

Curing “Target Panic” and Related Problems

Some archers may experience problems such as:

- Not able to hold aim on center of target face ("Gold Shy")
- Not able to move aiming point to center of target face ("Freezing")
- Not able to hold aim on center of target face without releasing ("Snap Shooting")
- Not able to hold aim on center of target face without releasing ("Punching")
- Any combination of the above ("Target Panic")

In severe cases, these problems may cause the archer's shooting form to degenerate to a state where it becomes difficult for the archer to even reach “Full Draw”. Some archers have even given the sport away in sheer frustration over these problems. In my opinion, all these problems although physical, stem from one basic fault. That fault is not physical, but mental. It's all in the way we think and learn a new skill. The brain is able to learn a new skill, such as walking. If we practice walking often enough, then the skill becomes automatic. We no longer have to think how to walk. Walking has become a skill controlled by the “sub-conscious” part of our brain. This allows us to look about, talk and do other things controlled by the 'conscious' part of the brain, all at the same time. Like a computer, the 'conscious' part of the brain learns what is required, writes the program code and then stores it in the 'sub-conscious' for instant execution when required.

In Archery, the brain has to learn many new skills of very finely controlled muscle movements in order to shoot an arrow consistently. The more we practice, the better the Archer shoots and the score improves. The Archer's shooting form becomes automatic as the 'sub-conscious' part of the brain becomes 'programmed'. This allows the Archer's 'conscious' part of the brain to concentrate only on aiming.

The 'Anchor', 'Release' and 'Follow-Through' should all happen under the control of the 'sub-conscious', automatically, without having to think about it. It is when both parts of our brain try to control the same skill, at the same instant, that the wires get all crossed up and the 'program' is corrupted. This usually starts as a small change in thinking of the Archer. While concentrating on aiming, the Archer will also switch their thinking to the release. As it is very difficult to think about two different things at exactly the same time, the brain will rapidly try to switch between both. So now both the aiming and the release are not in full control all the time.

The aim may wander slightly and have to be corrected, while the release may 'go off at the wrong time' or the fingers may 'flinch' or the release aid trigger may be 'punched'. This seemingly small problem can cause a drop in the Archer's score, so they will try harder to control their shooting. The more they try to control the shot, the worse the problem grows. This may occur over several months, until the Archer suddenly realizes they have a major problem with their shooting form. The Archer's confidence in their own ability to aim in the center of the target or even to release may suffer.

It's like having two people in your head, each of them fighting for control over aiming and releasing. Each knows what should happen, but refuses to let the other control it.

The shooting form is fine up until having to aim at the center of a target, then everything just goes haywire. The aim may lock below the gold and then refuse to move or the trigger may be punched to just get the shot off. I know how to shoot, I've done it often enough before, but now it doesn't want to work. Archer's who have experienced these sorts of problems will know exactly how frustrating they can be. Other Archer's, who have not experienced these problems, have no idea what these people are going through.

Depending on the Archer, how serious the problem is and the amount of practice time, it could take several weeks to cure one or more of these mental problems. The cure generally consists of practicing:

- Aiming at a target face at a short distance and holding for 10 seconds, then 'let-down'
 - Aiming at a target face at a longer distance and holding for 10 seconds, then 'let-down'
 - shooting at a blank target butt at a short distance with eyes open
 - Shooting at a blank target butt at a short distance with eyes shut
 - Combining the above to complete a shot sequence at a short distance
 - Combining the above to complete a shot sequence at increasingly longer distances.
1. Start with a large target face at about a distance of 3 to 5 yards.
 2. Aim into the bulls eye and hold for about 10 seconds. Don't worry about how steady you can hold to start with, as the purpose of this practice is to regain your confidence in your ability to aim. Don't shoot the arrow, but 'let-down' instead.
 3. You can also vary the position of your aim in the gold, from top to bottom and left to right and in between. This will help take away the problem of 'having to' aim in the center, as you can control where you want to aim.
 4. When you can aim at the target and remain calm and feel in control, then move back to a longer distance, say 10 yards. As you feel confident at each distance, then move a little further away. At about 20 yards, change the target face to smaller size. If you have any problem with aiming at a longer distance, move forward to a shorter distance and start over. To regain total control over your aiming may take some weeks of practice.