

# YOU ARE MENTAL!

Thoughts on the FT Mental Game and Mental Errors.

By Scott Allen

This is the first in a series on what I believe is the most important part of field target... the mental game.

## **Part 1.**

### From the Conscious Mind to Habit.

When I started field target, it was all about the learning the mechanics. Holding the rifle. Shot order. Finding the right position. Repeating the position. Range finding. Looking at the trees and grass swaying in the breeze. Guessing how much to hold off. Pulling the trigger.

As a beginner, intense concentration was required at every step.

The process was a similar to learning to ride a bicycle. Keep moving or you fall over. Lean left and you go left. Don't move the handlebars too much. Front and rear brake balance. Stay away from sewer grates. And so on.

After just a bit or practice riding a bicycle, most people can learn to force all of those into the subconscious so that all that is left is peddling and enjoying the ride.

It's the same with field target.

How many experienced field target shooters think the same way we did when we first started the game? We don't.

The reason we don't is simple. By repetition and practice we have moved large blocks of the shooting process from our conscious mind to our subconscious. We have learned to ride the bicycle and it's second nature. We have created habits in our shooting that happen on a level somewhere below conscious thought.

With practice and repetition the laborious process you started with becomes routine. This allows us not only to enjoy FT, it allows us to think about the single most important thing in FT: reading the wind and holding off.

The problem is that not all the habits we create in our shooting are good habits. Or more precisely not all habits protect us from mistakes. Sometimes our habits either cause us to miss shots or keep us from making shots.

Our shooting habits are hard to change because once established they get mostly reinforced in our practice and shooting because as you get better at FT, your hit percentage goes up.

This is where the habit loop comes in.

### The Habit Loop: The Cue. The Routine. The Reward.

The *cue* is the trigger that tells your brain to go into cruise control (automatic mode) and ushers a specific routine. For me, the cue is sitting down to shoot. However, we all have habits. Walking

between lanes some of us look at the score card. Other's are trying their best to ignore the score and thing about the next lane. In any event, the cue for any habit set is what triggers your usual response.

The *routine* is the second part of this loop. My routine, when I sit down, is to take the gun from the cradle, select the target I'm supposed to shoot first, range it, set my clicks, cock and load, check the wind and take the shot. Take the second shot and move to the next target, repeat. My routine between lanes is to ignore the score card and the score and think about the wind and the orientation of the next lane.

The *reward* is knocking the shot down. I'm at a point in my FT shooting where most of my shots are knock downs. This reward is what makes me repeat the routine and further drive it into my subconscious.

### Mistakes.

I would be willing to go out on a limb and say that at a certain point in one's shooting, most misses are mental mistakes or failing to read and adjust for the wind. In this article I am focusing on mental mistakes. I will tell you about some of the ones I have made.

At the nationals in 2014 I somehow mixed 8.4 grain pellets with 10.3 grain pellets. The results were exactly as you would predict. A bad score and a high level of frustration until I figured out what was going on. That was a mental mistake.

In 2017 in Phoenix I made several mental mistakes.

- I forgot to close the breach one time.
- I forgot to set my clicks one time.
- I shot the wrong target, twice.
- I went a turnout of elevation adjustment on a close target and didn't correct one time.
- One time I lost concentration after a shooter from another group came up behind me before I took my second shot on a target and asked me what I just ranged the target at. (No, I'm not kidding and yes, I wasn't happy.)

These are all mental mistakes. They all resulted from errors in the routine or from the routine being interrupted or thrown off by some internal or external circumstance.

### Fixing Mental Mistakes.

So, it's easy enough to identify mental errors, but how do we fix them?

Some mistakes can be fixed mechanically so that no mental effort is required to fix the routine.

For example, the most fool proof way to prevent leaving an elevation knob a turn out it to set up your scope or buy a scope that has enough adjustment not to have to be turned more than 360 degrees. An open breach could have a device that covers the trigger, so you can't take the shot with it open (Doug Miller has this on his Thomas). I also have a routine to make sure that all my gear is correct the night before a match (yes, even my pellets because I only put match pellets in my Wilkins pouch). It's just simple checklist that I look at. While the pre-match checklist is not, technically, a mechanical fix, I look at it that way because it happens outside the stress of the match and I don't have to remember anything but to look at the checklist.

Most mental mistakes during a match don't have satisfactory mechanical fixes. You must objectively think about your routine and spend time figuring out where in the routine you are going wrong. Once you figure out what or where in your routine there is a problem, the really hard work begins: you must reprogram your routine so that it accounts for the potential errors. In other words, you must change a habit.

Changing a shooting habit (like changing any habit) may not be easy but it is certainly doable. With time and attention, you can do it.

**The important thing is that you have a routine and that it's a good one.** It must account for as many mistakes that you can think of.

If you find you need to change your routine to eliminate or at least reduce the possibility of mental errors, you have to create a new shooting habit and not be on cruise control with a bad routine.

1. Practice shooting knock down targets. The shooting routine is interrupted when you reset the string and you must make this part of your practice.
2. Have enough targets so that you shoot once (or twice) and move to the next target. This will establish the routine of taking the shot, resetting the target if needed, and then ranging and adjusting for the next shot.
3. Practice harder shots than you would see in a typical match. This will cause you to see the match targets as easier and will increase your confidence.
4. Use a timer in your practice. In a normal AAFTA match, I never run out of time. However, the time limit in a strict WFTF event is much more challenging.
5. Establish routines and subroutines to follow. This will vary from shooter to shooter, but I firmly believe if you have a routine you will cut down on mental mistakes. Here is what I do: In my mind and on my rifle, loading and cocking is a four-step process and once complete I know a pellet is in the breach, the breach is closed, and the rifle is cocked. Ranging and clicking is three steps. Once I do it my clicks are properly dialed in. If I do both subroutines and remember to count the steps and pay attention to each step then my rifle is ready to shoot and I will not make any of the mental errors I identified above. If I fail to make a step something bad will happen and I will lose a shot.
6. Reinforce the positive result in some way to yourself.

In time you will have a new routine that is being rewarded with more falling targets and fewer mistakes, and your good habit will replace the one that allowed the errors to occur.

Then the challenge is to run your mental routine (or program) every time under every circumstance and not let it get interrupted, or if it does get interrupted, you can get it running again. This means finding ways to get into a positive mental mindset, and this will be the topic of the next Part 2 in this series.