

Coordination?

By Gene Wensel

“He’s not a very good shot on paper targets, but he’s a deadly shot on game.” How many times have I heard that statement? How many years did I believe it? For decades, I liked to think I was “one of those guys.” I eventually came to realize those people are rare birds, with the possible exception of people who are intimidated by shooting in front of others. Most folks are either good shots or they’re not. I’m not saying with time, effort, coaching and lots of practice, a poor shot can’t learn to become much better. Reading between the lines, most people who think they are “poor on targets but good on game” are really just trying to say, “I didn’t practice enough.” I had to mention the, “I get intimidated when people are watching me” folks because I happen to be one of those types.

Anyone who misses cleanly can also wound an animal with a poor shot. In most cases, it’s actually harder to miss cleanly than to wound an animal. We have a definite responsibility to ourselves, our passion and the game we hunt to minimize that reality.

What causes an easy miss, even a chip shot well within our own capabilities? Some people know in their hearts their maximum effective range is only 15 yards but they like to think it is closer to 30. Before we answer the question, we need to define range limitations. Each of us should know our own personal limitations. By my definition, it is the maximum range we can place *all* (not “most”) of our arrows inside an 8” paper plate. That distance might be under 15 yards for some folks, over 30 yards for others. Most of my treestands are set up for 15-20 yard shots. Why? First of all, I hunt a lot of thick habitat. Secondly, I feel very confident right around the 15 yard line....not too close but not too far.

What makes one bowhunter a better shot than others? The answer is coordination; to combine two or more harmonious actions. We’ll use a professional athlete as an example. I’m sure there are thousands of people physically built *almost identical* to world class athletes. Many are also in very good physical condition. Yet a pro ball player knocks down millions of dollars playing big league ball while hundreds of guys built just like him draw minimum wages. The reason is that the professional is mentally and physically coordinated. He has tuned his gifted proficiencies. Is that fair? Sure it’s fair! The pro developed his abilities, honed his skills and signed a contract through demonstration and consistency in his coordination.

There is no such thing as “hand/eye” coordination. The hands and eyes have to be harmonized with the brain, so in reality, it should be more accurately called hand/eye/brain coordination. Juggling, shooting skeet, playing a video game or casting a fly line require hand/brain/eye coordination. Other abilities might incorporate foot/eye/brain harmony. Skate boarding, surfing, or accurately kicking field goals are good examples of foot/eye/ brain coordination. Bowling, gymnastics, skiing, or auto racing calls for hand/foot/eye/brain harmony. Slight of hand magic tricks require hand/eye/brain coordination by allowing either the brain to fool the eye, or the eye to fool the brain.

Shooting a bow well, regardless of whether we're talking tournament archery or bowhunting, requires hand/eye/brain coordination. It is entirely controlled by "micro-chips" from the eye to the brain, telling the fingers exactly how and when to release.

How does all this relate to instinctive shooting? It depends on one's definition of instinctive shooting. Many people define it as shooting a bow and arrow using only hand/eye/brain coordination. It is concentrating hard enough to shoot your arrow where you are looking, hopefully in focus. No reference points for aiming are supposedly used. I used to think if a person held at full draw for more than a split second, he or she wasn't shooting instinctively, but was in fact somehow aiming. Releasing upon touching one's anchor point is snap shooting, not instinctive shooting. There is a difference. On the other hand, just because a guy shoots bare bow doesn't mean he's shooting instinctively.

I tried a bow sight for a short while many years ago (early '70's). It didn't take long to realize sights weren't for me. Not only did I have to keep my bow perfectly vertical while I subconsciously wanted to cant it, but I was constantly worrying about misjudging yardage. I shot several animals with the sight before I realized I wasn't even using it in most hunting situations.

I've shot three fingers under for many years. "Three under" simply raises my anchor point to a spot closer to my eye. At first I wasn't sure if a person could shoot three under and still shoot instinctively. I now tend to think many folks can.

I don't want to turn this article into a piece on how to shoot a bow. Good shooting habits can be learned elsewhere. I do think its very important (and easiest) to master good habits by learning proper shooting form from the very start. Self-taught shooting styles often lead to bad habits that can be tough to break after we train our brains to do something a certain (wrong) way. Doing everything exactly the same way every time definitely helps, especially if you're doing it right!

I feel instinctive shooting is more pointing than aiming. Using a shotgun as an analogy, lets say we have the gun loaded with 00 buckshot. It throws a pattern. No amount of aiming will tighten that pattern. From close range, most people will be as effective from the hip, maybe even more so since they eliminate the time used to shoulder the weapon. But by loading that same shotgun with rifled slugs, we'll be a lot more accurate by shouldering the gun. By adding a rear sight, our accuracy will improve dramatically. Thousands of deer have probably been killed with slug guns utilizing no rear sight at all. Yes, pointing can be deadly. Regardless of our shooting style, we must come to full draw and anchor at exactly the same spot to achieve best accuracy.

Most experienced bowhunters would be lying if they didn't admit to blowing a "gimme" shot once in a while. It happens to all bowhunters sooner or later. Two years ago I had a great 4x4 walking right to me. I could see him coming from over 60 yards, walking down a trail that passed right in front of my stand. I was already standing with an arrow on the string, posed to strike. I didn't have to move at all. I was excited but completely in control. But that big buck stopped *four* different times, looking right up at me each time as he got closer. In my mind, I didn't really believe I would be able to draw my bow without getting busted. When he was finally broadside at 14 or 15 yards, I started my draw, still knowing he would probably see me move. When I did in fact actually get to full draw, I was so stunned I didn't take the mandatory split second to pick a spot. The arrow was off, passing completely through his abdomen. He ran fifty yards or so, stopped, shook his tail and slowly walked out of sight. I waited in the tree a half hour

after dark, quietly climbed down and tip-toed up the ridge in the dark to return the next morning. Needless to say, I didn't sleep well that night.

In the morning, Barry and I took the trail. The arrow was right there, covered with blood, but mysteriously had no stomach juice odors on it. It didn't make sense, yet I saw my arrow pass through, low and back. He actually bled fairly well for a hundred yards or so, then he all but quit bleeding. Making a long story short, we trailed that buck by specks of blood for almost half a mile before we finally lost all sign. I searched for two more days, finding no other sign. I felt very bad for a long time. Then, in February, a neighbor guy picked up both of the buck's sheds! I would have bet a lot of money that he was dead. I tried again to piece together what I saw when I remembered something that at the time seemed trivial. When the buck was approaching me, I noticed a grapefruit sized tumor protruding off the bottom of his abdomen. That tumor had apparently either pushed his intestines upward or my broadhead passed directly through the tumor. In so many words, I had "lanced in boil" for him! Matter of fact, I named him "Lance" that day.

Last fall, I saw Lance twice and got several trail camera photos of him. I could even see my healed arrow scar on his abdomen! Life goes on. At this writing, Lance is still out there. Not taking that split second to pick a spot cost me that buck.

Coordinated shooting requires us to harmonize our hands, eyes and brains. I can't help but ask myself if people are born coordinated or whether it is an acquired skill. I'm still unsure of the answer. An auto race is not necessarily won by the guy with the fastest car, but by the most coordinated driver behind the wheel of one of the fastest cars on the track that day.

A lot of coordination comes from timing. Almost anyone would be able to juggle three oranges if they threw each orange twenty feet in the air. By throwing the oranges higher, we allow our brain an extended reaction time to catch up with our hands and eyes. By throwing each orange only two feet high, juggling becomes a whole new challenge!

When we shoot an arrow that lands absolutely dead center, we know in that instance we did everything just right. A single arrow shot over and over from the same bow locked into a shooting machine with a draw lock will shoot the same arrow into almost exactly the same spot every time, even at long ranges, unless there is a cross wind. That tells us that almost all misses are human error, or at least the human element is a big factor and not very variable.

How can we develop better coordination for bowhunting situations? The first step is to start very close to our target, developing stance, draw, anchor, release and follow through to build and maintain good form. Many people talk themselves through each step of the process, consciously forcing themselves to concentrate. The best way to train your brain is through practice. If you practice often enough, when a golden opportunity presents itself, you'll have the confidence to pull it off without choking.

Coordination, mind control and consistent shooting form are no harder to learn than poor shooting habits. Shooting a bow and arrow is fun. Hitting what you're shooting at is even funner!