

CHAPTER 19

MIND CONTROL

There are two ways of looking at smallbore target rifle shooting - as a hobby/pastime, or as a competitive sport. Lots of people tend to think that they fall into the 'hobby' group and use their shooting for relaxation - an opportunity to get out of the house and to have an interest in something totally removed from their work.

There's nothing at all wrong with that attitude; it may not be *your* attitude, but never dream of questioning why somebody follows a particular sport the way they do. What people don't realise is that, however much they try to treat rifle shooting as a hobby, it still produces competitive feelings, no matter how hard they try to suppress them.

If this wasn't the case no-one would come off the firing point thoroughly fed up when they've shot badly, and there's no-one out there who could honestly say that they don't experience some feeling of pleasure when they've shot well!

Of course, lots of people get some perverse pleasure from being able to complain about their shooting, and very few smallbore shooters boast about their successful shoots but, in the main, when you shoot well you're pleased and when you shoot badly you're disappointed. This is the whole point of shooting. If you don't care where your shots go, you might as well be using 'blanks'.

The feel of a .22 target rifle going off leaves a lot to be desired in the excitement stakes, so we have to get our excitement elsewhere, and *that* comes from bettering a particular score or average, or beating someone else.

Therefore, despite what was said at the beginning about pastimes and hobbies, smallbore target rifle shooting really *is* a competitive sport but, there are various levels of competition and somewhere in there is a place for *you*.

If you want to shoot better than you do at the moment, you are most certainly competitive and that's a most admirable attitude. However, one thing that troubles a lot of shooters is that they think they haven't got what it takes when it comes to winning Olympic medals.

This applies to a lot of people, but there are still lots of other medals to be won.

Let's suppose for a moment that you've just started shooting; you have all the right kit because you've been reading this book, and now you're ready to take on the world. You look round in your local club and you see lots of people who shoot better than you; your first question should be "why?"

Do they have better equipment? That's possible, of course, but better equipment in the wrong hands gives no advantage.

Have they been shooting for longer? That's also possible as you've only just started, but even without any help of any kind you'll begin to make progress by just shooting (bad habits and all!).

Have they had any coaching? Ask them, and the answer is probably "no". We do have coaching schemes in this country, but they fall pitifully short when it comes to reaching ordinary club members.

Do they have a natural talent? Some people do seem to have a natural aptitude for shooting but it's not like being blessed with perfect pitch and being a musician. An 'aptitude' just might mean that you're interested enough to put some effort into the sport.

That would, of course, explain the case of someone who's been shooting for years and has never improved. That doesn't mean to say, of course, that he doesn't enjoy his shooting, but everyone knows that he'll never make it to the top, and he's quite happy about that.

It's worth pointing out here that .22 target rifle shooting is 90% technique (at the very least) and anybody with the right technique (and the right mental attitude) can make it into the top 10% of shooters in this country. After that there will be something which separates the Olympic gold medallist from lesser mortals, but that still may only be a matter of mental discipline - something which we're all capable of learning. So now we're going to try to look at adopting the right mental attitude.

However this isn't a book on psychology so we won't pretend that there's any medical background to this - it's basically an opinion as to the attitude you should be adopting if you wish to improve your shooting.

There are no complicated formulae or rules, and the word 'must' won't appear very often, because as soon as somebody says 'must', some minds automatically say 'mustn't'! You need to keep an open mind and create a sponge in your brain (some people have these naturally) which is capable of absorbing information.

Think for a moment about Sherlock Holmes; he'd get the vote for being the most boring person to meet at a party, as he'd spend so much time looking at people's shirt cuffs to interpret the ink stains that he'd have no time to be entertaining, but he would have probably made a brilliant smallbore target rifle shooter.

You may think at this stage that this is wandering off the subject, but shooting is a mystery to many people, and there are times when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle could have given us a few pointers if he'd still been around. Try to see if you can train your mind to be as inquiring and absorbent as Sherlock Holmes'.

For someone new to the sport there's so much to be learned from observation; even people who've been shooting for years may still find things they didn't know about, simply by asking, or by experimenting with a new idea.

So, let's go back to the new shooter in the club, faced with all the experts. (If you've been shooting for years, please be patient - there might be something to be learned from putting yourself in the shoes of a beginner for a while).

Keep a notebook with you at all times (if you have a mind like Sherlock Holmes' - or like a computer - you can probably get away without a notebook, but you're trying to improve your shooting, not win a memory contest!). Watch what goes on when you're down the club - most shooters are creatures of habit.

They have set routines that they follow. Ask yourself "why?" Is it because, by doing the same thing every time, they ensure that they don't forget a vital piece of equipment, or are they on 'auto pilot' with their brain working elsewhere? Which would work best for you?

There will always, however, be the scatterbrained club member who does something new or different every time (to the great amusement of the other members), but still manages to shoot well. Could you cope with that, mentally?

Is doing something the same way every time you shoot going to help your shooting? Are you going to be happier working on 'auto pilot' or would you rather think about what you're doing all the time"

Clubrooms can be great places of camaraderie and entertainment, but when you're new to the sport and nobody knows you very well, you might be ignored for a while. This gives you a great opportunity to minutely examine every stitch in your shooting glove while carefully getting your kit ready for shooting, which helps you prepare *yourself* for *your* shoot.

However, after you've done that for a few evenings, your mind starts to wander off on its own; before you know where you are, you're joining in the general clubroom banter and then find yourself on the firing point without a bolt for your rifle, or any ammo, or ... the list of things you can forget is endless.

So, how do you cope with this?

'Auto pilot' is the choice lots of people make, but - be warned - points can easily be dropped in the clubroom before you even get into the range. Shooting is very much a mind game and if you don't go into the range in the right frame of mind you could be on to a loser before you start.

Don't be fooled by some people's casual banter in the clubroom; that's their way of unwinding from a hard day, or their way of getting into the right frame of mind. It's very easy to get uptight before a shoot, particularly an important one, and a laugh and joke in the clubroom first is some people's way of easing the tension.

Analyse what everyone is doing; watch what different people do before they go in to shoot. Do they have routines which *you* could adopt which will help you?

Watch the shooter who's counting his ammunition out into a separate tray and consider why he's doing that. Is it part of his preparation procedure or does he simply find it difficult to use the manufacturer's original box? Or is it because he finds it easier to keep track of the number of shots he's fired by arranging the ammo in a particular pattern in the box?

Remember that smallbore target shooters are the nicest people you're likely to meet, so you're in a safe and friendly environment, and you can relax. Nobody expects anything of you - they're all there to help you if you need it; so if you need to create a quiet routine for yourself, then do it - only a fool would fail to understand.

The shooter who busies himself with his kit and his notebook (and his warm-up exercises) before he shoots is not thought of as being stand-offish; there's plenty of time to be the life and soul of the party when you come out of the range.

Remember that Sherlock Holmes solved most of his cases by observation, and you can learn to do the same. While you're surrounded by better shooters than yourself, observe them, make a note of what they do and ask yourself "why?" But don't follow the top shooter in your club around with a notebook and pencil - it might be better to observe from the other side of the clubroom!

Don't be afraid to ask questions, but do have the courtesy not to interrupt any of the club's top shooters when they're obviously concentrating hard in preparation for their shoot.

If you feel nervous about approaching people that you don't know too well, particularly if you're shy, remember that most of those experienced shooters were in the same position as you at some stage in their shooting career, and would have suffered the same pangs of curiosity and anxiety.

Don't be afraid of making a mistake - someone will have already done it before you (there are very few *new* mistakes in the shooting world). What *is* important is how you recover from that mistake, and don't be slow to apologise if you make a mistake which affects another shooter (such as putting a shot on his card).

However, if you knock the Club Champion's rifle off a table, breaking his stock and bending his sights in the process just before he's about to go into the range to shoot the final of a team knockout competition - *you're on your own!*

If you're lucky enough to have any top international shooters in your club, watch them closely (but discreetly!). You may be reluctant to approach them, but most top shooters are very nice people and really don't mind the polite approach and the interested question (after they've shot).

However, whatever you do, don't assume that they shoot well because they have some amazing secret formula which they want to keep to themselves! They've reached the top by putting in a great deal of hard work, and if you put in the same effort there's no reason why you shouldn't reach the top as well.

So - adopt the attitude that you *can* make it, and you will!

Before you can expect to get to the top you're going to have to decide whether it's you or your brain who are in control. Your brain runs your body very well, and anything capable of looking after such a complex machine deserves a lot of respect. But there are times when *you* should be in charge and you tell your brain what to think about. That's all about mind control.

Smallbore target rifle shooting is a sport which requires a great deal of mind control. Once having learned the basic techniques, it's all about controlling the brain and what it's doing.

So many people struggle for years, desperately trying to learn every technique and buying every accessory that comes along, completely forgetting to control the bit between their ears.

Really good shooters have been let down on the day by their inability to cope with their nerves, or with the pressure from a big match. They may even have lost a match for the sake of a few moments of concentration.

However much effort you put into your training or practice, it's no good if you don't train your mind at the same time.

Lots of people think that there'll be plenty of time for working on their mental attitude once they're on their way and have learned the basic technique but, in fact, it's *never* too soon to teach your brain what you want it to do.

This chapter is going to work through the basic techniques and, at the same time, emphasize *why* what you're doing is so important to your brain.

The first thing to do is draw up a list of *all* your shooting equipment. For someone just starting out in the sport this is essential; your list should read something like:

1. This list
2. Rifle
3. Bolt
4. Sights
5. Ammunition
6. Spotting scope & stand
7. Jacket
8. Shooting lens/glasses
9. Shooting sweatshirt/jumper
10. Sling
11. Glove
12. Hat
13. Ear muffs or plugs
14. Mat
15. Stopwatch/timer
16. Cleaning rod (in case a bullet gets stuck in the barrel)
17. Oil, rag & cleaning equipment
18. Wet weather gear/wellies
19. Bulldog clips
20. Pen & notebook
21. Squadding notice (if going to an open shoot)

22. Tools (to cope with bits coming loose/dropping off)
23. Soft drinks/water
24. Food (if necessary)

Consult your list frequently, particularly before you set off to shoot somewhere - it will do you no good at all if you find that you've left something behind. Mentally you may manage to overcome the inconvenience (providing you haven't forgotten something vital, like your bolt), but it still means that you'll have to give over part of your brain to coping with the problem, instead of concentrating totally on your shooting technique.

If you've checked your list and have everything on it when you arrive at the range, your mind won't be continually trying to remember whether you *do* have everything and, consequently, you and your brain will be much more relaxed.

Over the years that list will probably become a mental one but - be warned - that's precisely the time when you allow your 'auto pilot' to take over, and when something breaks your routine, causing you to forget something.

It has been known for people to arrive at a range without a bolt, or sights, or ammunition. How can you possibly expect to shoot well if you go down to shoot in a panic? *Knowing* that you have all your kit and that you can cope with any emergency, gives you confidence and stops your worrying, which has *got* to be the right frame of mind to produce a good shoot.

So, consider the beginner, hovering in the clubroom with notebook in hand, nervously waiting to go into the range; all the kit has been checked and all that remains is to set it up on the firing point.

The first thing to put down is the shooting mat, but where do you put it?

If you've been watching everybody else, you'll notice that they have a very casual way of throwing their mats down without seeming to pay any attention to how they lay.

However, as a beginner you should pay careful attention to how you lay out your shooting mat. Rifle shooting is about consistency, so you need to place your mat in exactly the same position every time so that you can lay on it in the same way every time.

During your shooting career you may shoot on lots of different firing points in a wide variety of surroundings, so you will need a *datum* point to use as a reference.

The obvious *datum* point is the target, as it will always be there; it may not always be directly in line with the firing point but it is important that you line your mat up with that target, no matter what angle the firing point is at.

The obvious way of aiming your mat at the target is to put 'sights' on it:-

Arrange the mat at approximately 15 degrees to an imaginary line from the target to the centre of your firing point. Now stick some brightly-coloured tape on top of the mat - one piece at the head and one piece at the foot, so that they're on that imaginary line, straight from the target. They don't need to be very long tapes, they just have to be large enough for you to see.

Now all you have to do when you lay your mat on the floor is line up the two pieces of tape with the target and - *Hey Presto!* - your mat always goes in the same place.

Once you know that your mat is positioned correctly all you have to do is lay on it in the same way each time and you're starting off on a consistent basis.

The next piece of equipment you might want to place on the firing point is your spotting scope. Obviously it should always be positioned so that you can see through it easily, but even that requires a great deal of work and experimentation.

The scope should be placed so that looking through it requires the absolute minimum of effort and movement on your part - and that's a lot easier to write than it is to do!

Modern scope stands are built with multitudinous adjustments to allow for every conceivable position, so let's assume for the moment that you've found the ideal position for your scope. Get out your roll of sticky tape again and add some marks to your mat to indicate where the scope stand legs should be positioned (making sure that you don't confuse these marks with the ones stuck on earlier!)

Having got your scope and mat in place, you can scatter the rest of your equipment about in whatever way you find the most convenient. You'll know where to put your ammo so you can reach it easily; the rifle should come to hand quite readily when you're ready to shoot - these are all things which you can work out for yourself. Just remember: "minimum effort and movement".

One important piece of equipment not yet mentioned, of course, is *you*. Once you're down in the right position it would make sense to mark *your* position on the mat. For example, there's no harm in marking where your left elbow goes (if you're

a right-handed shooter) as that's usually what you lay down first when you pick up your rifle.

What you can't see, of course, is how you're laying in relation to the rest of the mat (and therefore the target) and even the smallest of positional differences can have an effect on the pressure which is bearing on the rifle, particularly if you alter it during the shoot. But if you can't see how you're laying, how can you see if you're in the right position?

A camera can be a valuable tool when it comes to analysing your position, so get someone to take some photos of you from all conceivable angles while you're shooting, and compare them with your idea of what you *should* look like.

Using these you can refine your position by adjusting your sling and stock if necessary, until you achieve a flat, comfortable position which you can repeat. As a general rule, if you look ungainly and uncomfortable when you're in the shooting position, your shooting will suffer as well.

Lots of shooters just get down on their mat, pick up their rifle and point it at the target. They may have been told things like "shut your eyes and see if the sights stay on the target" and they may have developed all sorts of personal ways of trying to ensure that they're in the right position, but how do you, as a beginner, learn to do this in a calculated manner?

Firstly, your body is a mass of nerves and senses, at the head of which is a computer capable of assessing unbelievable amounts of information. Use it. Every part of your body is capable of feeling something and your brain is capable of interpreting that feeling. Try this small experiment.

Send your brain off on a tour of your body via its sense of touch. Ask yourself what you can feel in various parts of your body.

Can you, for example, feel your left elbow? Try your right knee; can you feel anything touching it? Can you feel your trousers or skirt resting on it? What you're trying to do is make your brain aware of what you're feeling or touching.

When you're next lying on your shooting mat, send your brain off onto its tour again and see what your ankles feel like, and your knees, and so on up your body to your neck and head.

Teach yourself what you feel like from inside. Remember where your right knee goes - perhaps because it's resting on a fold in your mat you can feel it. Notice what your

right elbow feels like because of where it is on the mat; it's not easy because you're all wrapped up in layers of clothing, but do try.

If you know what you feel like you'll be in with a chance of repeating everything, so make your brain work for you by checking that everything feels as it should do.

When you're shooting well and everything feels right, send your brain off on a journey round your body and try to get a blueprint of what every part of you feels like.

Newer shooters will find their brain having to cope with a lot of messages about pain and aching muscles, sore elbows, eye strain, etc., but don't worry, that's perfectly normal - it *will* get easier!

The next step, after learning to concentrate and make use of your brain, is to develop the right mental attitude.

The world is made up of optimists and pessimists - you know, one says a glass is half full, the other says it's half empty. That could also be down to either a positive or negative mental attitude.

Most coaches will be trying to instil a positive mental attitude in their protégés and you could learn to do the same thing, but be careful: over-positive mental attitude could also lead to over-confidence, and we all know how good the sport of shooting is at bringing you down to earth.

Confidence brought on by the right mental approach is good, but it's a question of exactly how far you should go with this approach.

You could enter the British Championship thinking you're going to win and if you're a top class shooter then this is not unreasonable. However, if you normally shoot in one of the lower classes, you would probably know in your heart that you have very little chance of winning. So how far down the list do you aim? (pun intended!)

If you're entering the championship for the first time, you don't have a yardstick to measure your performance by; you may *think* you know how you should perform, but in practice that doesn't always work out.

You could adopt the attitude that, as it's your first time it doesn't really matter where you come. Some people would say that was too negative, but it's not really as straightforward as that. You could, for example, say that it doesn't matter where you come this year because you're going to improve on that next year.

If you've taken part before, then you could say that you're going to better your last

position. (Notice that doesn't say 'better your score', because there might be some outside influence, such as the weather, which reduces everybody's score).

The mental attitude which says you can beat your past performance is positive, without reaching for an impossible goal.

Alternatively, you could select somebody whom you consider to be a better shot and single *them* out as the person to beat, wherever they come in the competition. This also develops a positive mental attitude.

Your own personal view should be that, regardless of what the competition is, you're going to shoot to the best of your ability. This sounds a bit obvious, but it's amazing how much mental effort is required to get the best out of yourself when you need it.

It is a well-known phenomenon amongst sportsmen that if you enter a competition thinking that you're going to lose, perhaps because you're overwhelmed by the competition, then you *will* lose.

In shooting there is an obtuse rule which applies: because we don't need adrenalin to get us pumped up, entering a competition knowing that you aren't going to win can sometimes bring about a relaxed state that has been known to lead to some surprisingly successful results.

The problem is: how do you reach just the right mental state which allows you to be positive yet relaxed, and confident without being over-confident?

The answer is mind control. You *have* to be in control of your brain, even though you may have to play some little game with it and fool it into thinking the way you want it to - it's up to you to devise your own personal approach and practise and develop it to your own benefit.

To give you some idea of what this is about, there are some top international shooters who have shot brilliantly when they've been angry, either with themselves or about something which has happened before the shoot.

Now obviously you don't go around raising your blood pressure by getting annoyed at every little thing which upsets you, as that could be very destructive, but there is a chance that getting slightly aggressive could stimulate the attitude of "despite what's just happened, I'm still going to win!"

Supposing you had a puncture on the way to a major shoot - would that destroy your positive mental attitude, or would it stimulate an aggressive frame of mind, or would you have the "oh well, I didn't want to win anyway" approach?

Some people who've had traumatic journeys to the range, arriving hot and flustered, have then gone on to shoot very well, so obviously something happened - perhaps their journey took their mind off worrying about the shoot (this is where it depends on which portion of your brain is doing what).

Those people who can weather any storm with a calm and placid approach, may shoot well after or during a crisis, but may not be able to get the adrenalin flowing enough to shoot well when it's needed.

Whilst we don't need to get excited during a shoot, a certain level of adrenalin can sharpen up your senses and reactions, which you do need. So if something goes wrong on your way to a shoot, don't get aggressive enough to get angry, just get positive.

Whatever you do, don't go onto a firing point with an empty mind - most people have difficulty completely emptying their mind anyway (try it now), but you could wander onto the firing point not really thinking about what you're doing; your mind will then flit about, thinking about anything that crosses its path, so get a hold of it and make it think about what you're about to do.

Champion athletes plan their races before they start; they know what they're going to do before the starter's gun goes off, and there's no reason for you not to do the same - if you think shooting your match in your head is boring, it's because you're not concentrating.

Before you go onto the firing point, and after you've assembled and checked all your kit, just spend a few minutes thinking about how you're going to shoot the match; treat every card as a match, even if it's just a warm-up or practice card.

If you do this, there won't be room in your head for irrelevant thoughts (if you can win the match in your head, it might just come true when you're shooting).

Preparation time before a match is important, principally so that you can get all your equipment ready, but while you're doing that, get your brain ready at the same time; lead it gently into shooting mode by starting with the check list of your kit - you may still be using your piece of paper, or you may now be able to do it in your head.

When you have everything ready (including your targets), spend the next few minutes thinking about what you're going to be doing for the next twenty. If you're shooting outdoors, check the weather (wind, sun, etc.) and consider how you're going to tackle the various conditions (aiming off, waiting for the wind, etc.), then visualise yourself laying out your kit in the right place, settling down and shooting.

This takes a bit of practice, but with thought and care you'll soon get the idea.

The biggest problem you'll have will be to convince your friends that you haven't just become a miserable old so-and-so who won't have anything to do with his mates. Just show them this chapter and by the time they've read it they're sure to understand!

There's plenty of time for laughter and jollity after you've shot, and with good mind control you can leave your thinking until just before you shoot - there's no need to meditate for hours beforehand.

If you're shooting outdoors it's very important to study the prevailing conditions before you shoot - this is all part of your pre-match thinking.

If the wind, for example, is blowing from left to right, is that the same as it was the last time you shot? If it is, then your sights should require very little adjustment; if it isn't, what are you going to do about it?

With a bit of thought beforehand, you could be prepared for what you're going to do, or you could even make some adjustments to your sights to ensure you're somewhere near the centre before you start.

Finding that your first few shots are centre 'bulls' is a great confidence booster, and that gives you time to measure the wind deviation etc. without wasting time zeroing in.

Once again, don't go too far in one direction in the mind control area; if you concentrate 100% on your pre-match preparation, you might miss the start of the detail, or some valuable information being announced over the tannoy.

This is where being in charge of your brain is important; you have to be able to switch in and out of a mode at will. The lowliest, most sluggish computer has an advantage over us in that you can just press a switch to change what it's thinking about, whereas your mind might take a little more convincing.

Anybody who admits to being able to shoot brilliantly on a practice card and hopelessly on a match card suffers from lack of mind control.

Everybody says "what's the difference between them?", but when it comes to the crunch, it's amazing how many people perform apparently better when there's no pressure on them. 'Apparently' because it's all in the mind again - the only part of you or your equipment that knows that the card has a sticker on it, is your brain.

If your club Captain went along secretly putting stickers on your practice cards

without you knowing, you'd shoot all your cards with gay abandon, and shoot them all equally as well. Unfortunately life isn't like that and this card you're about to shoot is very important to you because it's the first time you've been asked to shoot in a club team, and you want to do well.

So what happens? Your brain puts the mockers on it for you! It starts worrying about you not shooting well and letting everybody down, and you just *know* you're going to be the lowest scorer.

So who *is* in charge, you or your brain? You'll get all sorts of help from fellow club members about calming down and not worrying, and if they're smart they might even remind you that you're helping the team just by shooting, because if you don't shoot then they'll lose even more points than the lowest score *you're* likely to get.

Of course your brain, in its panic, won't accept that and you now wish that they'd asked somebody else. This is where positive mental attitude comes in - think of all the positive things that you can: for example, the Captain asked *you* because you've shot well in the past, or at least you're up to the standard that he expects, therefore you can do it again, can't you?

It's your overall average and standard that the Captain is looking for; if you average 95, but last week shot a 100, then he's going to be asking you to shoot on the basis of your 95 not the 100, so all you have to do is shoot to your average.

Very often, a good team member is not the best shot, but the one who is there when he's needed and turns up when expected. So by just being there, ready to shoot, you've already proved yourself to be a good team member.

Think of the camaraderie; your fellow team members all want you to shoot well, they're all on your side. The more experienced ones will be only too delighted to offer you help and encouragement - they won't be thinking about you letting them down, they're only too grateful that you're shooting at all.

Nobody will expect you to be the top scorer, so there will be more pressure on those team members who usually put in a top score, so relax and enjoy the experience. With your brain full of positive thoughts (those mentioned above aren't the only ones), you won't have room for negative ones.

None of this will happen on its own of course; left to its own devices your brain will disappear off down the nearest rabbit hole to its own little dream world, so *you* have to get it back on line and make it think about what *you* want.

One last thought about the vagaries of the mind: isn't it amazing that when you're laying in bed after a traumatic, awful day, you can't get to sleep because your brain

won't stop worrying, but after a wonderful day when you had the best shoot of your life, you fall asleep almost immediately.