

There's No Shame in Aiming

by Gene Wensel

If I were to take a survey of traditional bowhunters readers, most would claim they shoot their hunting bows “instinctively.” The truth is, many archers confuse the term “instinctive” with “barebow.” Because it is presently in vogue, almost “fashionable,” to shoot a bow instinctively, nearly everyone who shoots barebow claims to utilize nothing but pure instinctive skills. The sad part is that there are literally thousands of bowhunters roaming the woods each fall who have no right shooting instinctively at game. At least not until they have mastered the style. The same peer pressure that spawned the rebirth of traditional archery brought with it the notion that a traditional bow should be shot instinctively.

Please don't get me wrong; I'm not saying that instinctive shooting is not a **very** effective bowhunting style. It is probably the best for many hunting situations. But, using boxing as an analogy, the fancy footwork of a modern boxer becomes less important when confronted by the flat-footed stance of a really good puncher who gets his “dancer” cornered. “Style” quickly turns to method.

The term barebow simply means you shoot with no sight.

The most common definition of instinctive shooting is “shooting a bow using only the abilities of eye, body coordination, and instinctive memory.” Shooting an arrow where you are looking, or looking at the target and shooting sounds easy enough; actually very simple. For some people, maybe.

Hand/eye coordination, or better stated, hand/brain/eye coordination, is an incredibly deep subject when one tries to figure out what takes place within the human mind, when nerves relay impulses from the eye to the brain and then to the hand.

Is one human born more coordinated than another? I don't know. Probably, but maybe not. The **ability** to become coordinated is something altogether different. Give a left-handed bow to a right-handed champion archer. Chances are he'll demonstrate a decent lack of coordination at first. But force that same archer to switch from right-handed to left-handed, and we'll most likely note that within weeks, they'll tell you the switch came a lot easier than expected.

Remember the first time you got on a bicycle with no training wheels? How about the first time you played basketball as a kid? Remember how hard it was to run and dribble at the same time without looking down at the ball? Next, we were expected to run and dribble with our *left* hand as well! No way can a kid do that! At least not without practice.

Instinctive shooting has a way of playing mind games with most archers. I think the key word so far is “coordination.” Most bowhunters are ashamed to admit they might be uncoordinated. Why? Because *modern society has equated coordination with athletic ability*. No one wants to admit to their peers, or especially to themselves, that they might not be a good athlete.

I've had the pleasure of bowhunting with a couple world class athletes. I watched the late, great Paul Schafer, himself a world class athlete, coach Bo Jackson on how to shoot a recurve bow. Even though Bo was in his prime, playing both professional baseball and football at the time, it was easy to see Ol' Bo had a hard time with a recurve at first. I won't say he was all thumbs, but he did make it look like the challenge it was for him.

I bowhunted with golfer Jack Nicklaus annually for many years now. Though his proficiency with a compound is about three times that of his stickbow skills, it's mostly because he doesn't have time to practice as often as he'd like to. The most fun I've ever seen Jack have with a bow and arrow in his hands was an afternoon we spent shooting at cow flocks with longbows and Judo points. I have to add another observation concerning Jack Nicklaus. When he's watching TV or reading, his concentration is so intense that he blocks out everything else going on around him. I had to nearly yell or clap my hands to break his trance. World class golfing obviously takes extreme hand/eye coordination as well as concentration.

Hand/eye coordination does not come easily for many people. Nor does athletic ability. That would be like saying all tall people are good basketball players. Or all big guys are good football players. Or people with big heads have bigger brains and therefore make better chess players. Right.

I would go so far as to say that most **really** good instinctive shots are also pretty good athletes. What's more, most good athletes have what it takes to become really good instinctive shots. Why? Because they have the ability to develop needed coordination. But, really good athletes and really good instinctive shots are not all that common. I'm not implying they are few and far between. What I am suggesting is that there are far too many bowhunters out there who shoot instinctively only because they think it's "cool." Not nearly enough of them have mastered the style. I guess my biggest concern is that a good percentage of them probably never will.

Let's use the analogy of shooting a handgun from the hip. If you could quick-draw a six-shooter from a gun-slinger-type holster and hit what you're aiming at **from the hip**, it would be a very personally satisfying experience, as well as an honorable skill. But, if you consistently missed your target by spraying bullets everywhere but where you wanted to hit, you couldn't help but say to yourself, "Dammit, why don't I aim? Why don't I take an extra split second to raise the gun barrel closer to my eye?" Human nature? Or is *that* real instinct?

The same is often true when shooting a bow and arrow instinctively, especially in hunting situations where only the first shot counts. If we hit where we're looking, there's no feeling quite like it in the world. On the other hand, if we miss badly, we can't help but ask ourselves why we didn't "aim." Or at least try harder.

I'm going to say there are five types of barebow shooters:

1. Those few who have truly mastered their instinctive shooting ability through practice and coordination.
2. Those who are trying to shoot instinctively, who are still in the practice stage of learning, but are not there yet.
3. Those who will never get there for one reason or another.
4. Those who say and think they are shooting instinctively, but are in reality aiming somehow.
5. Those who aim on purpose with no sight; using split vision, gap shooting, point of aim or whatever.

I'm going to stick my neck on the chopping block by stating that if a bowhunter holds at full draw for more than a split second, he is aiming somehow. Mind you, this is just my opinion.

I'm also tempted to say that someone who has truly mastered instinctive shooting doesn't even need an anchor point. Look at it this way...the commonly used analogy of instinctive shooting being similar to throwing a ball...a good pitcher or quarterback doesn't have an anchor point. He doesn't need one.

I might also cause sparks by suggesting that **not** learning instinctive shooting from a good book or video by following the author step by step (and then not practicing the art religiously) probably causes more bad shooting habits, especially short-drawing or premature releases, than any other single reason for poor shooting, with the possible exception of being over-bowed. Snap-shooting is a style in and of itself. It is often involuntary and can easily grow into the habit of letting an arrow go too soon.

I hate to admit how many bowhunters I know who routinely have four inches or more of their arrow sticking out in front of their bow hand when they release. Not only is this going to produce inconsistent accuracy in the flight of your arrows, but spine, penetration, and trajectory will all be affected as well. At three pounds per inch, a guy short-drawing by four inches is getting twelve pounds less energy than what is stamped on his bow. Are you really shooting 60 lbs.? Or is it more like 48 lbs.?

Concentration is the real key to instinctive shooting skill. If an archer can't intensely concentrate on his shooting, he or she will never be able to completely master the skill.

I'm somewhat embarrassed to admit I've heard whispered remarks around campfires about the pitiful scores and miserable displays of shooting form of the average traditional archer at organized shoots. The old adage of "I'd rather see a bowhunter shoot a compound well than a stickbow poorly," comes into play very realistically here. It reminds us that some people could do more for traditional archery by not shooting in public rather than pathetically going through the motions to be social. Time will tell.

There's no shame in aiming. Howard Hill was probably the best barebow shot there ever was, at least in his century. Ol' Howie used peripheral vision to aim with what he termed "split vision," a technique he mastered to perfection even while using very heavy bows. Howard was not only a strong man but an exceptional athlete as well.

To the man, the finest **consistent** game shots I've ever known did **not** shoot instinctively. The late Paul Schafer anchored very high on his cheekbone. Paul cut his arrows an inch longer than his draw length

because he actually drew **past** his anchor, came forward to a high anchor point, then used the tip of his arrow for point-of-aim. Paul routinely practiced out to extremely long ranges under the assumption that psychologically a 25 yard shot would seem like a piece of cake when a person regularly practiced at fifty yards.

Shooting styles differ in various other ways of aiming. I shoot three fingers under, putting the shaft as close to the eye as possible without distorting vision. I cant my bow simply because it feels “right” to me, and at the same time, gets the arrow closer to my eye. I like things that feel right. I suppose I should admit right here that I’m not a particularly good bow shot. At least not as good as I’d like to be, nor as skilled as some of my hunting companions. I switch bows too regularly. I’m not loyal to any one particular bow design or brand because I tend to think of my bows as if they were one of many friends rather than a spouse. Because I’ll use two or three different bows in any given season, I limit my effective range. I’ve learned to rely upon hunting skills to offer more close range encounters in order to make up for the lack of exceptional shooting skill.

Someone once stated a truly good instinctive bowshot should be able to regularly snuff a candle in total darkness, where he can’t see his arrow, his hand or anything except the flame. You might ask, “If instinctive shooting is like pointing a finger, then how can a person even see their own finger in total darkness?” Concentrate, stare and then point at a candle in total darkness sometime. Then, while still pointing, turn on the lights. You’ll find your finger right on the money more often than not. The human brain is a marvelous computer. The problem is, too many people still miss.

About now you’re probably asking yourself, “What’s the point of all this? Is Wensel trying to convince me that instinctive shooting isn’t all that its cracked up to be?” Not at all. Instinctive shooting **does** work for some people. It **should** work well for almost everyone who puts in the time to practice religiously without picking up bad habits. But like ping-pong, golf, throwing a ball, riding a bike, dribbling a basketball left-handed while running, or any other coordination skill, it takes practice. Lots of practice. Not unlike being a good athlete, some will never master it no matter how hard they try.

The shame of missing is the birthplace of a thousand excuses. You’ve heard most excuses by now. We’ve all probably used a good percentage of them already. “I got a deflection.” “He jumped the string.” “Just as I let the string slip from my fingers, he stopped.” “I think I hit my arm guard.” (Or was it my binoculars?) “He was closer (or further) than I thought.” “My lower limb hit the tree.” “Just as I got to full draw, I got something in my eye.” (Could it have been a tear?) “So help me, just when I released, the deer stepped into a hole and I shot right over his back.” “The arrow took a left halfway to the deer.” “My bow made a noise.” “My nock broke.” “My string popped.” “Something squeaked.” “In my heart I didn’t really want that deer.”...Need I go on?

What’s wrong with excuses like, “I just missed.” Or maybe, “I was so excited I don’t really remember.” Or how about, “I guess I need to practice more often.”

What’s the best therapy for poor shooting?

1. Practice. Shoot fewer arrows better. It’s better to shoot a dozen arrows well than 150 poorly. Think quality over quantity. Good groups are built arrow by arrow, one at a time.
2. Get ultra-close to your target, especially if you haven’t shot for awhile. Try fine-tuning both your form and your release with your eyes closed. “Feel” each shot. Train your brain.
3. Know your range limitations and stick to them. If you can’t keep 100% of five consecutive arrows in an eight inch dinner plate at fifteen yards, you have no business shooting at living creatures past that range. In that case, your personal challenge then should be to either increase your effective range through practice or rely upon your hunting skills to get you inside the fifteen yard line.

Shooting a bow and arrow is not supposed to cause mental stress. Flinging arrows is supposed to be fun. But archery is a whole lot “funner” when we hit what we’re shooting at.

It’s not that instinctive shooting doesn’t work...my point is, it’s just not for everyone. Especially those who don’t have the coordination, time or patience to practice. But for those who **do** have the time and **do** put forth the effort yet still can’t get it down pat...pay attention...there’s no shame in aiming.