



Punch FEVER

A hypothetical case study about how obsessing over moving up a class can be a performance killer

BY RUSTY ANDRÉ

Punch fever can strike any competitive shooter trying to move up in class. Needless to say, this fever does not respond to aspirin or any other fever reducer medication. Sorry, but no pill can cure this ailment!

Punch fever is a mindset developed when a shooter's desire for punches becomes his or her main focus. In extreme cases, it can destroy a shooter's performance, self-confidence and even their love for the game. Most people have a desire to do well in all they do, but when you combine this with a competitive spirit and a very competitive environment, you have a perfect stage for punch fever to develop.

▼ Never get so caught up in competition that you forget this is supposed to be fun.



So how does this ailment strike a shooter, and how do you know you have it? Let's look at Joe's journey trying to moving up to the next class. Joe is a B-class shooter. He absolutely loves competitive sporting clays. He always looks forward to the next tournament and has made several new friends. Joe had

are still on their steady climb. Now Joe is starting to think about things like other shooters' success, the need to shoot higher scores, how many punches he needs to move up, etc. Joe is feeling something he hadn't noticed before — pressure! He is feeling pressure to perform, pressure to shoot higher

Punch fever causes you to totally focus on outcome and not process.

Now Joe has punch fever, but he doesn't realize it yet. He feels he just needs to shoot more. So off Joe goes to his local club, squeezing in a little more shooting time. He simply shoots the course, not working on his pre-shot routine, focus or mechanics.

The next tournament comes around, and Joe is sweating buckshot, worried about giving a winning performance and getting that punch. He arrives at the tournament with his head full of unproductive outcome thoughts. He is worried about shooting a great score. He is thinking about buddies, particularly the ones that seem to be pulling

world in general! Needless to say, he does not do well in the tournament, so the cycle continues.

Time goes on, and Joe continues on the same path, making no progress. His thoughts during tournaments are purely outcome thoughts — he's focused on final score, he's worried about who is beating him, and he has a burning desire to win! He still loves the sport and wants to do well, but the fun factor is starting to diminish.

After several months of being stagnant, Joe decides to discuss this issue with some experienced shooters. Lo and behold, the experienced shooters know exactly what his problem is because they've been there. After much thought and reflection, Joe realizes that he had let his desire for punches railroad his mental game and focus. So ironic that a desire to win can cause you to lose all the tools you need to win!

Joe now realizes and accepts that he has punch fever. This is important, because you have to acknowledge you have it before you can cure it! Punch fever will keep you focused on outcome. Focusing on needing a good score is focusing on outcome; fretting about a fellow competitor beating you is focusing on outcome. Worrying about winning punches or losing already acquired punches at year-end are outcome thoughts.

Punch fever also affects you physically. It can cause you to lose the good form and mechanics you worked hard to develop. Inconsistent mounts, moves, hold points and break points are all phys-



► Moving up often leaves you at the bottom of a new class, as opposed to finishing in the top of your previous class.

steadily learned new things in the beginning, making slow but steady progress through the classes from E to B. Like so many of us, he does not shoot as much as he'd like but rather as much as time and finances allow.

Joe has noticed that the competition seems to be getting stiffer. It's obvious he is surrounded by very competitive shooters in his class. In the lower classes, he usually placed in the top portion of his class; now he often finds himself lost in the crowd. He used to feel good because he was usually in the top four or five of his class, with the occasional win. Some of his shooting buddies are stagnant, like him, while others



▲ The cure to punch fever is to stop focusing on outcome (your targets as well as everyone else's) and start focusing on process.

scores, pressure to win punches. This is not the same feeling as first-station jitters, which usually go away after the first station as the name implies. Pressure from punch fever stays with you constantly, even when you're at home, at work, or anywhere else unrelated to shooting. The bottom line is simple:

away from him in the quest to move up in class. Joe gets off to a rough start, dropping three out of eight birds in the first station. Then he drops two on station 2. Joe is now down five birds in the first two stations and is in a mental tailspin. He is upset with himself, with the situation and probably with the

ical products of your brain being in the wrong mode. This affliction can also cause you to be too careful in your move to targets, leading to tracking or riding targets too long. All of this can ultimately cause you to lose trust in your own ability.

THE CURE

Now Joe can work on the cure. This will include both mental and physical rehabilitation, with mental rehab being the first order of business. Step one is for Joe to accept the fact that even though he was trying really hard, what he was thinking and doing was counterproductive to producing a winning score. Needless to say, forgetting about punches is easier said than done. Now Joe is going to concentrate on process! He is also going to eliminate those expectations that have taken over his thought pattern. Joe has renewed enthusiasm and a game plan — he is excited to begin the process of getting his game back.

The next step is a trip to the club or course. In station one, Joe starts with a clear head. He looks at the show pair with total sharp focus on the birds. His intense focus on the birds appears to slow them down in his mind. Now he runs through his checklist — a list of all the basics, including foot position; focal, hold and break points; lead method, etc. He establishes a shooting plan. He clears his mind, takes a deep breath and calls pull. He follows through with the plan and intense focus and smashes the pair. The station menu says three pairs. Joe

is going to repeat the entire process for five pairs. This is not easy — it takes discipline. Shooters can easily take any of these steps for granted. That's why getting back to serious practice of all the basics is important.

Joe moves to station 2 and goes through the entire process carefully. He is shooting well and regaining confidence. He realizes how far he had mentally wandered off the right track. Now it is obvious this is not a day at the course like his previous trips. He is treating it like a tournament, mentally and physically, but with a different mindset. He continues

► Take each step of your pre-shot routine carefully and deliberately, clearing your mind while you make a shooting plan.



▲ Pressure creeps in as you start struggling to move up in class.

through the course, carefully following his plan and basics. A feeling of accomplishment has returned. It's a feeling he hadn't felt in sporting clays in a while, but the tough part of this rehab

is still ahead — his next tournament.

Before his next tournament, Joe has to reinforce in his mind that no success can come if he allows traits of punch fever to return. He arrives at the tournament with no expectations of score, who is shooting or who is winning. He has total focus on process, which



Even though Joe did not win, he knows this was a success — he is back to being competitive, only one bird off the class winner. He enjoyed the tournament and knows in his heart that punches are just icing on the cake. If he focuses on process and enjoys himself, the punches will come. Another case of punch fever cured!

I know the effects of punch fever firsthand — I suffered with a serious bout of punch fever while I was in A class. I sat in A class for a long time, going through the vicious cycle that our shooter Joe experienced. In my mind, success of the day was totally dependent on winning a punch. My mind was always filled with outcome thoughts. It got to the point where a good tournament start was a rare occasion. Enjoyment of shooting with friends and the thrill of competition were overshadowed by the need of winning a punch.

I want to make it perfectly clear that I did not win a single punch while suffering from punch fever. That's a great reminder to focus on process and keep it fun to avoid dreaded punch fever! **CTN**

will enable him to make the best shot he is capable of on every single target. It is a very simple plan, but not easily mastered by some shooters. Joe did not win his class but finished second.