition to preventing surprises and helping you deal with problems, contingency planning gives you tremendous confidence, since it prepares you for anything. It is one way to make up for the fact that other shooters may have more experience than you.

Two days before the 1988 Olympic three-position match, a TV cameraman kicked my rifle over and broke the stock almost all the way through the grip. Instead of panicking, my reaction was to calmly find a way to get the stock fixed. I had planned what to do if my stock was broken. I always carry a repair kit with tools and epoxy for just such a problem. I did go see the Russian armorer, who had a work area. He had better glue than I did so we used it and worked on the gun together.

I lost one training day fixing the stock. When I tested the gun the next day, my groups seemed to be vertical, and I was afraid something was wrong with the glue job. (Because the barreled action was glued rather than bedded, I had had to repair the stock with the action in it.) I left it alone, and at the end of the last training session before the match, I tested a different lot of ammo. The groups seemed more round, and I used that ammo for the Olympics. The lesson, of course, is that by being prepared for the worst I solved the problem and it didn't affect my ability to win.

Some confuse contingency planning with negative thinking, but such preparations can easily be made without focusing on the negative. While you are thinking of what could go wrong, your focus is on preparing your response. What would be negative and detrimental to your performance would be to plan what you will say to your friends, or to worry about what they will say when you don't do well.

List the items that Murphy's Law says will happen sooner or later in a match. You might include, for example: poor light, hot or cold weather, heavy mirage, broken target mechanisms, difficult range officials, gun breakdown, jet lag, being late, unusual food, problems with equipment control, etc. Then develop a plan to deal with each one. If I can't work out in my mind how I might deal with a problem, such as an uneven firing point, I go to the range and practice with that problem until I work out a solution.

Perhaps even more important than planning for what might go wrong is to plan for what might go right! You should be prepared to have a really good day, which everyone does. Think what it will feel like to get through the last position, or the final, and finish with a really good day. Imagine what it will feel like to shoot a record score. Imagine what will happen when you win, even what it will feel like to stand on the awards rostrum and receive your medal.

Many shooters fail to prepare themselves for doing really well. Consequently, when they start to do better than normal, they can panic, shoot a few bad shots and end up with a score close to their average, one they are comfortable with. If a shooter has thought about winning and what it will mean, when the time comes, winning will be much easier. Thinking about such cases during quiet times off the range is a good investment for the future on the range. All of this is "thinking" training and therefore all part of mental training.

While I don't actually rehearse shooting a perfect score, I work very hard to convince myself that the top end of my scoring is open. I know that the harder I train the better technique I will develop, and the envelope, or range of scores I can shoot will become smaller. Both my best scores and my worst scores will rise. I don't limit myself by saying this is the most I can achieve. The top end is always open.

To summarize, spend time planning how you will deal with anything that might happen in a match. Think about each thing that could go wrong and work out a plan to deal with it. Think about how things could go right and what it will feel like when they do. *Know* what you will do. Having a plan for every situation will prevent surprises, make you better able to deal with whatever happens and boost your confidence.

MALCOLM TRAINING Y

Editor's Note: *Great Britain's Malcolm Cooper won gold medals event. He was the only competitor ever to win this Olympic event gold medals. He held, or shared, five world records at 300 meters.*

As a shooter, you know that if you spend time training the body to shoot, your performance will improve. You should realize, however, that the mind can be trained, as well as the body. When you do realize this, you will be able to work out ways to improve your mental performance and address any problems you may have.

Society teaches us, wrongly I believe, to analyze our mistakes. I believe that it hurts your performance to analyze bad shots, since it requires you to focus on what has gone wrong. It points the mind away from what you are trying to do right. The mind functions like a good computer. If junk goes in, junk will come out. The idea is to train your mind not to let the negative thoughts in. Whenever a negative thought comes in, a positive thought should be substituted. For example, after a run of 10s, you may think: "I'm going to shoot a nine anytime now." You should say to yourself: "I will not accept that," and substitute the image of a good hold, the front sight centered on the bull, a perfect release and follow-through. If negative thoughts are blocked every time they enter your mind, and positive ones substituted, the mind will begin to think only one way—"I can." Soon, "I will" will replace "I can't" and "I won't." Once you do this, your confidence will skyrocket and you will start to believe that you really can do all kinds of things with your mind. Once you believe that the mind can be trained, you can go on to the next step, which is to develop a series of thoughts that will help you fire a good shot.

This series of thoughts is another way to train your mind. You can actually work out for yourself exactly how you want to think at a certain time and place. You can sit down and determine the thoughts that would be most helpful to a good performance. Use your imagination to see and feel what a good performance on a shot is like. You must be able to think about that good performance before and during the firing of a shot. For example,

Planning for the unexpected helped Malcolm Cooper (center) win a gold medal in the 1988 Seoul Olympics. At left is silver medalist Alister Allan (GBR), the bronze winner is Kirill Ivanov (USSR). Going into the finals, Allan had 1181, Cooper 1180 and Ivanov 1173. Cooper pulled it out over his teammate in the final, 99.3 to 94.6.

M COOPER YOUR MIND

BY MALCOLM COOPER

in the 1984 and 1988 Olympics for the smallbore three-position twice, and only the 12th shooter since 1896 to win two Olympic See Part I in the January 2014 issue of Shooting Sports USA.

before the rifle is picked up for a shot, you should envision a perfect sequence of: Settling the rifle, relaxing with it in the center of the hold area, breathing out, taking the final hold, seeing through the sights with the bull in the center, breaking the shot and following through. This perfect sequence can then be carried out.

Gary Anderson

Imagining a perfect shot just before you shoot can help bring to your mind exactly what you want, and it increases your ability to repeat it. It also helps keep your mind fairly occupied with performing properly. If you are constantly calculating your score, you are wasting your mental energy and you are not thinking of what you need to in order to do well. It is a good practice to follow a bad shot with a mental review of what you *want* to think, and then be sure to think correctly during the next shot. This confirmation of proper thinking will tend to eliminate poor thinking and the memory of the bad performance.

Another form of mind training is learning to follow your instincts. All input from training and matches becomes part of your natural instincts, and these instincts can become your best friend. I'm sure that there have been many times when you have wondered how many clicks you needed for wind, answered the question, and then thought: "No, that can't be right." You then went with a more conservative number of clicks, only to find out that your instincts were right. I enjoy following my instincts. I get quite a kick when I follow them and they are right, which they often are. While there is an element that draws me back to caution, the rougher the conditions, the better I seem to do by following my instincts. Now, for the most part, I don't wait on the wind, but go with my instincts for a sight correction and shoot or hold over.

Mental training is no substitute for technical training. It is regrettable that having the mind trained as you would like doesn't help the body do what you want it to. On the other hand, an untrained mind will hold back a well-trained body.

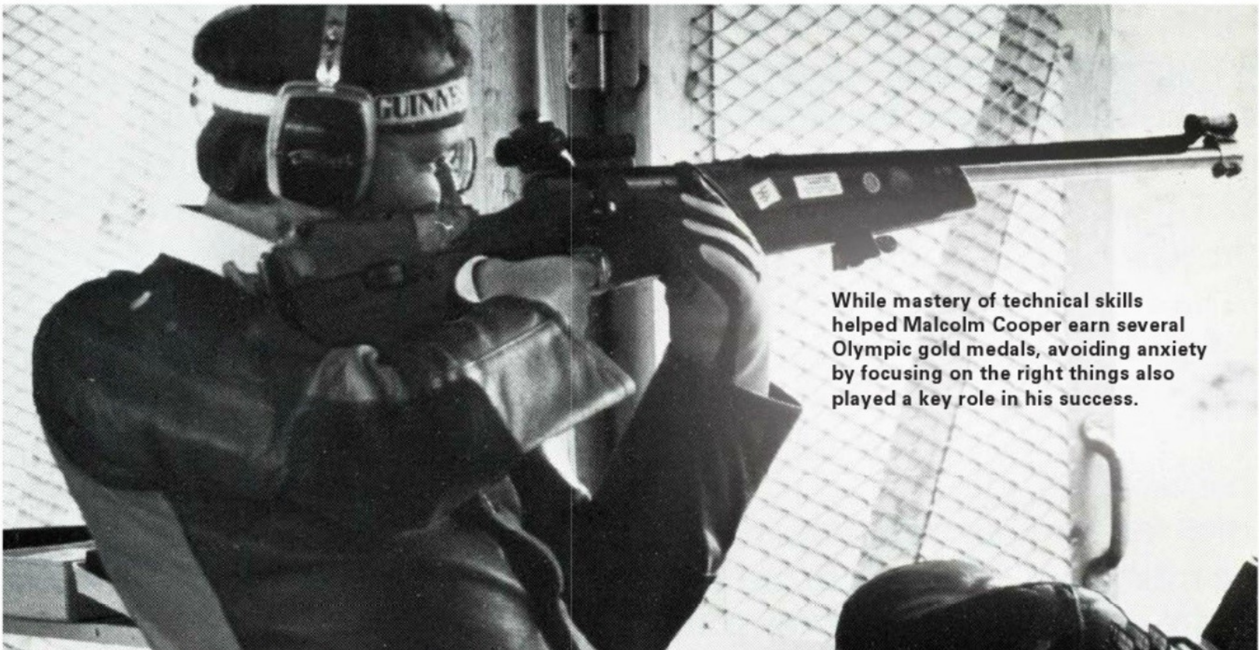
MALCOLM

TURNING MATCH PRESSU

Editor's Note: *See Part I in the January 2014 issue and Part 2*

Match pressure is something all shooters face. What counts is how we react to it. Whenever I've felt pressure for any reason at a match, I've always turned to face it. I have even sought to expose myself to pressure as much as possible. Pressure is a condition that causes adrenaline to be released into the body. Adrenaline is a compound that has several physiological effects that prepare the body for action. Many describe the effects as preparing the body for "fight or flight," that is to either physically fight or to run from danger. Many shooters believe that adrenaline is destructive since it creates a strange or uncomfortable feeling. But a certain amount of adrenaline can actually be helpful. I often shoot with high adrenaline. Sometimes I even finish a match with a headache from its intensity. I believe I perform at my best with my adrenaline pumping, since it heightens my senses. I see better, I feel better, and my reaction time is quicker.

With adrenaline there appears to be increased muzzle movement,



While mastery of technical skills helped Malcolm Cooper earn several Olympic gold medals, avoiding anxiety by focusing on the right things also played a key role in his success.

NRA File Photo

M COOPER

RE TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

BY MALCOLM COOPER

2 in the March 2014 issue of Shooting Sports USA magazine.

which most shooters attribute only to an increased pulse beat. Your heart rate does increase with adrenaline, but if your technique is good, there is no significant increase in movement from the pulse beat. It is just that the adrenaline is letting you see better. Most of the movement is always there, but it can't be seen as clearly. If you do see an increase in movement, that is OK. In fact it's good. It means you are seeing well. The problem is when that perceived increase in movement makes the shooter anxious and that *anxiety* leads to the release of too much adrenaline. Trouble can begin at this point because the body comes right up to a razor's edge, and equilibrium is easily disturbed. That anxiety, though, should never be experienced if one is confident, uses positive thinking and pays really good attention to the job at hand. Such anxiety is caused only by negative thoughts, which can be controlled with adequate mental training.

As you practice, it is hard to put pressure on yourself and create the same situation that you will face in a match. When I was learning to compete, I would often seek a pressure situation so I could perform at my best. I would use a pressuring device such as needling my friends that I would do better than them or bragging that I would shoot a difficult score. Before any match, I psych myself up to perform at my best and get my adrenaline at the necessary level. If, after one position, I feel dull and want to be picked up, I look at the scores my competitors are firing and ask what score I need to win. This will create tension and give me the necessary lift I need. All it's for is to heighten the senses.

There is no other pressure for me like shooting in the Olympics. The world championships do not create the same kind of feeling. Even after four Olympics, I still sometimes have butterflies before I start. But once I start, I funnel my energy and focus my mind on the job at hand. I must be totally focused on what I am doing in the match. At this point it is critical that I have no negative thoughts to push the adrenaline level up too much. I just use what's there from the excitement of the match.

The key to this is that whenever I shoot, I keep my attention on what I am doing and let the score look after itself. If I control my thoughts on each shot, there is no time to calculate scores or work out where I will place. It is no good wishing for 10s and having my attention on the target. My attention must be 100 percent on what I am doing. I am the *launching pad* for the shot. The target is simply the vehicle to show I've performed correctly.

By facing pressure whenever you feel it, you can learn to use your heightened senses and the related feelings that adrenaline brings. Learn to shoot under these conditions, always being careful to focus entirely on the task at hand and avoid negative thoughts. ◎