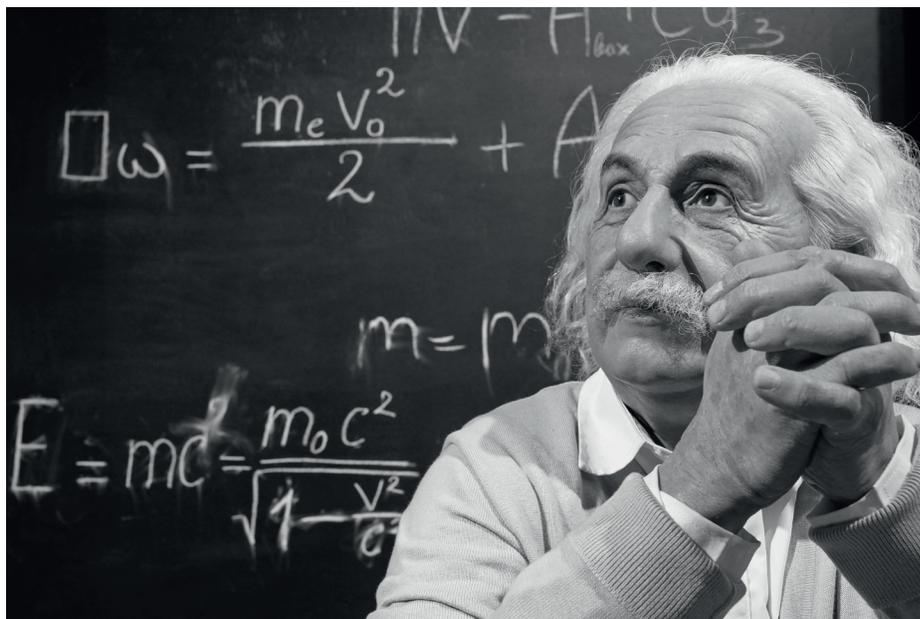


# Make Competition a

# HABIT

//// john d. shima

So many clay target shooters have the shooting skills to achieve an AAA class average during an occasional competition, yet they never maintain the consistency necessary to break through the imagined barrier. I think Albert Einstein, one of the greatest minds in the world understood these shooters' dilemma when he said, "You cannot solve a problem with the same mind that created it."



## Aspire for Automaticity

According to Sian Beilock, researcher, and author of *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To*, human performance relies on working memory and procedural memory. Moreover, optimum performance occurs when the majority of the tasks are delegated to procedural memory.

**/// Working Memory** - Accumulation of knowledge and experiences are necessary to develop appropriate performance goals and the training programs to achieve them. The purpose of practice is to transfer the repetitive processes involved in optimal performance from working memory to procedural memory.

**/// Procedural Memory** - Procedural (muscle) memory stores the specific reflex circuits that are necessary to efficiently execute habitual behaviors.

In other words, procedural memory is responsible for automaticity.

I encourage shooters to practice precise pre-planned moves from the hold point to the break point for each target presentation to create muscle memory. Automaticity is what makes precise habitual moves efficient, effective, and seemingly effortless.

In his book, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, researcher Charles Duhigg explained that habits are the brain's way of saving energy when executing repetitive behaviors. In other words, habitual behaviors occur without conscious thinking. The three elements of habit loop formation are cue, routine, and reward.

**/// Cue** - The cue is the thought or environmental stimulus that triggers the habitual response. The emergence of the clay target is the cue to initiate the shooter's pre-planned move.

**/// Routine** - The routine is the shooter's automatic execution of the appropriate pre-planned move. A disciplined shooter uses a specific pre-station routine to visualize and activate the appropriate pre-planned move.

**/// Reward** - The reward is achieving the desired outcome of the pre-planned move. Most shooters assume a broken target is the obvious reward. The reward should be the unconscious execution of the appropriate pre-planned move. The broken target is the consequence of the appropriate execution of the automatic pre-planned move.

Based upon the Japanese system of kaizen, motivational speaker, and author James Clear published *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*, to explain how small changes every day can promote remarkable improvements in performance. Clear described incremental changes in habits as the



compound interest of self-improvement.

Duhigg and Clear emphasized that the various habits stored in procedural memory can be synergistic or antagonistic. When a core habit is altered it can trigger a chain reaction in other related habits. Clear identified three levels of habits to clarify his opinion:

**/// Goal-Driven Habits** - The most common tactic used to improve a habit is to establish a specific goal. Specific goals are linked to a desired outcome. Principles: Life and Work author Ray Dalio stated that anyone who knows with certainty their goal can be achieved isn't striving high enough. Clay target shooters who aspire to achieve AAA class may never accomplish their goal but their shooting proficiency will improve as a result of their efforts.

**/// System-Driven Habits** - Tactics that break a goal into specific processes necessary to achieve the desired outcome are system-driven. Indistractable author Nir Eyal suggest that people fail to develop good habits because they focus on

immediate outcomes rather than making incremental improvements in the execution of processes. Therefore, shooters who seriously commit to achieving AAA class must identify appropriate training regimes for each stage of their development program, invest in adequate practice, and work closely with an appropriate shooting coach.

**/// Identity-Driven Habits** - People tend to develop habitual behaviors that match their beliefs about who they are in the context of abilities

and worthiness. Motivational speaker Tony Robbins argues in *Awaken the Giant Within* that a person's identity dictates his or her behavior. In Robbin's context, identity could be defined by an individual's past, present or future. I work with many shooters who have AAA class shooting skills but remain trapped in a Class A or Class AA mindset. Shooters must align their shooting identity with their aspirations rather than allow their shooting averages define their shooting identity.

### **Wants and Needs**

I paraphrase Jacob Bronowski when I say, "The greatest drive in the ascent of man is to do a thing well, and once achieved, is to do it better." In an effort to satisfy this noble drive within most clay target shooters I clarified the important difference between wants and needs. The goals a shooter wants to achieve are accomplished by accepting the strategies the shooter needs to follow to develop the consistent habits necessary to achieve the desired outcome.

**/// Train to Practice** - Bobby Knight said, "The key is not the will to win... everybody has that. It is the will to prepare to win that is important." Preparation to win in the clay target sports is a deliberate process of training to program reliable shooting habits.



**/// Practice to Compete** - Bruce Lee, the iconic martial artist said, “I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.” Focused practice involves precise repetition of each pre-planned move a shooter will use during competition. A rigorous, repetitive process is necessary to program efficient habits.

**/// Compete to Thrive** - For Simone Biles, perhaps the greatest gymnast of all time, has a surreal mindset toward competition. Biles stated, “A successful competition for me is always going out there and putting one hundred percent into whatever I’m doing. It’s not always winning. People, I think, mistake that it’s just winning. Sometimes it could be, but for me, it’s hitting the best sets I can, gaining confidence, and having a good time and having fun.” A healthy mindset for clay target shooters is to use competition, not to discover whether they are better than other shooters, but to measure their progress toward becoming their best self. From this perspective shooting is a metaphor for the shooter’s life.

### **|Make Competition a Habit**

Wilma Rudolph, who overcame polio to become a world-record-holding and three-time Olympic gold medal sprinter said, “Winning is great, sure, but if you are really going to do something in life, the secret is learning how to lose. Nobody goes undefeated all the time. If you can pick up after a crushing defeat, and go on to win again, you are going to be a champion someday.”

The only way for a shooter to learn how to cope with losing is to enter competitions. Nobody wins every competition. Accepting defeat as a necessary experience on their shooting journey allows performing in competition to become a habit. Most champions thrive on competition, so they compete at everything they do, even



outside their chosen sport. Basketball great Michael Jordan said, “You have competition every day because you set such high standards for yourself that you have to go out every day and live up to that.”

There is no question that developing a competitive mindset requires rigorous effort. Living with a competition mindset becomes a habit that requires continuous maintenance. Champions accept that losing during competition is necessary to build resilience. Resilience is an essential part of the competitors’ life journey. They strive to become their best self, and thrive in the journey. ■

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**habit**  
*habit*

**|hab • it, noun|**

**2c. a behavior pattern acquired by frequent repetition or physiologic exposure that shows itself in regularity or increased facility of performance**