

COACHING A U.S. SHOOTING TEAM

Bill Pullum

This is going to be a short session, because coaching isn't allowed! No one has ever worked out what a coach does and I'm not real sure I can sit down and describe what a coach does. One general thing he does is help the shooter shoot the best score that he can. The coach is there to take harassment off the back of the shooter, acting as a buffer between him and harassment.

Let's go back to selection of shooting team officials. I have some mixed feelings on this. I think the team captain's recommendations should receive strong consideration, but I don't think he should have the final say, simply because I've seen team captains take a parochial attitude, staffing the team with too many of his own people thereby weakening the team. This can be good or bad, depending on the qualifications and dedication of the people he selects. If he selects them because they are friends of his or in his branch of the military, this isn't good. If he selects on qualifications to do the job, then his selection can be good. In the past, the NRA International Committee has selected the team officials and in some cases the team captain has selected the team officials with Committee approval. We've had unfortunate experiences with both methods, so probably a hard and fast rule isn't the answer.

After the shooting team has been selected and a team coach is selected that the shooters don't have confidence in, there is not a great deal he can do except be a go-fer. If a coach is selected that hasn't worked with the shooters and doesn't know them, the coach will not be able to make a significant contribution to the team effort. If a coach is selected who has worked with the shooters, knows them all, understands their "paranoid" personalities, and they know his, and they have a mutual trust in each other, then there is a great deal that can be done. When you get to a world championship, you have nine or ten shooters and about six events, so you can have only one event being fired at a time. What are you going to do with the rest of these people, sitting around chomping at the bit, waiting for their event? They can't be told to sit on their hands, because nervous energy and tension starts building up and they are worried about keeping their proficiency high. The coach had better get out and start finding training sites for them, find transportation to get them there, find some way to get them away from the match, to get them away from newspaper reporters, TV people, autograph seekers, good well wishers and all of this and give them a way to stay occupied, stay busy. They may or may not be accomplishing much, the most they are accomplishing is avoiding problems by staying away from the pressures, being by themselves with time to think without interference. We've been fortunate when we've shot in Europe and other places by being able to go there in advance and line up training sites before we arrive at the match site, so we've been able to work a schedule and keep it loose when we arrive for the championship.

During the match, one of the first things a coach better know is the rules. If you're going to play the game, you better know what rules you're playing by. Early, after arriving, you better get acquainted with the match officials who are going to be officiating your match, and develop some sort of rapport with those people. When you're at an international match and you start working with rules,

simply because the rule book says something is to be done one way, doesn't mean it's going to be. "It ain't necessarily so." It's the jury on that range that runs the match the way they feel the rule should be interpreted. There is an appeal from this, but it's usually denied. It is a futile effort. There have only been a few cases over the years where a range jury has been overruled by a jury of appeal. You better work up a rapport with these guys so you know what to expect and they know what to expect from you. If you run into a problem, you're going to need to know who to go to that is going to be friendly to your cause. He is the first guy you go to. If you expect a problem, it is a good idea to go to this guy before it occurs and explain what may occur so you can get him on your side before it does occur. This has happened to us on three or four occasions and it's worked out very well.

As I said before, coaching is not allowed. The coach has to stay somewhere in the spectator gallery behind the shooters. He's not permitted to go up to the shooter, he's not permitted to signal to the shooter and the shooter can't turn around and signal or talk to him. The only way a shooter can talk to the coach is to take off his equipment and walk back to the spectator area, away from the line to talk to the coach. It is not required by the rules that the shooter get permission to talk to the coach - however, most matches do require this. This seems to be a tradition that has developed, but is not in the rules. As I said though, the match is run by the jury so it's a good idea for the shooter to tell the match official he is going to take a break from the firing line. It's a very good idea for the shooter to go back and talk to his coach if he is having a problem. The coach may be seeing something he's not seeing.

Diana, may I bring up your case in the world championships?

DZ: Sure, go ahead.

BP: In the world championships in '74, Diana was shooting kneeling. She came off the line and was having horrible problems and thought she had gone to pot. All that had happened was that the wind had changed on her and she had gotten out of step with it because she couldn't read it. I believe that if she had gotten out of position and came back to talk to the coach after her first bad shot, we might have saved her four or five points.

The same thing happened to Writer at the Olympics in 1968. His first string offhand was a 98, his second string was an 89. He completely lost his concentration, but he didn't realize this and didn't recognize what he was doing. I believe if he had come back during that string, I could have helped him. I'm not going to tell him any big secrets or anything. We're just going to talk, using the coach as a sounding board to help get the shooter's thinking back where it belongs. I believe we could have saved a few points there and one was all we needed for a gold medal. The coach can't do anything for the shooter when he's on the line. The shooter has to come off the line voluntarily. He can't look around at the coach and the coach say, "Come here". That's against the rules.

When the shooter has problems, say with the range in some fashion, the shooter should not get embroiled in all of the administrative challenges and protests with the jury and the problems of the language barrier. The best thing for

the shooter to do is to turn this over to the coach, lie down on his back, close his eyes and let it all go by until the coach comes back and tells him how much time he has left. Then get up and shoot. Keep your emotions under control. You can't shoot when your emotions are high. As soon as you start getting embroiled in an argument, your emotions are going to be high and you're going to be out to lunch. That's what the coach is for, let him take care of it. If you think someone is doing something illegal, don't get embroiled in a big emotional contest about it. Talk to the coach about it and forget it. If a protest is to be involved, he'll go to the team manager and he'll take care of it. We had a case in 1968 where a guy in the spectator group who had no business getting involved, came running up to me telling me one of the Russians was using something illegal. I went down and looked at the Russian and he was a little bit illegal, but he wasn't gaining anything by doing it. His score certainly didn't indicate it was helping him. So I ignored it. This spectator came back with pictures of the Russian trying to get me to file a protest. I told him to leave us alone. He then went to the team manager and the team manager filed a protest. In about fifteen minutes the Russians filed a protest against us. Meanwhile, Foster ran into trouble on the other end of the line, and I couldn't get down to help Foster because I've got the jury working over Anderson. Foster's tearing his gun apart on the firing line, and I couldn't leave Anderson to help him. I had to stay with the jury and Anderson until they finished with him. One of the jury members asked if Anderson could shoot as well if he took a sweat shirt off. I asked if it was illegal. They said no, but thought they could solve the protest if he took it off. I said, "If he's illegal disqualify him, otherwise take your cotton-pickin' hands off him and leave him alone." Don't let yourself get embroiled in something like this guy generated. If the team manager had talked to me about it, we could have avoided the whole incident. There wasn't any basis for the protest. Later the chairman of the Technical Committee came around and said, "If you'll withdraw your protest against the Russians, they'll withdraw the one against Anderson." I told him if I had filed a protest against the Russians it would be legitimate, but I hadn't filed this protest, so I couldn't withdraw it. He would have to talk to the team manager. The team manager then withdrew the protest. It didn't have any basis in fact, so he shouldn't have filed it in the first place. The manager and other officials are there for the benefit of the shooters, but you can generate more problems than you can solve if you start getting involved in minutia.

I think as a philosophy, if the coach knows the shooters and the shooters know the coach, and they know that they can trust each other and know that when they have a problem they can talk it out, the coach provides an important function. I can't tell a shooter what to do, how to correct anything. All we can do is talk a little bit and he can arrive at a solution. We can do this, because we've done it over a period of time, we worked together in training. This is about all the coach can do for the shooter. The coach should be there to help the shooter, and if he can't help him, he shouldn't be there.

JB: To me there are two kinds of coaching. One kind is coaching which takes place over a long training period where you are developing shooters, as opposed to what Bill has been talking about which is more a psychological boost and assurance to the shooter.

JF: The semantics are wrong. The coach at a world competition isn't really the popular conception of what a coach is. This gets us into trouble because some

of the shooters and all of the nonshooters have a misconception of what the coach can do and cannot do at one of these international competitions. There is nothing a coach in the usual meaning of the word can do at an international match. The shooter must already have developed all the proper techniques by the time he makes the competition. The coach won't be able to help him there at all because there isn't time and on the line he can't talk to him. To me, keeping the harassment down is the most valuable function an international shooting coach performs.

MA: I agree. On teams like the world and hemisphere championships, having a coach who is knowledgeable about shooting has to help the confidence of women and junior shooters who are expected to win medals in the first competition they've ever attended. Unfortunately, even a coach of Colonel Pullum's caliber can't make up for the lack of a training program in the U.S.

BP: The one last thing then that is very important, is to make the entries properly and on time. If a guy earned his slot on the team, it shouldn't make any difference whether the coach or other team officials like him, dislike him or whatever, he should shoot on that team. In 1966, Margaret was the first woman to make an open team. You would be amazed at the pressure that I had, not only from U.S. officials, but even from foreign countries, not to shoot her. They maintained she would fold, that a woman couldn't stand that kind of pressure. This was a pretty generally accepted philosophy. It was my philosophy she earned a slot on that team and by golly, she ought to shoot on it. I feel the same way about everybody else. The only exception to this is if an individual gets to a match site and starts chasing around, not paying attention to his "knittin'" and not doing what he came there to do. I might decide to take him off for disciplinary reasons. But unless he is sick, and as long as he is trying, I wouldn't think of taking him off. Now, if he is not shooting well and he comes to me and says in the interest of the team you should shoot ol' Joe instead of me, we'll talk it over. Then we'll get ol' Joe in and talk it over with him. The change should only be made after consideration and by mutual agreement, because he's earned his slot on the team. He ought to shoot.

LW: I'd like to comment on what you've just said. I think a precedent was set in Tokyo at the '64 Olympic Games when I made the position team, the first U.S. team I had made. I was one of the four members of the Olympic Team, along with Anderson, Gunnerson, and Pool. I was second in smallbore three-position shooting. Anderson didn't make the smallbore team, but he was the world record holder and world champion, the recognized best smallbore shooter in the world, but he didn't make the team. And here I am, a nobody who had never made a team before. When we got there, the team captain decided that Anderson should shoot in my place, because he was more experienced and U.S. officials thought he had a better chance to medal. We had a little meeting about it in his room one night and I found out I wasn't going to shoot. That was the first I'd heard of it. Needless to say, I was a little bit unhappy about it.

BP: What did it cost to rebuild the room?

LW: Anderson, the team manager and I were all in the room and all had our say. Finally, the team manager backed down. But it was just luck that the team manager was receptive to what I had to say. The situation turned out fortunately for me, but it could have gone against me. This did help to set a precedent.

JF: I will back up Wig's statement because until that time the tryouts only put you on the team. Whether you shot the event or not was entirely up to the team captain.

BP: At another event, I won't mention time and place, one of the team managers was insisting that everybody shoot every day and shoot record scores, so that he could know the scores and he could select the team. He almost had a rebellion on his hands, because the shooters refused to shoot scores or to turn them in.

MA: He also held team meetings in the men's dorm, which made it a little difficult for at least one member of the team to attend. Colonel Pullum, could you talk for a few minutes about practical things. For instance, I know you always have another member of the team behind the person that is shooting.

BP: There are two or three reasons for this. One is if the shooter begins to have problems, sometimes having a more experienced shooter behind him lets that observer become a coach or that observer can come get me immediately so that I know about it. If they are having a shooting problem, with the wind or with the gun, there is somebody that knows about it right away before the match is lost. This also gives you someone knowledgeable about what the score should be so you have a little better feel for a challenge. You have two people who know the score then, the shooter and the assigned shooter-coach. The procedure for challenge in an international match is a little different than in the U.S. The team officials must make the challenge. I guess in the matches I've coached, we've made fifteen to twenty challenges and I've yet to win one. But we're still trying. This helps the shooters. You pick someone that is compatible with the guy, you don't put two enemies together. You pick two people who can communicate a little bit, this helps the shooter and this is what it is all about. It's a big moral support to the shooter. He knows he has help available if he needs it and fast.

MA: I remember reading Anderson's article when he won the high power championship at Camp Perry this year. He commented that Colonel Pullum happened to be behind the line that day and that it made him think of all the times Colonel Pullum had been there when he had shot well and won medals. He trusts Colonel Pullum and his presence was a help.

Changing the subject, something that came up for some of us here at Benito Juarez this year was arriving at the range really late one day because our bus was late. How do you prevent this on a day when your shooters are shooting for an Olympic gold medal?

JB: I'd like to answer that question. No matter what the host country provides for transportation, I've always tried to see that we have some self-transportation capabilities. On match days, I always like to take the team for that day's event in our own transportation, not crowded in the bus and have other people help with the equipment. You don't want the shooter to become disturbed if the bus is ten minutes late or fifteen minutes late. This way you set your own pace and it contributes to building a good mental attitude on that day.

BP: I'd like to cover one more thing that just occurred to me. When you have a coach going with a team that's going to help that team, he usually organizes

training and he organizes the whole procedure that goes on before and during the match and coordinates it with all the team members. Let me cite an example where organization possibly cost us some medals. In 1968, we went to Santa Fe, New Mexico to train because of altitude in Mexico City. When we left Santa Fe, we were about as tough as any four shooters that have ever come off the line anywhere. When we got to Mexico City, I was set out in a motel 35 miles from Olympic Village. The shooters were in the village and the training range was clear across town from both of us. The shooters had a broken schedule - Wig had an hour in the morning, and in the afternoon Foster would have maybe two hours, and Writer and Anderson had other different times. We went for about ten days like this. Really, I completely lost the handle on the organization. I really believe we lost some of our edge because of the loose organization over which neither the shooters nor I had control. We were several points better per man when we left Santa Fe. I believe this was the cause of it, and did at the time. I made recommendations that you don't separate the coach from the shooters. The coach should be with the shooters so he can work with them, not just on the range. A great deal of coaching is not done on the range, but when you're sitting over lunch say, just conversing. A lot of coaching is done in this way.

MA: You talked with me about the lighting on the air rifle range in Switzerland. If you don't mind discussing it, I think it points out the many things a coach must be aware of to do an outstanding job.

BP: I don't like to talk about this. It was an error on my part. I went over and looked at the air rifle range in Thun, and it looked good. It was well organized. We had shooters training on various ranges - some on the smallbore range, some on 300 meters, some on the range in the mountains, and a few shooters were on the air rifle range. However, they weren't shooting good scores. I didn't spend enough time on the air rifle range, being spread a little too thin. We got to match day and the first two people were finished before I recognized the problem. There was a slight glare, yet the light was dull. If you overheld just a little, you had shots scattered all over. Schumacher was in the second pair. He started shooting all over the paper. Finally he put his gun down and came back to talk with me and asked what the problem was. I told him just to hold it up and shoot it, not to wait on it. His score improved considerably on his last string. This was my responsibility and my fault for not having caught this earlier. It's part of the coach's job. When you get to a new range, the coach and the shooter need to get together, I mean each individual shooter, and talk about the range. Height of targets is an extremely important thing. It forces adjustment of everything you do in standing and kneeling. If both coach and shooter understand what's going on they can solve it. Little things are the things that win matches when you reach this level.

MA: I've heard mention of the fact in International Committee meetings that the coach is a "wet nurse" to the shooter, but I think we all realize that while some team officials may only be capable of being such, a qualified coach is worth a great deal to his team and plays a key role in the outcome of their success.

JF: I'd like to say one more thing. When you make one of these international teams, a person must be mentally flexible and not be convinced that he needs to train six hours a day up to and including the day before the match. Quite often, it's just an impossibility. The Olympics is very tight. A world championship may

be a little more loose, but it depends completely on the country where you're shooting as to whether you can get alternate ranges to train on. Often, each country is allowed say two firing points for four hours a day. When you have a WC team with ten to twelve shooters, that isn't much range time for each shooter.

MA: Do you foresee the news media this time being a problem? We've always wanted coverage, and it looks like we might get some this year. Will it be an additional pressure factor?

JB: I think the Olympics is a hotter subject than anything else. I plead innocence since I haven't been to an Olympics before, but it will probably draw more people than normal, with a lot of action behind the line. IOC only accredits a certain number of news people, but there will be a lot of other newspaper people attending the games.

BP: One way we handled this at the world championships in Weisbaden in '66 was to have an alternate training site. We sent Wigger, Anderson, Foster, Margaret and Pool to Graffenwohr. They were the well-known shooters on our team. The remaining four shooters trained in Weisbaden. They were unknowns, so nobody bothered them and they got a lot of range time. We then brought the big guns in the day before the match. Everyday, I was asked, "Where is Anderson?", "Where is Wigger?". When they asked about Anderson I always said, "He's off training in church."

MA: Thank you Colonel Pullum for giving us insight into the many responsibilities of the coach during an international match. Surely this will help our juniors understand their responsibilities on their first big team.