

The Emotionality of Shooting

When it comes down to it, archery is not a test of a man's physical prowess, it is a test of a man's heart. Before we even talk about the stress of shooting in front of thousands of people for an Olympic medal, we need to start at the beginning of archery's test against the soul. It is within man's power to attain victory or defeat: to display courage or cowardice.

When one first picks up a bow and attempts to hit a mark, his physical skill is not adequate to create much anxiety. After considerable practice the archer begins to expect a certain level of performance from his physical skill. Suddenly, he cares. His willful will predominates his thoughts. Whether it is a determination to shoot well or beautifully for others or more simply, to beat a personal best and improve his confidence, it is now the archer's *desire* to shoot well that is his limiting factor. Physically, for one arrow, he is capable of shooting near the exact center of the target. For one arrow he is capable of drawing a bow with more grace than Apollo could command. For one arrow, almost anyone can achieve excellence. However, when that one arrow must be repeated with another, and another, on command, the archer begins to question his ability to sustain beauty.

In its simplest form, archery is a task of conquering demons. Indeed, in all sports, and, for that matter, any passion, one must learn the art of controlling the swells of the heart to achieve virtuoso status. In archery in particular, its repetition and protraction makes the continual battle the athlete must fight with his heart unlike that of any other sport. When an archer stands waiting to begin his gold medal match, he merely walks to the line when the buzzer sounds. Adrenaline only makes his hands shake more, and then he avoids any thoughts that would take him down such a path. Excitement is his enemy. In the moment where he experiences the great fight or flight instinct, he must do neither. He must stand in place, gently and carefully draw back his bow, and launch an arrow into the winds. Moreover, a twelve arrow match, each arrow means something different. It is true that the first arrows score the same as the last, but as possible chances of pulling ahead of his opponent dwindle, or the closer he gets to shooting the arrow that sets a world record, the more the archer's heart swells. The more his heart cares. When the desired intangible comes into view, the last arrow to win the match feels immeasurably harder than the first few easy tens. Because always, the heart knows the calculus involved, and seemingly a miscalculated heartbeat can spell defeat should the arrow land millimeters away from his dreams. The moment the archer shoots from a place of need, "I need to make a good shot on this last arrow to win," he has spelled doom for himself. Is it not true that he needed the first arrows just as much?

The simple truth is that great strength resides in the act of shooting. The archer who shoots to make his physical expression beautiful is very different from the archer who shoots to hit the center of the target. Ultimately, there is greater happiness to be found in shooting for the beauty of expression than for the sake of hitting a mark. Modern psychology talks about the differences between process-based and outcome-based thought. Process-based thought focuses on the actions that will produce a result. Outcome based thought focuses on the result, using excitement and desire to create performance. While all claims about either method are subjective, some logic exists that would argue outcome based thought created unrealistic expectations and no path towards them. The archer focused on the process is the one who

shoots for beauty. He focuses on the details of his motions smoothing and blending them together until it is not possible to tell where his arms end or the bow begins. The other archer--the outcome archer-- pulls the bow back to his face, shaking with the effort and the anxiety of achieving perfection. The bow is not part of him. It is just an instrument freely in the heavens above. He hangs between, forever dreading the snap of the bowstring that will tear him in two.

Fear drives all of the failures in archery. What if something, at the crucial moment, goes wrong? A good question, yes, but the correct answer hints at so much more. Something is always going wrong, isn't it? If you have to feel comfortable to shoot the arrow, you are already lost. This answer looks at the desired outcome--a ten on the last arrow of the Olympics to win a gold medal-- and reminds all archers that no matter what their goals are, things will never be absolutely perfect while reaching those dreams. Only a fool would ask favors of the wind. Fear drives the heart and mind to demand the impossible--the wind gust that pushes a mistake into the middle of the target. It is the nuances of each moment that makes life alive and real. The archer who shoots the arrow for the beauty of his motions is one with himself, coexisting with the wind, the bees buzzing around his head, and the pitter-patter beat of his excited heart. The illusion of comfort can be so great as to drive the perfectionist mad when he realizes he is very much uncomfortable, and hopelessly out of control. The key to success in these moments is action. Hesitancy is the mind's desire for control, a slowing of action; a prevention of forward thought and motion. The shot practiced endlessly during training is one of smooth, fluid ongoing motion. However, when the archer stands facing his target, there are no respites for contemplation, despite feelings of dread, a lack of comfort, and a fear of both success and failure, the only thing the archer can do is shoot his arrow. And in so doing, he must shoot his arrow as he has practiced it a thousand times: unthinking, strong and confident, a true expression of his heart.

Total Archery

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