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Phases of Mental Condition in the Big Shoots

There are times when sensation is more potent than thought; when intuition exceeds reason and obedience to subconscious promptings produces bigger results than can the finest skill of the world. And the men of the Schützen clubs who make and break records out at Shell Mound are aware of this. And when they listen to the still small voice whispering admonition or encouragement and obey, they very often avoid spoiling their records or succeed in placing them a notch or so higher than ever before.

Between himself and his audience the public man knows when he has established a perfect correspondence. The demagogue knows when his listeners are with him; so the actor and the preacher. Mark Antony knew that the Romans were hanging upon his every word when he made his historic speech, knew that they were responding perfectly to each secret suggestion, were being swept unwittingly along with him to the end designed.

Likewise the sharpshooter. There come times when he feels that everything is with him, his eyes, his hands, his muscles, nerves, the gun, the target, the shooting range, and all the natural forces. He does not know why; he cannot tell why; he simply “feels.” He feels that then is the accepted time, that then he can perform prodigies of marksmanship.

And if he be in normal condition, this feeling is true. He can go ahead and shoot far more ably than is his wont. But if he be in an abnormal, nervous condition, the chances are large that this feeling or intuition is false. Ay, and there’s the rub—how to tell? Is the “feeling” a result of over-excitation? Or is it produced in some subconscious way by the thorough co-ordination of all his parts?

This thorough co-ordination comes but seldom, yet it is when it does come that the greatest shooting is done. Every part of his complex organism must be fitted and running smoothly. The digestive juices must be doing their work. The heart must be pounding away the same as it would if the man were asleep. There must be no inflammation or fatigue of the eye. There must be neither too much nor too little blood pulsing through the brain.

In short, the most delicate balance must exist between all his parts. If the equilibrium of one be disturbed, all must work to re-establish that equilibrium. No one part may act without the instant communication of that act to all the other parts, and all the other parts must then and at once act in correspondence.

But the marksman, when he is in this perfect condition, does not know it. It must be impressed upon him somehow. His shooting, if it has been commonplace before, begins to pick up. The red flags are dropping in quick succession. He is doing well. Then, like a flash, and without thinking, there comes to him the feeling that now is the time!

He warms up to the work, loading and firing rapidly. His blood is bounding, fresh and vigorous. His vision becomes clarified. He is aware of an exhilaration, of an elevation of the spirit, and he is no longer aware that he has a body, so perfectly does that body correspond.

All sluggishness has departed from him. His brain is lucid and working without effort. Every fact recorded there throughout his life, and related to shooting, stands out clear and sharp. He may utilize them as it is not given often to him to utilize them; for they are all there before him and he may select from them all. When he estimates the wind-drift, or the flickering light, or the changing atmosphere, he does so without exertion, so easily and quickly that he does not know he is doing it. He knows where each bullet strikes before the marker can give the signal. He has become as a god and knows all things without thinking. In reality he is thinking, but so perfect is the whole correspondence that he is unaware.

This is exaltation, inspiration. He is keyed up to concert pitch. He is oblivious to everything save the work he is doing. His brain, clear on shooting only, is dim to everything else about him. He hardly knows himself. Faces of bystanders appear vague and indistinct. He moves as in a dream, aware of nothing but shooting, shooting, shooting.

In such exquisite poise is he, such delicate balance that he has become like a somnambulist. The slightest thing may upset him. The least intrusion of the world he has withdrawn from *will* snap the tension. At a man's speaking to him he may collapse. Then is the time for his friends to keep away from him and to keep everybody else away from him. And it is not too *Hindi* to say that he would consider himself justified in killing on the spot a man who harshly aroused him.

Many call this condition luck, but the wise marksmen, King Hayes among them, will shake their heads when questioned about it.

"It is perfect trim," they will say, and they are right. It is when in such condition that the artist, the man who creates with head and hand, produces his greatest, most enduring works. It is, to sum up, the condition when no part of the organism is unduly excited or unduly lethargic, but when an equable excitement has been communicated to all the parts, has elevated their pitch and given them unity.

This was the condition of Strecker on that memorable Wednesday afternoon when he fired the 160 shots that put him on the high road to the kingship. He was dreaming, and dreaming really. He waved congratulating friends from him in an absent-minded way, for he knew his inspiration was upon him and did not wish to waken. Nor did he waken until the targets closed down at 7 o'clock, when he came back to the world and his friends.

On the other hand, this is a condition marksmen try to induce. Before venturing their fate, for instance, upon the Honor Eureka, they devote themselves to the ring target, and shoot, and shoot, and strive to bring about a perfect co-ordination of parts. This conscious effort to produce an exalted condition which will sweep them on to victory tends to bring about overexcitation. After three or four good successive shots they are prone to believe that the time has come. They feel it, but they feel falsely. They then tempt the honor target and are undone. A lying spirit has whispered them to destruction.

A. H. Pape had an experience of this kind. He was shooting exceptionally well on the ring target, which is twin to the Eureka. He was striving, after the manner of marksmen, for that exalted condition, and he thought it had come to him. And when he made in succession 23, 25, 24 out of a possible 25, he was sure of it. So he presented his honor card to the secretary and trained his rifle on the Eureka and, lo! his first shot, which should have brought him 25, brought him 9. He had not run upon his luck, or, in other words, had not established the fine poise to delight equilibrium of mind and body.

There is another interesting phase of range psychology, quite different from that of exaltation. It is the itching to know one's fate, the excitation produced by a good score and the

knowledge that the next and last shot will make or mar everything, and the inability to overcome this excitement or to wait until it has passed away of itself. On Tuesday McLaughlin, the crack San Francisco shot, made four 10s in succession on the standard American target. All he had to do was to repeat what he had already done four times, make one more 10, and the record of the Fest was his. This very knowledge was sufficient to produce a strong nervous excitement, while the desire to know the best or worst was irresistible. So he fired his fifth shot and made an 8.

Wednesday morning, on the same target, Strecker made four 10s. But he had the will requisite to prevent him going up at once to know his fate. He restrained himself for two days before he fired the fifth shot; but even then he only made a 9. However, had he taken his chance at once the probabilities are large that he would not have made even an 8. As it was, his waiting enabled him to beat McLaughlin and to tie the high man.

And finally there is F. E. Mason, who is displaying perhaps the most splendid self-restraint of all. On Friday he got in 150 shots on the king-shooting, making an average of 1.92 per shot. Strecker's average for his 200 is a fraction under 2. This makes Mason the only rival for kingship in sight, and his next fifty shots will decide. Yet for two whole days he has restrained himself and attempted nothing. "Waiting until conditions are favorable," he says; which means waiting until he feels the right serenity of soul and body that accompanies perfect co-ordination, and until he hears the still small voice whispering to go in and win. Upon his ability to feel and hear correctly trembles the kingship of American riflemen.