

## CHAPTER 21

### PLATEAU OF MEDIOCRITY

The 'Plateau of Mediocrity' is something we've all experienced at some time or other.

You may not have realised that you were suffering from it at the time, but it can be a very frustrating experience, particularly for those people who want to shoot better. But if you're content with your shooting and have no desire to improve, you could be destined to spend the rest of your shooting career stuck on the 'Plateau'.

Before the rescue attempt, a short explanation is in order so that you can recognise whether or not you have a problem, but don't worry, if this describes your situation - you're not alone. In fact, anybody whose shooting is not currently improving could be deemed to be suffering from this malady.

When you start shooting, then there's only one way to go - up. The more you shoot, the better you get. Even with only the most rudimentary idea of what you're supposed to be doing you're likely to get a better score every time you shoot, up to a certain point.

Do you remember how difficult it was when you first started? But do you also remember how quickly you got the hang of it? I'm not suggesting that you went from an average of 70 to 95 in a couple of weeks, but everybody's learning curve does go upwards quite steeply at the beginning.

At first, most club instructors, coaches, or helpful members will start you off shooting groups, so your scores at the beginning aren't too important, but improvements *can* be seen even before you get your first scoring card. It gradually becomes easier to get all five shots together instead of them flying about all over the place, especially when it's drummed in to you that it's consistency you're after.

Every time you shoot you should learn something; the problems begin when you stop being receptive to the learning process.

When you start keeping a record of your scores (and the dates on which you shot them) you'll probably see a notable improvement as the weeks go by. Each higher score can be looked on as a personal goal reached, and it's so wonderfully easy to reach a personal best.

After a while it becomes harder to continue the upward climb; suddenly your shooting isn't quite improving at the rate it did and there's a certain slowing down in the frequency of personal bests. This is absolutely natural and something everyone encounters; there's nothing you can do about it - it's the very nature of the sport.

Instead of it becoming a race to improve your scores, it becomes a competition against your fellow shooters, and the actual score isn't quite so important.

It has been known for the British Short-Range Championship final to be won with a score of 97 - a fairly mediocre score for that level of shooting. So when you consider how many of *you* have shot a 97 or better, you can see that the score isn't always important.

You can all put up a good score at some time; what you can't always do is beat your fellow competitors all the way through the heats, quarter-finals and semi-finals, and then hold your nerve during the final (or even a shoot off), and produce a reasonable score.

Because this slowing down in your performance occurs naturally, you may not recognise that you're in trouble, and this is where the problem really arises.

So, as you progress, you go from improving the score on individual cards to trying to improve your average, because it's your average that really counts in the long run.

Anybody can shoot a 'ton'; it's doing it every time you shoot that's important, but however well you shoot, you're simply not going to continue this meteoric rise to the top.

Suddenly the dreaded 'plateau' syndrome will strike and you'll realise that your average is faltering. If you find that last year's average was half a point better than the previous year's but now it's slipped back again - congratulations, you're on the 'plateau'.

(It's called this awful name because it describes the flat part of your learning curve - the time when nothing seems to get any better.) Some 'plateaux' may even have a slight downward incline - that's also not unusual.

It may occur several times during your shooting career; what you have to do is recognise when you're on it, *then* you can do something about it.

So what are you going to do if you're stuck? If all this sounds horribly familiar, don't worry, here are some handy hints for escaping from the 'Plateau of Mediocrity'.

*One:* Ask your fairy godmother to wave her magic wand, sprinkle a little stardust around, say the right words and *Hey Presto!* - your shooting will improve.

That may sound somewhat frivolous, but you must retain a sense of humour and behind every apparently stupid remark you may find a grain of truth. You may not know any fairy godmothers personally, but you *can* improve your shooting by doing absolutely nothing.

Having realised that your performance may be in the doldrums, it's important not to panic; everybody's been there and most have managed to survive the experience.

What you should do is just relax, recognise that you're just going through a bad patch, and become comfortable with the idea that this year's not going to be your 'podium' year.

However, the danger in this approach is that it's very easy to drift into the attitude of "I never wanted to be Club Champion anyway!"

The mental approach you should be taking is that you recognise that your progress up the ladder of shooting fortune is slowing down, so you'll take the opportunity of consolidating your strengths and gaining more experience by just going out and enjoying your shooting at whatever level you find yourself.

Once enjoyment sets in and you relax and forget about the frantic race to the top, you might be surprised at how many good shoots come your way.

*Two: Panic!*

This is exactly the opposite of the previous tip, but it works for some people.

The first thing they do is run round in small circles with their head in their hands, telling everybody how well they used to shoot.

The problem a 'Plateau' causes for these people, and why it is so devastating, is that they have a natural desire to be the best and they want to be respected by their peers. This is such a normal reaction that you *could* be considered odd if you didn't feel it, and if you do experience it you'll probably make a better shot in the long term.

So if you feel as if you're going to panic, don't be afraid to - it can make you sit back and think about what you're doing; just make sure you turn your panic into something constructive.

Get all your shooting kit out and spread it over the lounge floor; go over every single item, checking anything which doesn't seem to be quite right and put it right. Give your rifle a thorough clean, have everything off it, and check that all the nuts and bolts are done up correctly.

This is called constructive panic - it's a wonderful exercise in confidence-building.

*Three:* Change something.

Sometimes a slight change in position can help; get someone to take some photos of you while you're shooting, and then examine them closely; it's amazing what strange positions some people get into without realising it.

However, be very careful about this tip. You will notice that 'change something' is singular not plural. Do *not* go all over your kit changing everything in sight. This is dangerous and foolhardy.

The formula is that you change one thing and then measure (over a reasonable period of time) whether there's any improvement in your scores/average. If there isn't, go back to where you were originally, unless you're absolutely sure that it helps you in some other way (e.g. comfort).

Those people who are constantly revising their position or their kit just make life harder for themselves. All it means is that they make a mistake every time they alter something and they end up changing it again some time later.

*Four:* Buy something new.

This sounds a bit like the previous tip, but it isn't intended to be. It's wonderful how a new rifle can concentrate the mind. Don't let anybody persuade you that you *don't* need a new rifle - the biggest old wives' tale in shooting is that 'it's the nut behind the butt'. This is continually offered as an excuse for a bad shoot or a fall-off in your average.

Your rifle started wearing out from the very first shot fired down it. There may be thousands of rounds to be fired before that wear starts to have an effect on accuracy, but there *will* be an effect sooner or later.

Of course, a rifle discarded by a top international shooter may be perfectly adequate for the average county team member, and the rifle discarded by the county shot may be ideal for someone shooting at club level, and so on.

If a new, or newer, rifle is beyond your pocket, then try a new jacket or an iris and colour filter set for your rearsight. It's surprising what a new piece of equipment can do for your morale; there may not be any quantifiable effect, but the psychological benefit can be just what you need, particularly if you can identify a problem which appears to be solved by the new piece of kit.

*Five:* Get your eyes checked.

Your eyesight can alter alarmingly at any time, particularly around middle age, so go to an optician who knows what you're talking about.

Six: Practise more.

Cut out some of those leagues and take time to practise. It's very easy to get so wrapped up in producing shot league cards for your club captain that you end up being part of a production line, instead of working at your technique or perfecting your aiming off and wind judgement skills.

Don't just go to the range when you have league cards to shoot; it's very easy to claim that you don't have time to practise, but champions *make* time, even those with a wife/kids/overtime/ailing mother, etc., so don't look for excuses, do it!

On the other hand, don't just go to the club and pour lead down the range - that isn't practice, it's a waste of money; set out a programme to cover the particular points you think you're weak on.

On your outdoor range, pick windy days - you'll be amazed at how well you shoot in a wind on a practice card; *that* will tell you something straight away.

Use your practice time to test your ammunition - don't leave it to chance; don't just stick to the same old brand: try different manufacturers, different grades or even different batches of your usual brand.

Seven: Take some time off.

This may appear to be in direct conflict with the previous tip, but so many people seem to get themselves into a hole and then keep on digging.

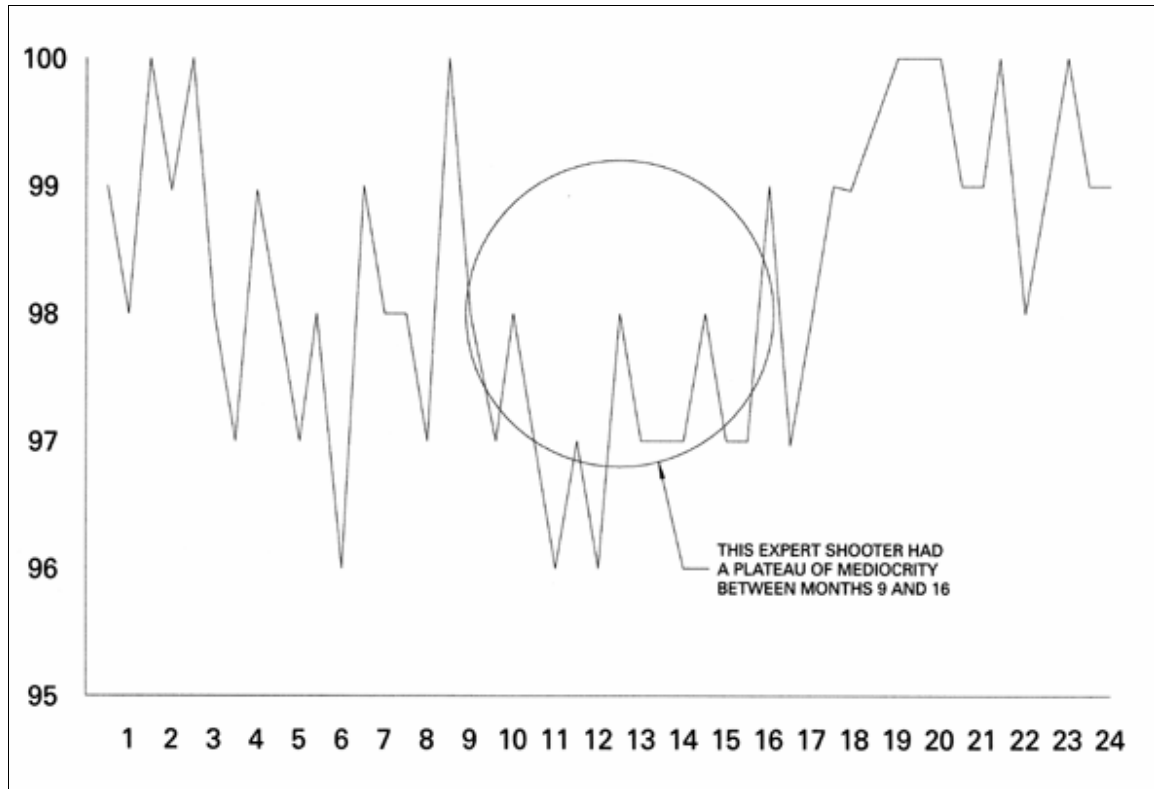
Don't give up shooting altogether; but if things get really desperate, try to go for a period of, say, six months without picking up your rifle (some addicts out there will find this difficult, but it can be done and it will be worthwhile).

Keep in touch with your fellow shooters and enjoy the relaxing atmosphere of your club without the pressure of analysing your scores; that can be a tonic in itself.

A number of people who've been forced to take time away from shooting through injury, or because their job takes them abroad, have returned without any loss of form and have gone on to shoot better than ever.

You could try taking off the winter months and then, two months before the start of the summer season, get in some serious practice.

Too much of a good thing (or of anything) can reduce your enthusiasm, and this could contribute to your arrival on the 'plateau'. Those of you in a rut *should* find something in the above tips to help you get your shooting going again, but if all the above fail then you may just have to accept that you've found your level in the sport.



### Even top shooters have a plateau

However most of you - unless you're suffering from ill health or serious eyesight problems - are still capable of shooting better than you do, so don't give up because you're on the 'plateau'.