



Get Your Mind Right

How mental preparation can help you win.

By CMSA World and National Champion, Kenda Lenseigne

I am often asked about the keys to my success in mounted shooting. Although there are many factors – a super horse like Justin, top-notch equipment, and years of experience in the sport – I believe my edge has been befriending my own worst enemy. My mind.

Like any sport, a big part of winning is accomplished on the mental side of competition. It is often neglected because it is not something one can get in a one-hour lesson, as you can with a mechanical skill. It has to happen by making changes in the way we think, a sort of bridling the “going to get Western” side of our brains when the adrenaline rushes in.

Positively powerful

I believe in the power of positive thinking. This happens by reversing all negativity out of speech, thoughts, and out of the

planning processes of mounted shooting. For example, at a shoot as we study the pattern at hand, we sometimes can't help but think, “I hope I don't miss.” By planting the word “miss” in our minds, subconsciously we may actually fulfill that promise to ourselves. By simply changing the phrase into “I know I can hit all 10,” we then eliminate the negative, reinforce the positive and give ourselves a better chance to succeed.

Leave that baggage behind

Often times shooters will ask, “What happened?” if a miss has occurred. I do not dwell on the mistakes I have made because they have already been made. Perhaps I have shot too low, or too high -- but dwelling on that mistake will only chip away at my confidence going into the next run.

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Therefore I leave it at the finish line. The more we replay our mistakes, the more likely we are to will it to happen again. This does not mean that we cannot learn from our mistakes. The practice pen is where we must identify our weaknesses and work them into strengths. However, on shoot day when pressure is high, it is important to only look ahead to keep our confidence in the game.

An already won mind game

Before each stage, I practice mental rehearsal, or visualization. Basically, I will rehearse in my mind the outcome that I want. I go over every step, every turn, and every broken balloon so when I enter the arena my muscle memory already knows what to do. This practice not only helps keep me calm and focused, but also gives me the confidence to simply act out what has already been accomplished in my mind. It also eliminates any surprises. Surprises transform into distraction and broken focus in a split second. I especially encourage new or lower lever shooters to practice mental rehearsal because it also helps the problem of "getting lost on a pattern".

The distraction monster

Sometimes as I am trying to focus I catch my mind wandering, thinking of everything from a steak dinner to the stalls I should have cleaned earlier. It's at that point I have to snap back into mental rehearsal and stay focused. To truly avoid the distraction monster -- the excited announcer, a loose horse, a good natured shooter who wants to have a lengthy conversation about their 2 year old colt at home -- I try to practice my rehearsal off by myself, earplugs in and focused. It is also very important that I do not watch what is going on in the arena prior to my run. If a rider before me should miss, or fall, I do not want that to be in my mind as I ride through the gate.

She talks to herself, she must be crazy

When I enter the arena, the last item on my checklist before takeoff is a simple one. I say {sometimes out loud}, "Kenda, take your time. Watch them pop." Although this seems a little crazy, it helps keep my mind on track all the way to balloon number 10. By "taking my time," it feels as though I am running in slow motion. That doesn't mean Justin's feet are moving any slower, it simply means my shots are not rushed. My trigger finger is not outrunning my horse and my mind is not yet at the finish line when my horse is at the rundown barrel.

These things don't come overnight. They require practice and concentration, just like horsemanship and shooting. But the end results—and I can attest to that—are more than worth it. 

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