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# INTENSIFY Your Mental Game



In part one of this two-part series, John Shima lays out some ways to sharpen your mental game.

BY JOHN D. SHIMA

**H**umans are the only species capable of thinking about what they think, but not all clay target shooters make it a regular practice. Since what you think affects the way you shoot, your mental game inevitably determines your performance during competitive shooting.

Although mental training can occur at any time, your mental game actually begins as you approach the station and ends when you step off the station. The mental game of most shooters commonly evolves from emotionally or intentionally activated self-talk. Unfortunately, these unstructured

mental games usually lack a specific purpose and reliable consistency.

## YOUR MENTAL GAME MANAGER

The older you are when you begin shooting clay targets, and the harder you try to improve, the more complex and confusing your mental game becomes! Complexity and confusion arise as you seek to learn the basics of shooting. As you acquire more knowledge and experience, your “shooting checklist” increases in complexity and precipitates more confusion.

Before you add more items to your shooting checklist, I want you to stop and ask, “Who really manages my mental game?” Certainly your conscious mind controls your thinking. But it is the Ego Self that attaches emotions to thoughts and controls your self-talk.

According to Dr. Jack Lesky at the Ohio Center for Sports Psychology, there are a number of specific mental skills that contribute to success in sports: a positive attitude, high level of self-motivation, realistic goals, positive mental imagery, effective management of anxiety and other emotions, and the ability to use positive self-talk to maintain concentration on the task at hand.

It is important to stress that your mental game is unique to you, because the manner in which these mental skills affect the way you shoot will vary from one round to the next. Moreover, these mental skills vary from one shooter to the next. The point I’m attempting to make is that you must discover how to intensify your mental game in a way that works for you, rather than struggle to adopt a method that works for someone else.

I chose the word “inten-

sify” to make a specific point. The purpose of this article is to help you discover how to strengthen or sharpen your mental game so you will be more relaxed during competition.

As you begin the process to intensify your mental

game, you must remember that the primary purpose of a strong mental game is to enhance your ability to concentrate on the task at hand and focus continuously on each target. It will be difficult for you to let go of the mental habits that helped



▲ A strong mental game helps you concentrate on the task at hand — watching the target continuously.

▲ Your mental game is just that — yours. Don’t try to adopt a method from someone else.

you achieve your present level of shooting proficiency. You must be willing to think about what you are thinking. More importantly, you need to understand the relationship between your thoughts, your self-talk, and your ability to concentrate and focus during the moment of truth.

## REFINE YOUR SHOOTING CHECKLIST

Self-talk is the principal element of your mental game because it is the inner voice that brings thoughts to your

attention, provides instruction, doles out criticism, and affects motivation. Conscientious people develop a habit of making mental checklists so they can remember all the things they believe they need to do.

Mental checklists provide a sense of reassurance that important things will be remembered. Most shooters believe that shooting checklists are necessary to become a successful competitor. They truly believe the more comprehensive the checklist, the better they will shoot.

▼ A mental checklist is important, but you must make sure it is simple. Too much to remember just leads to overthinking.



Self-talk is necessary to remind you of the items on your shooting checklist. The more items you add to your shooting checklists, the more active your self-talk will be. Comprehensive mental checklists may provide reassurance during periods of anxiety, and they will be helpful during training sessions; however, extensive checklists are detrimental to achieving peak perfor-

mances during competition. It is my opinion that too many shooters create mental checklists that are too cluttered, and they cause too much self-talk.

A simple way to reduce



The items you place on your mental checklist for competition should be self-talk cues intended to manage your conscious mind during competition. I encourage you to be judi-

can enhance or detract from performance in golf, endurance, basketball, skiing and dart throwing. Psychologist Judy Van Raalte argued that instructional self-talk may be more influential when learn-

▲ For your pre-shot routine, pick a couple of self-talk cues that will help you settle your mind. It can be as simple as “Load the gun. Cheek on the stock. Settle my eyes. Pull!”

icious when you create your mental checklists, because every item added induces a consequence. Limiting the items on your shooting checklist to self-talk cues that direct your attention to one specific activity — watching the target and focusing on the target — will allow your adaptive unconscious to automatically manage every pre-planned move to the target.

## CULTIVATE PURPOSEFUL SELF-TALK

Experts define self-talk as “the ongoing internal conversation with ourselves, which influences how we feel and behave.” Studies conducted by sport psychologists confirm that self-talk

ing new skills, while motivational self-talk enhances self-confidence and the performance of existing skills.

Self-talk serves different functions for athletes depending on the task and the content of the self-talk cues. Landin argued that the effectiveness of self-talk could be attributed to its effects on the ability of the athlete to focus his or her attention. Other studies demonstrated that self-talk can be effective in building self-confidence, enhancing concentration, controlling anxiety, and triggering appropriate automatic actions.

When I talk about intensifying your mental game, I am emphasizing the need to sharpen your self-talk cues and strengthen your mental discipline to manage self-talk

during competition. Just as I stress the need to train with a purpose to improve your mechanical and visual games, I also stress the importance of cultivating purposeful self-talk to manage your mental game.

Purposeful self-talk is a term I use to describe what your inner voice should be saying to help you concentrate and focus when you are on the station. You must discipline your inner voice to use specific cues immediately before you step onto a station, and to quiet your mind just prior to calling for the target.

As your shooting proficiency improves, the nature of your self-talk will gradually diminish. The ultimate goal of intensifying your mental game is to simplify the process until all unnecessary self-talk cues have been eliminated.

▼ You must learn to focus intensely when you're on the station, but to rest and relax your mind in between stations. Learning to flip that switch will boost your performance.

My goal is to make shooting as automatic as possible. By this I mean you must shift the process of shooting from a conscious action to unconscious reaction during the moment of truth. Conscious effort is required to create and adhere to a consequential shooting checklist that promotes purposeful self-talk, which reinforces consistent peak performances in competition.

## LEARN TO FLIP THE SWITCH

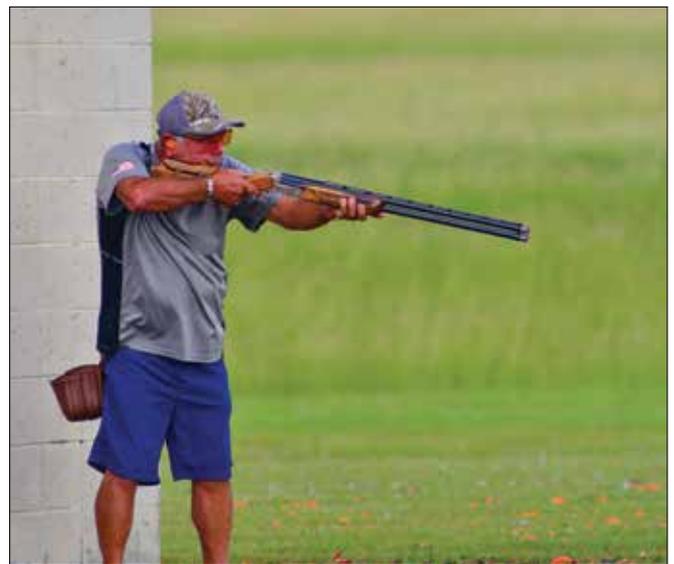
I believe most shooters spend too much time thinking about shooting between stations during competition. The conscious mind needs time to rest and re-energize so it can concentrate and focus intensely during the next moment of truth. Experts state the conscious mind frequently switches

between daydreaming mode and executive (action) mode to restore glucose in brain cells so they will be ready to concentrate on the next task. I refer to executive mode as your shooting mode. This is the mental state during which your ability to concentrate on the task at hand and focus on the target is optimal.

The hallmark of a good mental game is the ability to flip the switch from daydreaming mode to shooting mode every time you approach a station. Shooting mode is the time during each round when you must intensify your concentration on the specific task at hand and focus on the next target.

A primary characteristic

▼ You need a pre-station routine, which is different for each station, and a pre-shot routine, which remains consistent across the field.



of the shooting mode is the elimination of self-talk. This quiet mind is a state of awareness that eliminates the mental distractions and misguided intentions introduced by undisciplined self-talk. Consequently, your success in managing self-talk is determined by how consistently you embrace a quiet mind before you call for each target.

Since the mental game is unique to each shooter, you must adopt a specific routine that enables you to flip your switch from day-dreaming mode to shooting mode. How you settle your vision to look for the target, how you acquire and focus to track the target, and how you synchronize your pre-planned move to engage the target in the break zone are ultimately determined by the consistency of your personal induction (pre-shot) routine.

## CREATE A PERSONAL INDUCTION ROUTINE

Your personal induction routine is your consequential shooting checklist. This is a precise, practical list of two or three relevant words or phrases. These purposeful soft-talk cues guide your conscious mind to pay attention to the immediate task at hand. Essentially, purposeful soft-talk cues act like a pre-hypnotic suggestion that induces a temporary shooter's trance.

The shooter's trance is a state in which your conscious mind is concentrating continuously on one thought — seeing and focusing on

the next target. The shooter's trance occurs when you settle your vision into expanded soft focus at the eye hold, your mind is quiet, your awareness is heightened, and you are ready to react to the movement of the target as it emerges into your peripheral visual field.

It is an accepted fact that the human mind can only concentrate on one thought at a time. It is also a fact that the undisciplined mind will jump from one thought to another within milliseconds. Intensifying your mental

pletely — quiet your mind. Your personal induction routine should consist of the following two phases:

► **Pre-station routine:** You begin your pre-station routine when you are the next shooter to occupy the station. The purpose of this phase is to become mentally prepared to execute your pre-planned move. The first cue relates to your strategy for the particular station — stance, hold points, break points, etc. The next cue relates to kinetic visualization of the shot sequence

concentrate on the station.

► **Pre-shot routine:** While your pre-station routine will likely be different for each station, your pre-shot routine should be the same at every station. The purpose of this phase is to embrace a state of awareness during which your shooting eye will detect and acquire the target so you can focus on it continuously until it breaks. After you assume your correct stance on the station, your self-talk cues should be simple and should guide you toward a quiet mind, which will enable you to concentrate on the task and focus on the target. A simple mantra could be, "Load the gun, cheek on the gun, settle my vision... pull!"

As you create your personal induction routine, I want to emphasize that simplification should be the most important characteristic. Intensifying your mental game is not simple, but it must be made as simple as possible.

The ego will constantly attempt to add subtle "reminders" to your routine so it can become an active participant in the shooting process. Once you determine the necessary purposeful self-talk cues for your personal induction routine, you must resist the urge to add clutter. **CTN**



▲ The goal is to make shooting so automatic that you eliminate all unnecessary self-talk cues.

game sharpens your concentration and focus and eliminates mental distractions.

Your personal induction routine is actually the process that intensifies your mental game. The intent of this two-phase routine is to use purposeful self-talk to eliminate self-talk com-

so the adaptive unconscious will select the correct pre-planned move. The final cue relates to how you intend to use your vision to detect and acquire the next target. Do not begin this phase too soon, and do not repeat it more than once. You need to preserve your capacity to

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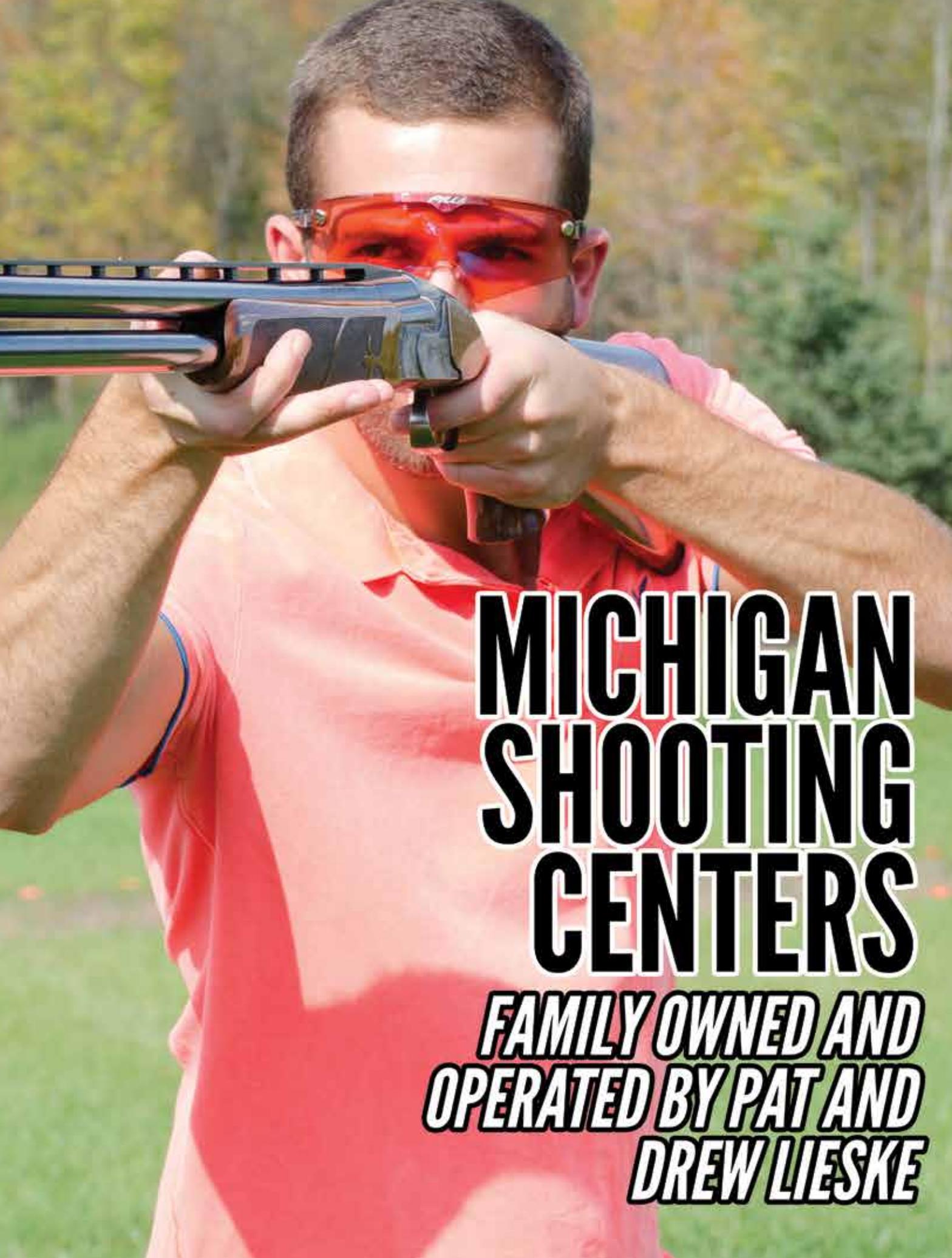


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