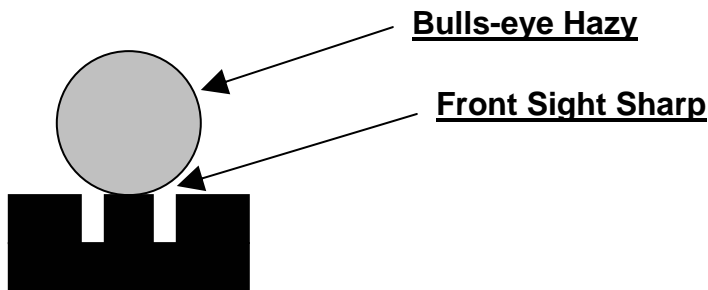


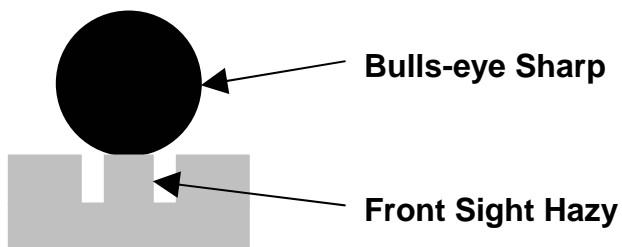


Shooting and Mental Management

Bullseye shooters know that there are many ingredients to the perfectly executed shot. The do's and don'ts of bullseye shooting have been written about by many past and present experts and are widely available both online and in various books, pamphlets, and periodicals. Most coaching aids focus on proper stance, proper grip, sight alignment, trigger control, and follow through. As shown below, we are told to concentrate on the front sight, not the target.



Correct



Incorrect

We are cautioned not to jerk the trigger, flinch in anticipation of recoil, squint our eyes, grit our teeth, or do anything else that might make you overly tense during the shot sequence.

But in my experience, as accurate and helpful as such information may be, the failure to shoot tight groups is more often than not rooted in poor mental management rather than in any physical problem. Control your thoughts and success will come. What you think may very well determine your score.

1. Avoid thinking about when the shot will break. Yes, I know the trigger pull is mentally linked to loud noise and recoil. It is a case of classical conditioning (remember Pavlov?) or, more specifically, conditioned fear. To get around this normal behavioral response, the shooter needs to concentrate so hard on the sight picture (or dot, for you red-dot shooters) that there is no ability to think about anything else – not even the trigger pull. New shooters are often impressed with their “luck” at placing a good shot when their gun fired unexpectedly early in their shooting sequence. Actually, not knowing the precise moment of trigger break (within reason) is an advantage, and all accomplished shooters eventually learn this. Think about sight alignment, not the shot itself.
2. What about the trigger? Doesn't that require mental concentration so we squeeze rather than jerk? Actually, no. Hold an unloaded pistol or revolver and squeeze the trigger until the hammer drops. You should be able to do this easily when otherwise occupied (talking, watching TV, etc.). Easy, isn't it? In fact, the less you think about the trigger, the better off you are. You will, of course, decide when to *begin* the trigger pull, but after that commitment, thinking about the trigger should be put on the back burner – out of conscious thought. Think of it this way. You are multitasking. Some other part of your brain is dealing with it – as when we drive for miles on the turnpike without even thinking about the details of controlling our vehicle. We can be on autopilot for long stretches, barely paying attention to our ongoing steering corrections – until something that demands attention interrupts routine uneventful cruising. It wasn't that way when you were first learning to drive. You had to really think about what you were doing. But with experience, we put routine and simple tasks (what could be easier than pulling a trigger?) on the back burner of thinking.

3. Shooters sometimes try to be too precise and wait for a perfect sight picture before squeezing the trigger. Some coaches call this “trying too hard.” This is a no-win strategy in shooting. Every shooter knows approximately what his or her minimum arc of movement is when lining up the sights with the target. If you try to be too precise and seek the impossible (eliminating all movement) by the time you get around to pulling the trigger it is likely that your arm will get tired, you will anticipate the shot going off (i.e., flinch), and your concentration will break. The result will be a poor shot. **A clue that you are doing this is when your timed and/or rapid-fire groups are smaller than your slow fire groups.** Instead of seeking perfect alignment, be content to squeeze the trigger when your arc of movement settles down to the minimum you typically achieve. Strive for perfect front and rear sight alignment and accept that your firearm will move naturally in an arc of movement here and there, up down, right, and left, about the target. You won’t even care – as long as you focus intently on the front sight and resist the temptation to sneak a peek at the target.

4. One problem that affects just about every shooter at one time or another is anxiety. Your gun is shaking, your arc of movement is growing, it seems like you are pulling ten pounds worth, and the shot still will not break. Your hands are sweating, your heart is pounding, you are out of breath, and your groups are much larger than the ones you typically shoot during practice. Usually, anxiety in sports relates to a strong desire to do well in a competitive situation. Sports psychologists call this “fear of failure.” A cousin to fear of failure is fear of *repeated* failure. “Ouch!! I hope I don’t do THAT again!” By thinking about a bad shot, the chances are high that you will indeed make the same bad shot – maybe even through the same hole. Good mental management will block negative thinking. Visualize the positive. Mentally guide the bullet right into the X ring. By the way, don’t even talk to or be around negative thinkers. You can see them shaking their heads in disgust after shooting a flyer. Instead, focus on the positive. You’re good, and you shoot 10s. It’s that simple. You don’t *hope* you’ll get a 10; you *will* get a 10. If your gun is sighted in, don’t even bother looking through the scope for the shot value. Instead, focus on the next shot, which, of course, will also be a 10. Focus on the positive. Good results are certain.

5. Besides concentration, trigger control, and anxiety control, one other factor that has been shown to affect shooting performance is conditioning. Grip strength and general upper body strength are related to shooting ability, especially with the large caliber guns. Staying fit will give you an edge. Good shooting . . .