

Q: I can shoot pretty good in practice but, in a competition, I don't know what happens! I never score even close to my practice scores. How come?

A: This question probably ranks as THE most popular. It is very common for athletes to perform better in practice than they do in competition. Unfortunately, it can be very discouraging because one of the reasons athletes participate in sports is because they want to succeed in competition. The discrepancy is due to how we react mentally to the practice environment versus the competition environment. In practice, we know our shots don't really count towards anything. Nobody is usually keeping score or, if they are, it doesn't really matter. There is little or no pressure. Therefore, it is easier to be very relaxed and focused on executing good shots. And, being relaxed and focused are exactly the ingredients needed for shooting our best. In competition, however, there is pressure. We know it counts.

Now we're keeping score. For some, they allow the pressure to make them nervous, which means their muscles tense up, their shot no longer feels like it does in practice, and they can't shoot as well. Plus, rather than focusing solely on executing one strong shot at a time, they are now thinking about their score, who they're shooting against, what place they're in, what they have to shoot to get a personal best, and maybe a million other things besides executing their shot. Also, when the shooter realizes they are not shooting as well as they know they can (like they do in practice) they may get frustrated with themselves - this negative thinking further tenses up their muscles and distracts their focus. It's important to make sure you have a strategy for getting yourself into each shot (that is, feeling relaxed, ready, and focused) before you shoot. Some archers do a quick deep breathing and visualization exercise before each shot. This will clear your mind, release some tension from your muscles, and get you ready to focus on the task at hand.

I recommend practicing this exercise in practice, too, so that it becomes as much a part of your shot as the nock, set-up, pre-draw, draw, anchor, etc., are a part of your shot. Another mistake archers make in trying to shoot as well as they do in practice is "trying too hard." They go to a competition bound and determined to shoot their practice scores but, in the process, try too hard. This also gets in the way of feeling relaxed and focused. My suggestion is to, first, figure out on average how many points lower in competition you tend to score. For example, your average FITA in competition may be 1190 and, in practice, 1235. Second, make small goals to close the gap between practice and competition scores. So, rather than try to shoot a 1235 at your next competition and setting yourself up to try too hard, set a goal of shooting a 1205. When you reach that goal, bump it up to 1220, then 1235, and so on. Third, accept that there are things you are dealing with in competition that you don't have to in practice. It takes time to learn to deal with them! You "practice practicing" everyday but you don't "practice competing" everyday.

Q: I've noticed a trend where, whenever I shoot a perfect end, I come back on the next end and totally flub it. What's going on?

A: In answering this question, I have a question for you. After shooting a perfect end, what happens? What I mean is, what do you do? How do you react? Let me guess - you are psyched! You may say to yourself, "Whoa, a perfect score! God, I love when that happens." This reaction makes sense and you have the right to celebrate. "Is there a problem with that?" you ask. Hang with me here and let's keep looking at what happens next. I have noticed that archers, soon after shooting a perfect end, get hopeful about shooting another perfect end. Even if you don't consciously think about it, you may have an expectation of shooting another perfect score. "If I did it once, I can do it again," right? If shooting an arrow was only a physical process then, yes, you might shoot perfect scores all the time. Unfortunately, you can't forget shooting is mental, too. In this situation your expectations translate into pressure; pressure tenses up the muscles, and suddenly the shot feels different. Additionally, with the pressure comes a tendency to try harder. If you are now trying to repeat your last performance, the execution of your shot will change, as will your score. Lastly, you may be going into your next end still thinking about the last end. You're still psyched and haven't let that go. Your mind is still focused on the past and not on the present or the execution of your next shot. Now let's think about what was going on before you shot the perfect end. Were you trying to shoot a perfect score? Were you hoping to? Chances are you probably weren't. You were most likely just focusing on executing the best shots you could; you were relaxed and focused. And that is exactly what it takes to shoot a perfect end!

