

Identifying Weaknesses

We naturally like practice sessions that reinforce our strengths. It just feels good to shoot well, but this false sense of confidence is a house of cards that will quickly topple when the winds of pressure start to blow. Having warm fuzzies about your skills won't make you a better archer or bowhunter. Being brutally honest in identifying your weaknesses is the best way to improve.

Many tournament archers perform great when they stand all by themselves at the range, but they shoot poorly when the pressure builds and people start watching. Rather than shooting to their potential, they subconsciously find ways to stay out of contention - to avoid these pressure-packed situations. The cure is simple: they must identify their weaknesses so they can step out of their comfort zones and still perform well.

Self-examination should include both the physical and mental aspects of the shot. The best way to identify flaws in shooting form is to have a very accomplished archer or professional coach watch you shoot. A critical eye is always scary, and leaving your comfort zone behind is always tough, but without these steps you will never shoot to your full potential.

Weaknesses also affect success rates in the field. No doubt, you have a preferred way to hunt. It is your signature. You've had some success with it, so you naturally assume it is the best way. In all honesty, it probably isn't. I know because I've been there myself. You can't get comfortable after a certain level of success and expect to keep improving. The hunters I admire most have wide-open minds and have made a lifelong study of all facets of the game. Look at your technique a little more critically. You will find areas where you get sloppy. Don't be afraid to try new techniques. Ask accomplished hunters for help. Sure it's humbling, but that's how you improve.

Flaws and weaknesses are like roaches. They are gritty, dirty little buggers that flourish when left alone in the dark. But shine a light on them and they quickly scurry away. Finding that light is your first step toward permanent improvement as an archer and bowhunter.

utes to warm up. Stretch your muscles for about 5 minutes, depending on how many exercises you do. You can use a rope or a towel, but I like to use the Bowfit archery exercise tool (1-888-757-5541). I stretch my arms behind my back, then up over my head and across in front of my body. I also twist my torso back and forth while standing upright and do some toe-touching stretches. The second phase of my warm-up routine is pulling my bow several times (without shooting). Finally, I like to move up close and train and prepare my mind by shooting the first arrows with my eyes closed, visualizing the perfect shot and all the steps that go along with it. If you use this warm-up routine you'll find that your first few shots will be much more consistent, you won't be nearly as sore the day after you shoot, and you won't be plagued by repetitive-use injuries.

AIMING

When aiming I keep both eyes open, but many good shooters close one eye. Also, my eyes focus about halfway from the pin to the target, but many good shooters focus on the target. It probably doesn't matter which way you aim, as long as you do it the same way every time. Experiment to see what works for you, then practice and hunt using only the method you've perfected.

Holding the bow steady is a big part of the aiming process. Unfortunately, the ability to hold a bow steady at full draw does not come naturally. Archers who are very steady have worked on their strength, endurance, balance, and relaxation for years.

To hold a bow steadier you must get stronger. The key to strength and endurance training is forcing your body to do a little more than it is used to doing. If you do this your body will come back stronger. Exercise those muscles used during



Ideally both eyes should be open when shooting a bow. However, if your dominant eye isn't always 100-percent dominant you may need to close your non-dominant eye while shooting.

the shot, and as they become conditioned you'll be able to hold the bow steadier.

However, keep in mind that no one, not even the best professionals, can hold a bow absolutely steady. So don't try to force the sight pin to stay on target, or you'll simply become tense. Let the bow move naturally and begin your release. Stay relaxed and execute the shot. The arrow will hit where it's supposed to.

Shooting Tip Be conscious of your eyelids; these simple shutters can have a major effect on your accuracy. Following are a few tradeoffs to consider when deciding whether to shoot with both eyes open, your non-dominant eye fully closed, or with your non-dominant eye partially closed:

1) Shooting with both eyes wide open produces the widest field of view, but there is a potential downside. If your aiming eye is not significantly more dominant than your other eye, your eyes will fight to determine which one controls the sight picture. The result: as situations change, your sight picture will change too. Dominance becomes an even larger problem when the light is low and the restriction of your peep sight slightly diminishes the acuity of your aiming eye. At times like this it is very common for the non-aiming eye to seize total control of the sight picture. When that happens you'll miss by a mile. You can learn a lot about visual acuity and dominance by practicing under low-light conditions for a couple of days.

2) I shoot at game with my non-dominant eye completely closed. However, when I compete I use a blinder for my left (non-dominant) eye and leave both eyes open. My goal

in both situations is to eliminate all possible variables in the sight picture, and by simply closing my non-aiming eye while shooting or

covering it with a blinder I remove it from the equation. Sure, I give up some field of view, but I'm so focused on the pin and the target that I really don't want to be distracted by anything on the periphery of my sight picture anyway. I don't consider the lost field of view to be a big negative.

3) Some archers have found a compromise by squinting and keeping their non-dominant eye partially closed. This permits a fuller field of view while greatly reducing the acuity and possible dominance of this eye. A possible lack of consistency is my only concern with this style of aiming. It will work fine as long as the archer always positions his eyelid the same. At tournaments I've seen shooters whose aiming style changes as they get tired or when they're under pressure. When your sight picture changes, your accuracy has the potential to change too.

BALANCE

The more stable your foundation, the less work your muscles have to do to hold your body, and ultimately your bow, steady. The key here is to get your bones to hold the weight so your muscles don't have to. Bones don't shake under tension as muscles do.

To improve your balance and stability, force yourself to practice from uncomfortable and unstable positions. The same principles apply to balance training as apply to strength training. Force the body to do more than it is used to doing, and it will respond positively.

NERVES

Anxiety in any form tends to make the bow shake. This anxiety can be caused by the fear of missing, buck fever, a lack of preparation, or other factors. There are many theories on how to calm your nerves, but I've personally relied on two techniques: concentration, and admission of fear.

By concentration I mean bringing my thoughts to a central focus and pushing aside everything else. By focusing on each step of the shot process - one at a time - I'm able to push everything irrelevant to that one step out of my mind. It gives my mind something to do so it doesn't wander off to think about everything that might go wrong.