

COMPETITIVE ATTITUDE

Lones Wigger

You've all been around long enough to know that we always seem to have the same winners. Some shooters are winners and some are not. You can look around and see that some of the shooters who aren't winners have been around just as long as those who are. They have the same equipment, they've had the same opportunities, they've had the same competitive experiences, they are about the same age and so on. But it's always the same few that come out on top when it is all said and done. I'm sure you've wondered why those same individuals always seem to excel, always seem to win. It can be a lot of small factors, but it really boils down to something called competitive attitude.

In my opinion, shooting is a very unique sport because it isn't necessary to be six foot six and weigh two hundred and forty pounds. You can be of any build and still be a champion shooter. All you have to do is look at the various champions we have and you can see this. They don't fit into a mold or follow a particular pattern as in many sports. I'd have a little trouble making it as a pro football tackle, but I could handle most pro football tackles shoulder to shoulder on a rifle range. This is one of the greatest things we have going for our sport.

You also don't have to be a man to excell. I've certainly had enough women and juniors beat me in my life to dispel this theory. I seem to have a particular nemesis with women shooters. There are a lot of good ones. There may be a certain amount of physical conditioning necessary that you will need to help you become a champion, but this can be acquired with a good training program.

To be a champion, I think it takes several attributes. I have always contended that it is not necessary to be talented or be a natural shooter. It certainly does not hurt, but I don't feel this is the key to being a champion. I have never felt that I have been particularly talented. Everything I have ever accomplished, in my opinion, was accomplished in spite of being talented. I've had to work hard, and sometimes extra hard. There are people who appear to be naturals to me. Bassham fits this category. It seems to be easy for him. This is great. But I've worked with and been around a lot of shooters over the years. I've been around a number of hard-charging second lieutenants who are assigned to USAMU at Fort Benning, with a variety of different ideas, talents and attitudes, and without question, I would rather have the one with the proper mental attitude, who has the desire to be a champion rather than the one who appears to have more talent but not necessarily the desire. He will go farther and amount to more than the one who seems to be a natural. I can think of a half a dozen in the past who were naturals, but never amounted to anything because they didn't have the right mental attitude.

I'd like to talk about different attributes that I feel are important to the shooter-athlete. First, I want to talk about dedication. How much dedication do you have? How dedicated are you to the sport? How dedicated are you to being a champion? What goals do you have in mind? Is this just a passing thing with you or are you really dedicated to becoming a champion? When I talk about dedication

it brings to mind something I saw on TV during the winter Olympic Games. We had some outstanding performances by some of the U.S. athletes in Austria. The most outstanding in my mind was by a cross-country skier named Bill Koch. He won a silver medal in one of the cross-country events. If you've ever watched cross-country you'll see that it takes tremendous dedication and desire, let alone being in top physical condition. Koch won a silver medal over some who were probably better natural athletes than he. They certainly had more training support and opportunity. He was being interviewed by a sportscaster one day who asked, "I guess you've been cross-country skiing all your life?" And he said, "No, I haven't been cross-country skiing all my life. Actually this is my second sport. My first sport was ski-jumping. When I was five years old, I changed my sport to cross-country."

The sportscaster just stood there with his mouth open. He didn't know what to say next. But I thought Bill Koch had said it all. It pointed out the amount of dedication that he had, that brought him to the point where he could win that silver medal. Years and years and years of training. I'm not saying you have to shoot thirty years to be a champion. It doesn't hurt you however, because you gain experience. That's another plus about shooting - you can shoot to a ripe old age if you maintain reasonable physical conditioning and have the desire. Herb Hollister is a good example. He is about seventy-five years old and still one of the best competitors in the country in his particular sport of American style prone shooting. He didn't shoot competitively until he was fifty some years old. Look at Bill McMillan who just made his sixth Olympic team and they're not easy to make. It's sometimes easier to win an Olympic medal than to make the U.S. shooting team. I don't know of many sports in which this is possible - where you can maintain a top level for so many years. We have some real talent sitting in this room. The best I've ever seen since I've been associated with shooting. We have several shooters in this room who have the talent to become world-class shooters. I hope some of you do. The only way you'll get there is to have the dedication to make sacrifices, which is the next attribute I want to talk about.

How much sacrifice are you willing to make to achieve your goals? How much time are you willing to devote to training? How many evenings are you going to devote to dry-firing, instead of watching the boob-tube? Are you going to sit in your kneeling position while watching TV for conditioning? How much time are you going to spend shooting the air rifle in the evening? How much sacrifice are you willing to make? I think to be a world-class shooter, it takes almost full-time dedication and sacrifice to reach this level. I think you must almost live it - dedicating your complete life to achieve this. I don't think you can be involved in a dozen other things and shoot as a hobby and become a world champion. It's not possible, there is too much involved. It has to be your whole thing. Maybe you're not ready to make this kind of commitment. If you're not, you probably will never be a world champion. I want to tell you a story about myself. When I was dating my wife in college at Montana State University where I was a member of the rifle team - incidentally, I started shooting when I was twelve years old - although we weren't married yet, she didn't understand this shooting thing.

BP: Still doesn't!

LW: They never really understand it and completely grasp it, but they usually get to the point where they either tolerate it or they leave you. In college, she

thought it was just a passing thing with me. She thought someday I'd give up the rifles and settle down to some serious type business. I didn't want to mislead her because I had seen this problem happen in a lot of shooter's marriages. They either divorced because of the shooting or the shooter gave up his sport because of his family. I tried to break her in slowly as to what was going to happen. So I told her, "I want you to understand how dedicated I am to this sport and you're going to have to make sacrifices for me to shoot. It could come to the point someday that we might have only a few dollars left and a decision will have to be made whether to spend the money for milk for a baby, if we have one, or entry fees for a match. Now I don't ever want you to misunderstand the priorities. I'm going to shoot that match." I really did say this. It was said in jest, but this is the kind of dedication that is necessary. If you don't have this, you're in the wrong sport. You're never going to achieve your goals.

Effort and hard work. How much effort are you going to make when you are on the range, or during your dry-firing? You can shoot fourteen hours a day every day of the year and you still may not be a champion. You may not be learning anything from your training, you're just putting in time. It's not how long you train, but how smart you train. You're fooling yourself and you're not accomplishing anything. You're wasting your time. You get nothing more out of your range time than what you put into it. For instance, when you go to the range, you should put total effort in your training on every shot. You make every shot look like a ten. You analyze every shot as to why it's a ten, or why it isn't. You analyze your good performances so you can repeat them. You analyze your bad performances so you don't. You've got to continually be thinking. I think to be a shooting champion, you've got to have a little bit better than average intelligence. You've got to be able to think for yourself. You've got to be able to analyze what you're doing and why. Until you get to the point where you can analyze your performance, you're not gaining much. Most of you are at the level where you should be able to do this. You don't have to practice all day. Several hours, three times a week is sufficient if you get something out of the training time. Don't be thinking about problems at home or school or business. Put effort into your shooting training time.

Hard work. Five hard-work shots are better than forty fast shots just to get the ammo downrange. I feel I missed making the Olympic team this year on lack of effort and hard work on the first three-position day. I went into the match with the idea just to shoot and take what I could get. I'd been shooting well in training and I would just shoot and take my score. That's exactly what I did - I just shot and took my score and I was immediately fifteen points behind. Fifteen points that I was never able to make up. It wasn't until the middle of my standing the second day that it finally dawned on me what my problem was. I wasn't working, I wasn't making an effort. I wasn't making each shot look like a ten. I've never achieved my goals in the past without hard work. Why did I think that I could just come out here this time and just shoot and make that team? From that point on I started making an effort. From that point on I shot as well as anybody on the firing line. It turned out I was six to eight points short, I couldn't make up the deficit. You would think after twenty-seven years of competitive shooting I would have realized this before I got here. I didn't have the right mental attitude when I got here and I wasn't prepared mentally. You can see how important effort and hard work are.

Desire. Probably the most important attribute of becoming a champion is desire. How badly do you want to be a champion? To what lengths will you go to become a champion? It all depends on you. How much feeling do you have in your gut to become a champion? Do you want to see yourself up on that podium receiving that gold medal, wearing it while they play the national anthem for you because you have achieved that goal? How badly do you want to be there? Do you think about it and hope you're going to be there, or do you really want to be there? Then you take all these other attributes we've talked about and use them toward that goal. Desire is one of the most important attributes.

I'm not sure I can put into words what being a competitor is. I feel personally that I'm a very strong competitor. I was a poor competitor here because I cheated myself when I didn't put the effort into it I should have. To be a competitor or to be a champion you have to use all of these attributes. You have to be competitive on every day, with every shot, in everything you do. If you don't have this attitude, you will never reach your goal, I don't care how good you are. You must have a competitive attitude. To me there are only two places you can finish in a match - first or last. If you're not first, you are last. You didn't win. You go on the firing line to win. Its got to be your most important consideration. You've got to have the confidence that you can win. Now most of you haven't quite reached the level yet where you can think entirely along this line. You've got to have intermediate goals as you build yourself up over the years. It won't be too long however, before you can think this. You need a long range goal of being perhaps an Olympic champion. Then you must set intermediate goals and reach them along the way toward your ultimate goals. You can't realistically come out here to this tryout, for instance, and expect to make the Olympic team and expect to win that gold medal in Montreal. But you should be setting this goal for 1980 or 1984. This tryout is a stepping stone toward that. You can reach your intermediate goals here, but don't set your intermediate goals too low. You ought to be striving to win junior or women's championships here at least. Then begin to work on your scores in comparison to the open scores that are winning the tryouts.

Winning is the most important thing. I thrive on winning. Now you know and I know that there is very little material gain from shooting a rifle. You can't make spending money even if you win everytime you compete. Personal satisfaction is about all you can really achieve from it. How badly do you want the personal satisfaction of winning? To be a competitor you must think winning. Winning is the ultimate - you are shooting to win. You are not shooting for fun. These are the two types of shooting. I never shoot for fun. Shooting is hard work and very seldom much fun. There are a lot of places I'd rather be than on the firing line, because the hard work is agony to me a lot of times. I may not win all the time, but hopefully each time I lose I learn something so the next time I can use what I learned and hopefully win.

That's all I have to say. I've given you my idea of what it takes. Now, I'd like to have a discussion and answer your questions.

RF: Yesterday when Bassham talked to us, he told us the most important thing is to have fun. You tell us just the opposite, yet you are both winners. How can you account for this?

LW: Well, to me the fun is winning. When it's all over and done and I've won, that's fun, that's what I thrive on. If I haven't won, it's not very much fun. Maybe it's because I have to put a lot of effort into my performance. I don't feel I've achieved my best performance unless I've put this effort into it. I feel like I've cheated myself if I haven't. If you put the kind of effort and hard work into shooting that I do in order to perform well, it's not fun when you are doing it. Now I feel Bassham is a very talented shooter, so it is probably easier for him. He's never had a problem - everything he does works out right for him. It may be fun to him while he's doing it. He shoots much faster than I do. He doesn't have to work on his shots as long. Believe me, if I could shoot twice as fast and get the same result, I would. I can't. There are several shooters like me - Margaret and Gary Anderson - who have to work for every point they get. Writer, Bassham and Foster don't have to put that effort into it to get the score. Now Foster doesn't agree with me on this. He believes in shooting for fun. To him it's fun when he is shooting. If he wins fine and if he doesn't win, he's not quite as happy, but it doesn't bother him.

JF: No, Wig, correction on that. I wish I had the attitude he has, but I don't. Apparently my psychological make-up isn't the same. I agree with him in looking at new shooters to predict the next champion - I'll pick someone with Wig's attitude everytime. I don't feel my attitude is the attitude a champion should have or is the attitude I'm looking for in champions. It happens to be what I'm stuck with and I haven't been able to change it. I manage to win because I shoot so much and I back into a lot of things at various times. It's not anything that my attitude has done for me. Don't emulate me. Wig's is the attitude you've got to have to be a champion.

BP: I've studied both of them for a long time. I believe the day Wigger quits winning, he will quit shooting. Foster will shoot until he's eighty years old, and that's the difference between them. I'd like to add one thing to what Wigger has said, which is extremely important to winning matches. Never give up, no matter what the circumstances. We had a good example of this in the English Match with Dave Ross here this year. There was no way this guy could come from ninth place and climb over the people he had to climb over to make the Olympic team. I've seen this year after year with Dave - he may not win every year, but he'll hang together and keep working on every shot. Don't give up. It is one of the best attributes you can develop. When I had new shooters come in at Fort Benning, I asked each one of them the same question, "How badly do you want to be a world champion and what are you willing to sacrifice to be a world champion?" I didn't get an answer right away, but got them to think about it. Then a couple of weeks later I'd go around and talk to them, because they hadn't really thought of this yet. I've let a lot of people go after four or five weeks too. If they don't have the time to sacrifice to be a world champion, I don't have the time to fool with them at that level.

LW: Wigger says he can't shoot fast, and yet I saw him in Denver a few years ago put 19 consecutive X's at one hundred yards in the bull's-eye in less than six minutes.

LW: You're talking about American prone though. Now there are times when you have to sacrifice a little bit in performance - quality so to speak to get quantity. If conditions are poor in prone, I might have decided to shoot fast rather than try

to shoot through all the changes. But prone is a controlled position, you hold ten ring. It's no problem to break the shot fast because it is controlled. In kneeling and standing you face a different problem because you're not holding as well. You still want to shoot tens, but you can't hold ten ring, so you must learn to break the shot in the middle of your area of hold. When I was talking about shooting slow, I meant in standing where you are going to separate the champions from the also-rans. That is the nitty-gritty. If you don't do it standing, you're not going to do it.

Going back to Colonel Pullum's remarks, I agree completely. Something that always comes back to me regarding this was one year at Perry in the sixties, when they were giving rifles for the aggregates. I lost a point at 50 yards on the first day. I missed the wind and dropped a point, which made me mad. So I just rattled them downrange and lost another point, because I was mad and had quit and just shot 'em. Then I settled down and fired a good match the rest of the day. It turned out I lost the iron sight aggregate by one point, and lost the rifle. I lost that rifle because I quit. I lost that championship because I quit. Since then I've been careful and tried not to quit regardless of the situation. I look at it this way, if I'm having problems, so is everybody else. If they quit, that is one more person I don't have to contend with, I don't have to shoot against. If I continue to work and put effort into every shot, my score may not be as high as I normally like to have it, but when all the scores are posted, my score is closer to the top than I thought possible. Don't succumb to panic. I've won a lot of matches, a lot of championships because I didn't quit, didn't get mad over a bad shot, and didn't give up. I won the Olympic gold medal on a creedmore over a Russian. All it would have taken was a fleeting moment of quitting on the firing line on one shot and I would have lost that medal. If you put in an honest effort, you're going to be there. If you don't win, at least you know you didn't cheat yourself, you did all you could.

Ed Etzel: In a world competition, when you have only one day, only a few hours to do your thing, how do you control your nervousness?

LW: I think you must be very well prepared before you get there. You must be well-trained and well in control of yourself - you must have confidence in your equipment and in yourself. You should be shooting well and mentally performing well, so you can't fall back on this as an excuse. If you are in good condition when you participate in a big competition, then you should expect yourself to perform at least as well as you have been in training. This gives you the confidence in yourself that is necessary. When you go to the line, you should be able to say to yourself, "Now, I should do it. There's no excuse for me not to do it." As to what you think about when you're on the firing line, I think you have to have yourself psyched up. You have to have yourself in a mental frame of mind that you feel you can do it. You've got to be psyched up to the point that you have a razor edge. You can't be mentally flat. For me to give a good performance in a match like that, I have to prepare myself mentally for a couple of weeks. I shoot the match in my mind before I get there. I think about what might happen and all the problems I may encounter and how I'm going to correct them. I think about the possible conditions I may have to contend with and how they might affect me. I have everything well planned and thought out so when I get to the firing line and when something happens, I can react and do something, I'm not lost. This comes from experience and being prepared. This doesn't mean you'll necessarily perform

your best score, but if you are prepared, normally you will perform somewhere near your capability.

I can site you an example of this. In 1972, when I made the Olympic team in the 300 meter event, I went back to Fort Benning and was shooting very well in practice. But I was flat, I wasn't psyched up. I just didn't have the confidence that I could go to Munich and win. Sure I wanted to win the gold medal, but I wouldn't let myself think about it very long, because it would dominate my thinking. This was wrong. I did need to think about it. I really didn't know what to do to get myself psyched up for this thing. So I called Colonel Pullum, who was in Texas at the time, because he was the only one I knew who I felt could help me. I called him one night and we talked for about an hour. I told him I was shooting well, my equipment was working well, I was in good shape, but I just didn't have the right attitude. I didn't have the confidence to go over there and win. Colonel Pullum listened to me. What he tried to instill in me was to think about winning that gold medal, how important it was to me and how much I wanted to win it, in order to psyche me up and get me thinking about it. He said to think about and picture myself being on that award stand, think about having them hang that gold Olympic medal around my neck. Think about how important it is to me. Think about standing on that stand until it became a reality in my mind, until I knew I was going to be there and receive that medal. So for about a month while I was in training, I was also mentally training and trying to psyche myself and get myself into the right frame of mind. When I got there, I was still shooting well in training. I performed well in the English Match with a 597, although I didn't win. Then the smallbore three-position match was won by Writer. All our rifle shooters had won medals except me. I watched the award ceremony when Writer and Bassham received their gold and silver medals. I was standing on a chair at the edge of the crowd taking pictures. A fleeting thought went through my mind, "Two days from now I'm going to be standing there receiving that gold medal." And I thought, "Oh my God, what did I just think." But that was exactly what I had thought. It was a positive, realistic thing. It wasn't something I hoped, it was definite in my mind. I didn't try to raise that thought, it just came. I didn't know whether I was ready or not physically, but my mental attitude was ready. I was fortunate, and I did win. You have to believe you can win before you do win.

BP: The other day I talked with you all about establishing goals, and that you can go flat and have an emotional letdown. That's exactly what happened to Wig. He had so many people helping him get back to the unit, he felt he had to make the Olympic team so he didn't let them down. His goal was making the team, not winning the gold medal. As soon as he made the team, there was a letdown. If you set your goal incorrectly, you will have peaked and have a letdown.

RF: Your attitude is definitely positive and it works probably for someone with a mature shooting attitude, but for me and most of the shooters I've talked to, when we have visions of glory while we are shooting, it messes us up. Why doesn't it mess you up?

LW: I'm not sure I can answer your question. But you said, "while they are shooting." This is definitely not the time to think about that. If you're letting your mind wander when you're shooting and not concentrating on your performance, you won't shoot well. You can't think about it while you are firing your shot. If you think about it while you're shooting, you're going to hurt yourself, pressure

yourself. For instance, I was shooting 300 meters the other day out here and I ran nine straight tens standing. I started thinking, "I'm going to shoot a hundred standing! I've never shot a hundred standing at 300 meters." Boy, I was hanging that target on my wall already - before I shot the last shot. And I shot a big eight because I just letdown, lost my concentration and shot it out there. You can't lose your concentration on your performance, or you lose your performance. In Munich, I was concentrating extremely well the day of my 300 meter performance. I can't overemphasize the importance of concentration while you shoot. However, I don't think anybody ever fully concentrates to their best ability. The better your concentration and the longer you concentrate on a particular day, the better you're going to shoot. A lot of people can concentrate on a few shots or a block of shots, but then they lose it. They may come back later and do the same thing. This is inconsistency, and inconsistency very seldom contributes toward winning. This is a matter of training - build yourself up, not just physically, but mentally. You must build up your ability to concentrate. You can learn to concentrate over longer periods of time, through more shots, so that you don't lose the consistency necessary to win.

RF: How do you keep it?

LW: Hopefully, for those few seconds when you are breaking your shot, you have a one hundred percent concentration. You can't keep one hundred percent concentration all of the time - you will have extraneous thoughts. Obviously, when I shot the eight at 300 meters, I was thinking about something other than breaking the shot - I was thinking about the result, a perfect string. Instead of concentrating on shooting the shot and making it look good, letting it be a reflex action, I was thinking about hanging that target on my wall. It's tough to concentrate. If you could have one hundred percent concentration, you'd never get beat. The older shooters maybe do have an advantage because they have matured through experience in their shooting. This is something you younger shooters will have to learn. I noticed some of your scores and I thought they were very good. Some of you had extremely high performances for your level of experience. You must be doing something right. You had to be on top of your wind and in control of your performance at the same time. This range has wiped out a lot of people because they don't have the ability to do both.

BP: I don't think in the United States today there is a shooter who is concentrating on more than seventy-five percent of his shots. Everyone is capable of doing much better than that.

MA: Wig, when you were coming up and setting intermediate goals, when you failed to reach one, how did you handle it then so it didn't stop your progress?

LW: You can't ever reach all your goals. If you reached all your goals too easily, you wouldn't be interested in shooting. You would have no satisfaction. I think this happens to a lot of talented shooters. They shoot so well early in their careers that they lose interest and don't go on. They mistake success. I once heard Bill Russell say, "Success is a journey, not a destination." Goals must be reoccurring and continuous in order to excel. You must set intermediate goals, a state championship, a certain level score you want to achieve in training, a level of scores you want to achieve in a match. When I started shooting we were trying to break 360 standing, then it was 370, now it is 380. It would have been unrealistic

when I started shooting to say my goal was to break 380 and go out to try to break 380, because I hadn't broken 360 yet. You can't reach unrealistic goals. You must set intermediate goals so as you reach them you feel you are achieving or moving toward your long-range goals. If you don't reach these intermediate goals, it's back to the drawing board for a little more training, a little more thinking and more trying to achieve them. Just because you don't reach your goal as soon as you think you should, you shouldn't quit or say you are going to take up ping-pong because of it.

BP: Conversely, don't set your goals too low. Make sure your goals are worthwhile, so it is worth the effort you put into it. If it is too low you haven't accomplished anything.

When Bassham first came to the team, he had a tremendous amount of talent - it is easy to recognize the talent and unlimited potential. I asked him what his goals were. He said to win a national championship. I told him he ought to just turn in his gear and leave, he was wasting his time and mine too. It had never dawned on him that he could be a world champion. His goal was in the wrong place for the talent that he had. For another shooter with a lesser talent, it might have been a little early to put their goals in that same place. To make your goals consistent with your talent you've got to evaluate what your potential is. You've got to have goals and they've got to offer a challenge to you.

We have a guy sitting over there who might just have the most potential in the world. I am speaking about Ed Etzel. Whether he will reach world level or not, I can't say. He has the potential. I don't know what his goals are or how much he wants to be a world champion. He will have to supply the desire. He is ready to break into the level of a world class shooter. I hope he has the desire and does do it. I think he can be better than Bassham. We have other shooters sitting here that are younger who also have this potential. How badly do you want it?

EH: Has there been any lessening of the excitement of winning a big match like the Olympics or World Championships over the first time you did it?

LW: No. Not in big matches. However, there is in small matches. I have a little trouble now getting myself mentally prepared or psyched up for small matches because they don't mean enough to me. I get my satisfaction in small matches from beating the good shooters that are there. This is my goal there. In a big match, I don't think you ever lose the thrill of winning. It's not blase the second time by any means. If it wasn't for this I probably wouldn't still be in the game. There's a lot of hard work and sacrifice that goes into it. Obviously I feel it's worthwhile or I wouldn't still be doing it. It's a tremendous high to win an Olympic gold medal.

BP: So you don't get sidetracked here, Wig is saying that he is shooting against and trying to beat the other competitor. I don't think he goes in the match with the idea that he is shooting shot per shot against Foster. He's shooting against himself and shooting the best score he is capable of shooting, because he knows that's going to beat Foster. When you go into an individual sport like shooting and start trying to beat another competitor, you're going to get into trouble. You begin to unconsciously fear being beat by your competitor and thus distract your mental preparation from what you should be concentrating on, which is

your own performance. You should shoot against yourself and shoot the best score you can, and turn in the best performance you can and you know that will be good enough to beat him. You don't have to hate your opponent to beat him, as is often preached in team sports. I believe this is what Wig is saying.

LW: To me the excitement still comes from winning. A lot of people don't agree with me about this, but I would rather shoot a lower score and still win than shoot a higher score and lose. Don't get me wrong. A good performance is very important. I have a different philosophy on this than some of the other top shooters. Again it depends on you as an individual - what motivates you. Sometimes scores don't reflect performance. You can perform an 1170 and shoot an 1140 if the conditions warrant. It's important to me to have a good performance, but it is also important to me to win. I want to win. If I have a good performance and lose, I'm not as happy as if I have a lesser performance and win. To me the most important thing is winning. As I said, there are only two places in a match. There are a lot more losers than winners. I want to be the winner.

I'm not saying being a winner at any cost. I'm saying doing everything within my power to win legally and within accepted shooting sportsmanship and etiquette. You must win playing within the rules.

MA: Wig, we thank you for sharing your experience.