



The Champion Mindset

It's simple. When you want to know how winners think, ask winners.

BY BILL MILLER

The technical skills of champions are obvious, and by careful observation, you can learn to emulate what they do and integrate it into your own game in a way that works for you. Discovering the mindset and mental tools of champions is different. You have to talk to them; get inside their heads.

Well, that's exactly what we've attempted to do by interviewing some of the top sporting clays shooters in the world today. Here's what we learned.

DERRICK MEIN, 35

Hometown: Paola, Kansas
Home Club: Claythorne Lodge, Columbus, Kansas
Years Competing: 27
 2021 USA Olympic Team (Olympic trap)
 Two-Time National Sporting Clays Champion
 USA Sporting Clays Team member
 13-time Kansas State Champion

CTN: Can you describe your mental game?

Mein: The biggest thing for me is I do my best when I'm not scared of failure. Eliminating that fear of failing helps me be successful across the board. I use failures as learning moments and to help better my game and better myself as a competitor. I try to use them as positives.

CTN: When you are going to shoot your best, how do you go into a big tournament? What is your mental and emotional state?

Mein: When I shoot my best, I'm always going in confident. I'm confident in my skill set and fundamentals and my approach to breaking targets. I'm always excited, and there are always nerves. I try to use those nerves to help me focus on the process of breaking targets.

CTN: How do you prepare mentally and emotionally for a big tournament?

Mein: I'm behind the wheel of my truck a lot driving to shoots, so I spend a lot of time going through the process in my head, how I approach being disciplined, making sure my fundamentals are good. There's a lot of mental visualization in all of that, but before I head to the shoot, I'll spend a lot of time shooting what many guys will call "corporate level" targets. It's just so I can go out and break a bunch of targets, but I'm there to work on my fundamentals and make sure everything is perfect. I feel like if I have perfect fundamentals on all the targets I know I should break, it will carry over and help me break the hard targets.

CTN: How do you maintain a champion mindset?

Mein: I think it's important to take breaks and allow your mind to reset and refresh. It's easy to get burned out or lose that hunger. When that happens, you get complacent and just go through the motions. My feeling is, if you want to win, you have to be hungry to win, so by taking those breaks to refresh, you can focus intensely on those shoots you really want to win.



DAVID RADULOVICH, 28

Hometown: Cleveland, Ohio
Home Club: Cyprus Creek, Wooster, Arkansas
Years Competing: 20
 Four-Time U.S. Open Champion
 2017 World FITASC Champion
 More than 215 tournament wins
 Youngest to achieve Master-class ranking – age 12

CTN: How do you maintain a champion mindset?

Radulovich: If I'm shooting in a way that's unbeatable, there is a very specific mindset I'm in. It's not even something I can necessarily turn on or off. It just happens. Everybody at the top of this game, and likely every game, accesses it when they are at their best. You actually become a different person. You become physically able to do things that you can't normally do.

If I'm in that mindset, I am going to win. That happens a few times a year for me. But if I'm not, I enjoy the game so much, I go to shoots that I'm not necessarily there to win. I'm there to enjoy. I have a lot of fun on the course; there's nothing wrong with that.

But the tournaments I really care about, that's a different story. There are two tournaments every year that I go into to perform. That's the World FITASC and the U.S. Open. At the World FITASC, I have four podium finishes, and in the U.S. Open, I've finished at or near the top in the last six. If you look at a shoot like the National Championship, where I struggle to be in that mindset, I'm pretty inconsistent.

Analyzing from the outside, someone might consider that less than impressive. They'd say, "Look at Michael Jordan. Every time



he shows up, he's ready to kill." Somebody who is like that is my great friend, Derrick Mein. Every shoot he goes to, big or small, he's there to show you he's one of the best. But for me, if I was like that, I don't think I'd have half as good a resume as I do now because it burns me out.

The most fun thing to do is go to a shoot and shoot at the top of your game. There's no better feeling than to go to a match and per-



form that way, but it's not something I can or want to do for every tournament. When I have the performance to win a major championship, there is nothing more physically or mentally exhausting that I've ever done in my life. And that part of it is not fun at all to me.

The win is fun. The pressure is fun. The adrenaline is fun. Even the nervousness is fun. It's like a drug. But the exhaustion is exactly the opposite.

GEBBEN MILES, 36

Hometown: Tucson, Arizona
Home Club: River Bush Farms, Eloy, Arizona
Years Competing: 25
1st Team All-American
Multi-Time World Champion
2009 National Sporting Clays Champion
USA Sporting Clays Team member

CTN: How far into your shooting career did you realize, “I’ve got what it takes?”

Miles: It happened at age 15, a month after I broke my elbow. That’s when I really started to consider sporting clays seriously. I had put so much work into basketball and I was just bummed, and with a month of recovery, I could only move my elbow a few inches. But it was like at the perfect angle to hold the shotgun.

My dad said, “Hey, you haven’t shot in a while. Let’s go up to Phoenix and shoot in their New Year’s Open.” Jon Kruger was there. Andy Duffy was there as well as some other big-name shooters.

I was in A class, and the highest I think I’d ever shot was an 85. I ended up shooting a 98! It came out of nowhere, and it wasn’t easy. I think Jon Kruger was in second with a 91. So, that year was when I started to take things more seriously and figured I’d like to see how good I could get.

CTN: How long was it into your career that you started winning consistently?

Miles: My big breakthrough was when I won the Nationals in 2009. And then the next year was really phenomenal. The driver was a faith-based camp I attended, tailored to college and professional athletes put on by Athletes in Action. The shift for me was applying Biblical principles to my life and, subsequently, my shooting. It really brought my relationship with God into everything I did. When I decided to let my entire life be led by God is when my shooting career had a significant move to the next level.

CTN: When you are going to shoot your best, how do you go into a big tournament? What is your mental and emotional state?

Miles: There are always ebbs and flows of your mental state at work. For a long time, I had a really great system of practice regimens leading up to a big shoot that would get me into a confident, focused state of mind.

But after I took a break from shooting for an entire year, it’s been really tough. I feel like now I peak a week early or a week late. So right now I’m trying to relearn what emotional state I need to gear up for. I know that when I’ve shot my best, I’m excited. I’m excited to go shoot and I’m excited to do the best I can do. That’s what translates into confident and focused moves to the target for me.



LEFTY RAY CHAPPA



MELISSA FULLER

CTN: How do you prepare mentally and emotionally for a big tournament?

Miles: For sure, prayer and visualization. But it’s active during practice sessions leading up to a tournament. Like when I won in Dubai in 2014, I visualized shooting in Dubai for three months ahead. Every time I went out and practiced, I was visualizing me there competing and every scenario that could come up. Visualizing the pressure of trying to win \$140K.

DESIRAE EDMUNDS, 31

Hometown: Savannah, Georgia
Home Club: Forest City Gun Club, Savannah, Georgia
Years Competing: 16
Six-Time NSCA Championship Tour Lady Champion
Two-Time World English Lady Champion
Eight-Time Lady All-American Team Captain
16-Time Member of USA Sporting Clays Team

CTN: Can you describe your mental game?

Edmunds: I would describe my mental game as consistency in each tournament. That would be taking the same type of ammo in the same type of case, eating at a certain time before a shoot, and that kind of thing.

I also want to set myself up mentally for the main event. I always want to do well in side events, but the main event is always what I feel I need to be confident and prepared for. So I may use the side events to work on what’s going through my head and gather that confidence for the main event.

On a very base level, my mental routine would include planning before I get in the box. If I’m confident before I get in the box and I’ve gone through all my mental checklists, things are much easier and go more fluidly while I’m in the box.

In the box, I try to keep it simple. And I always try to make my last thought before calling pull a visual reminder. That’s something like where I’m going to be looking hard, what part of the bird I’ll be looking at, or trusting my view of the bird 100 percent. In my opinion, that’s the most important thing to do and remember when shooting, so I want it to be my last thought.

CTN: When you are going to shoot your best, how do you go into a big tournament? What is your mental and emotional state?

Edmunds: I am so nervous. I told myself the day that I’m not nervous is the day I probably need to step back and not shoot as much. I still feel lots of pressure, which results in stress at shoots that I really want to do well at. I have found, over the years, that I flourish under that pressure and stress. At shoots where I don’t feel that, I don’t tend to do as well.



THADDIUS BEDFORD



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The pressure helps me hone in and focus on the things I need to do. When I don’t feel that pressure, I’m all over the board — having fun, talking, thinking about a million different things, and I don’t focus on the one end result as much.

CTN: How do you maintain a champion mindset?

Edmunds: I definitely allow myself to take breaks when I think I need them. It’s not something I’m grinding out every day, every week, every month all year long. Burnout is a real thing, physically and mentally. As much as you want it, you need to take a break. So, for me that means going back to Alaska, where I grew up, and I go fishing. I don’t even take my gun. I need that break. **CTN**