



Pushing The Limits

Building physical and mental endurance will help you shoot better scores.

BY TIM LE CRAS

Many tournaments occur in the summer, when dealing with the heat and staying focused can be challenging. Do you dread tournaments when the sweat is trickling down your back and you just want to get back into the air conditioning? Feel yourself getting tired when the pressure gets intense and the targets are tough? Training for these conditions can help you build physical stamina so you can remain focused and still perform at your best when the conditions are tough. Mental endurance is just as important so that every target gets your focus. You also don't want to give up when you drop a target or two. Training and drills that work on physical stamina and mental focus can help you remain on top of your game in an event when you get stressed. Want to leave the course feeling like you did your best? Develop a plan to train for tough and stressful conditions, find a good coach and execute the plan.

DEALING WITH THE HEAT

Try these strategies, combining them for maximum effect.

Hydration is key: It is really important to start off well hydrated and remain hydrated so that you can focus on breaking targets. Don't drink at the bar the night before and expect to perform well. Avoid caf-

feinated drinks, too. Your eyes and your ability to see and focus on the targets will be the first to be compromised by heat stress. Drinking lots of fluids (water as well as electrolyte drinks) well ahead of time is vital to keeping your eyes sharp, and staying hydrated throughout the day ensures that dehydration doesn't settle in. It might mean visiting the port-a-potties on the course, but that's better than having to be transported to the ER. Make sure you have a good, adequately sized cooler with lots of chilled drinks on your cart or in your vehi-

cle, and keep a drink ready in your range bag. Some range bags, like the Wild Hare Tournament Bag, have an insulated water bottle holder on the end of the bag so that your shells don't get wet and your water bottle remains chilled and handy.

Seek out shade: It sounds obvious, but this is easy to forget. Sporting clays shooters shouldn't stand around in full sun when it's not your turn to shoot. Find a shady tree nearby or hide out under the cart or in its shadow. Wear a hat that provides shade. Reduce what you're carrying so that you don't tire. Use a push-cart or golf cart to carry your gear so you don't tire out, and keep out of the sun. Skeet shooters have no real shade options between stations, but try to take a shade break between rounds as you are able. Be a shade hog whenever possible so that when you step up onto the station, you aren't already burned out.

Avoid sunburn: Sunburn is dangerous in more ways than one. It will sap your endurance and can even cause you to miss the next event altogether. Apply plenty of sunblock to exposed skin and consider wearing longer shorts or pants. Wear clothes with

shade-blocking abilities, and try using long sleeves and a hat. If you can, schedule your rotation for earlier or later in the day when the sun is not at its peak. You might have to deal with less-than-perfect lighting conditions if you do this, but it could be a good trade-off if you just cannot stand intense heat.

Condition and build endurance: Always check with your physician before trying any of these strategies, and make sure to stop and seek an air-conditioned building if you feel yourself losing focus — a sign of heat stress. Strategies to help you develop the ability to endure heat stress take time and involve conditioning. Top athletes train under challenging conditions to build endurance by conditioning. What is "conditioning?" One definition is "the process of training or accustoming a person to behave in a certain way or to accept certain circumstances." In this case, it's heat, but it's also the stress of a tough

competition.

To perform in the heat, you have to train in the heat. So what can you do to train for heat? First, be in really good physical shape so that you don't tire easily. Second, get accustomed to the heat (carefully, and again, check with your physician before). If you are healthy, start building your heat tolerance carefully. You could mow the lawn when it is hot, take

a walk in the heat of the day, do yard work in the heat or, better yet, get out and shoot some. Build your endurance and tolerance, but be sure not to overdo it. The goal is to be physically and mentally ready after registering in the air-conditioned clubhouse. This will take time and effort.

◀ The pressure of competition can push you to your limits, too. The solution is to shoot more competitions.



▲ Heat stress compromises your vision, so hydrate well in advance of a shoot.

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► Find a shady spot or hang out in your clays cart in between stations to stay out of the sun.



▲ It sounds obvious, but practicing in the hottest part of the hottest days will condition your body to extreme temperatures so you're not as stressed physically on game day.



BUILDING MENTAL ENDURANCE AND RESILIENCE

It is hard to shoot consistently in a challenging competition when you are mentally stressed. Here are some training strategies and drills to build mental endurance and resilience.

Endurance Drill: Practice on tough targets and repeat them multiple times. One training strategy that I have seen used by several coaches with great effect is this drill. For sporting clays shooters, this drill can be made more challenging by using long FITASC targets, and for skeet shooters, try working on doubles on every station as well as the singles. It's very simple and well established and can make a major difference in your endurance and focus. The drill is to break at least 10 targets in a row before moving on to the next station. If you drop a target, while it might seem a bit much, you reset from zero until you can break all 10 in a row. Even if you miss the 10th target, go back to the beginning and start again. This drill is then repeated with targets on different stations.

Pick challenging targets to push your limits, although it is also a good idea to shoot easier ones to work on your focus on targets that you should not drop at all in competition. It sounds brutal, or maybe boring, depending on your point of view — but if you want to get better, it takes work. This drill builds mental endurance and confidence so that three or four pairs in a row on a sporting clays course is straightforward, even if the targets are challenging.



▲ LEFTY RAY CHAPA

On the skeet field, you can do the same type of drill to build endurance. Singles first, then work on doubles on every station until you break 10 in a row. Each session, pick a few stations to work on so that you don't burn out and practice tired. Then do these drills on a hot day and see if you can still maintain focus — with proper hydration, of course.

Building Resilience: You must learn to rebound after missing targets. Having the mental ability to reset and work hard on the next target after dropping one is key. It takes resilience and determination. Ever seen someone drop high 1 on the first round of skeet and then break the next 99? That's resilience. Conversely, I have seen shooters drop a target and then spiral down, missing more and more, because they let the frustration get to them. Shooters who come off a station shaking their head and cursing have let the pressure get to them. Take a little time to stop and think about the correction needed and then execute. You

◀ Zach Kienbaum, no stranger to long, grueling shooting days, gives a young shooter tips on stamina.

▲ Shoot-offs are particularly stressful, especially if you're relatively new to the pressure of the big show. Endurance drills can help train your ability to focus.

► Conditions and targets won't always be perfect. You can train for too-fast or too-slow pulls by asking your trapper for erratic pulls in practice before tournament day.

can't close the gun and truly be ready for the next pair unless you have a change of plan ready. You need to be able to recover and focus on the next target, putting the last one behind you. Don't worry about the score — just think of the correction needed. Don't rush the next target. The stressed shooter throws a shell into his gun and rapidly fires off, not even taking time to do a good setup or follow his pre-shot routine. Experience and building resilience are integral to staying the course when the pressure of a tough course could otherwise get to you. Work on hard targets so that you are used to missing occasionally, but then work to correct and break them.

Become Battle-Hardened: How do you do this? Shooting lots of events can help, but it is key to hone your skills and be good at reading the targets. As you gain confidence and experience, try shooting more events in one day and several days in a row to build endurance. Just be careful not to burn yourself out. Shoot tougher tournaments with high-class shooters. Learn from their experience and watch how they handle the pressure of a tough match. In skeet, practice shoot-offs by working on your doubles game, especially on the middle stations.

Deal With The Suboptimal: Variable pulls are frustrating. Fast pulls, slow pulls, multiple broken targets, a trapper who mixes up the sequence or pulls the wrong target — if this easily gets you off your game and makes you lose focus, then practice dealing with it. Ask your trapper to give you erratic pulls so that you become used to dealing with them, and focus on when the target appears or is thrown, not when you expect it to come out. Lots of broken targets? Well, that happens enough — just don't let it get you frustrated, and calmly ask the trapper to clear the trap. Don't rush the next good target when it comes out. Resilience is also being able to



deal with suboptimal conditions so that it does not upset your game.

The goal of these drills and training is to build resilience and endurance, but it must be done carefully and deliberately. Conditioning develops over time, and expert instruction is key. Find a coach to help you do this and discuss the game plan. Hire a coach who challenges you to go beyond your comfort zone every time. That's a worthy investment that can make all the difference and take your game to the next level. Then you will not falter when it gets tough — be it heat, wind, cold or mental pressure or a combination of these. Hard work is needed, as this does not come easily. **CTN**

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