

MENTAL PREPARATION

“**M**atch Nerves.” We all know what they feel like. But what causes them? Dan Beale tells us that they come from fear. Fear of the unknown. Lack of confidence can play a role as well. How are you going to shoot today? Is everything going to work well? Generally, after the first stage the nerves start to settle down. This is because the unknown is now known.

The big question is how do you deal with them and minimize the effect they have on your day. Confidence in yourself and your equipment can go a long way toward mitigating these effects. Dan goes on to offer several other suggestions on preparing for a match and minimizing the effect of “Match Nerves.”

PREPARING

Six weeks before a match, start your preparation. Call some folks that have shot the match in previous years. Get the lowdown on the match before you start your practice sessions. Are the targets big and close? Are they small and far away? Are they reactive? Do you need heavier loads? What props do they use? How are the long guns staged? Will you be shooting from a horse, etc.? Target your practice for the match, this way you won't be surprised.

A consistent routine for practice and match day will help you to build up a set of cues that put your body and mind into a mode for shooting. Spend some time before each practice session and before each match doing a set of stretching exercises. Do the same ones every time.

Have a routine for the day. Before you leave for any match, make sure to check your equipment. Are your sights still in place (you'd be surprised to know how often sights fall off)? Are all the screws on your guns tight? Is your leather in good shape? Do you have all the right ammo? Do you have drinking water, especially important on hot days? Check everything again when you get there. Make sure that you didn't forget anything. Use a checklist. This will leave you free to focus on the match, knowing that you have everything with you and all your equipment is ready to go.



Don Jones (Cody Conager) goes through the pistol sequence at the loading table.

OK, NOW WHAT?

You've spent weeks preparing and getting yourself ready for the match. All your equipment is clean and in good repair. You are confident in your ability and as ready as you'll ever be. You've gotten set up with your posse and are at the first stage. The nerves are getting bad now. What do you do?

Do some regulated breathing exercises (slow regular deep breaths) in order to help you to settle down. Rehearse the stage in your mind over and over before you shoot. Think about the actions of drawing, firing, and reholstering. Think about picking up and restaging your long guns and dealing with props and movement. Know how many steps it takes you to go from one place to another so that you know what your gait will be when you move. Close your eyes and **visualize** yourself shooting the stage. This should be like

watching yourself shoot the stage in a movie. Have a snapshot of the targets in your head as you rehearse it in your mind. Go through it several times before you go to the loading table.

Have a routine for each stage. This should start the moment that you see the targets and find out what the scenario calls for. It should continue through the visualization and mental preparation, getting your ammo and guns together, loading at the table, going to the line, shooting the stage, and unloading. Do it the same way every time. A comfortable routine will help you to get over the nerves and encourage you to shoot at your best every stage. Each of these steps sets you up for the stage and gets you ready to shoot. If you aren't ready to shoot when you get to the line, then you won't do your best.

Now you've finished your first stage, but you are not shooting well. You were slow, or had a couple of misses. You know this isn't going to be one of your best days. How do you handle it?

If you are not shooting at your best on a match day, change your focus to the fundamentals. Break each action down into its components and focus on the basics. This will cause you to slow down, but you'll shoot consistently, and get back to your rhythm.



Andrea Beale (Dang Its Darlin) knows that visualizing herself shooting the stage is a key to success.



Joe Davenport (Sourdough Joe) goes through the stage one last time while staging his guns.

After you shoot the stage, you will know if you did well because it will feel like a well-choreographed dance. The stage will just “feel” right.

It’s all in the preparation.

Authors Note, Added October 2007: This subject, mental preparation, is arguably the most important skill for the competitive shooter. It’s reduced a seasoned shooter to tears and brought a skilled shooter to the winner’s podium.

While I haven’t written much here, I have touched on the basics. There are several books that do a significantly more thorough job of explaining this. I’m going to provide a few titles and links to sites below. While the links aren’t active, they can be copied/pasted into your web browser.

- Brian Enos, *Practical Shooting, Beyond Fundamentals*: Brian Enos was one of the foremost pistol shooters in the competitive circuit. He and Rob Leatham practiced and worked together for many years to develop several of the skills presented in this book, including the draw outlined in the *Revolver* chapter. This book lays out several techniques and strategies for mental prep, along with many other things. In my opinion, this is a “must have” in every competitive shooters library. It’s available at <http://www.brianenos.com>
- Lanny Bassham, *With Winning in Mind*: Lanny was an Olympic gold medal winner and champion rifle shooter. He shares his mental techniques in this book. There is a lot of good information in it, and a lot that has to be reshaped in order to apply to action shooting. Well worth reading. Also available at <http://www.brianenos.com>
- Dr. Joseph Parent, *Zen Golf*: This is the third mental prep book that I recommend. The language and concepts are very well presented and easy to understand. While it’s, on the surface, about golf, it very much applies to competitive shooting. This one is available through Amazon at <http://www.amazon.com> Do a search for “Zen Golf” and you’ll find it.