

# PUNCHING PROBLEMS

**Alistair Whittingham solves the seemingly incurable disease of punching**



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**Punching occurs when archers try to cognitively control a technique that should happen automatically. They look for 'cues' to instigate movements**

“I have started to punch – does that mean I have to give up archery?” This was the question I was faced with not long ago by an international compound shooter who had approached me for coaching. I was shocked by the question, and intrigued that an individual of such standing would consider quitting because he had caught the dreaded curse. So rather than leap in to the fray and start discussing ‘cures’ I decided to ask him what he felt was the problem, how it manifested itself and what could be done about it. I was also interested to hear how all this made him feel.

What I was to hear was in no way unique: feelings of a lack of control, an inevitability of action and outcome, huge anxiety and feelings of real desperation. This intelligent and successful athlete was talking as if his skill had deserted him, his performance no longer under his control. The next step in the counselling process, as I was quickly beginning to see similarities with several of my clients who seek psychological help, was to ask the athlete what he thought could be done to remedy the problem. I was bombarded by the standard methods of addressing this problem: “better get an evolution release aid,” “I’ll have to do lots of bare boss,” and “it doesn’t matter – I am always going to be a puncher, aren’t I?” As we discussed the issues further it became clear that the archer really did believe that this problem was insurmountable.

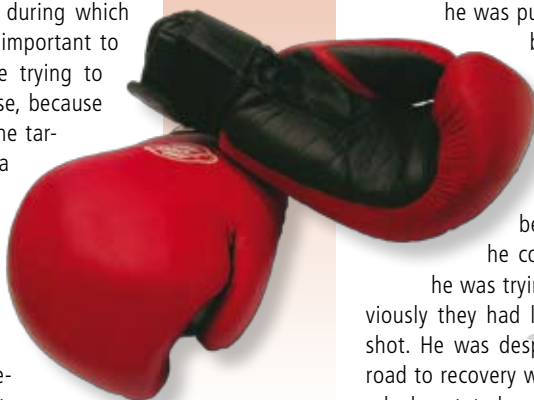
Let’s have a look at why ‘punching’ happens. As I have discussed in previous articles, archery is a closed skill (one where the athlete does not manipulate the technique they use due to outside stimuli). This is such a crucial point that I am always amazed that it is not emphasised more in coaching literature. In essence the archer has a well learned technique that they must trust in and allow to happen automatically, unchecked by cognitive control. When the archer tries to control this skill cognitively during the execution phase they stop this process from happening. In the case of punching a release, the archer begins to look for ‘cues’ to instigate movements that they do not need and are unable to process and the whole movement falls apart. This disruption of the skill then leads the individual to concentrate even more on the aspects of the shot that should be allowed to happen in a natural, uncontrolled manner and the spiral of failure continues.

It is important to look at what processes lead to execution in a well performed shot. The archer focuses internally while drawing the bow, and 'checks' alignment and posture by feel and the visual information coming back to them. This is done by comparing what is happening at the present to what they expect to happen, not as a new experience every shot. This point is vital: the archer is not viewing feedback on posture and alignment as unique to this shot but merely comparing it to stored and expected information, rather like driving a well-learnt route each day. Having got the all clear on posture and alignment (i.e. comfortably at full draw), the archer then focuses externally, closing off all focus on feel (kinaesthetic) feedback. They have got the green light to go forward with the shot and must commit to the next stage without being tempted to go back to check that they have got this right. The best analogy I can give for this is: once you have checked the traffic left and right at a junction you commit to the manoeuvre; you do not have a sneaky look again to check the oncoming traffic halfway across the junction or things will end badly!

So the archer is now focused externally, the big question now is "what is going to trigger the shot?" Many people believe that it is conscious aiming that will trigger the shot, but this just can not be if one is to produce a truly automatic motor skill. Yes, the archer is looking at the target and the relationship between it and the scope; they will not execute the shot if they are not pointing where they want to. But this is not aiming *per se* – the archer is again looking to match up a pre-programmed picture to allow the triggering of the release, not a conscious, meticulous aim. When talking to top compound archers they refer to a picture they see; they do not talk in terms of exact rock steady aiming that then lets them make a conscious decision to trigger. The key point here is to open a window of opportunity during which the shot can go off. It is important to be aware that if you are trying to aim and trigger the release, because of being rock steady on the target you are working on a picture that is no longer there anymore when you shoot. The time taken by the brain to process what you are seeing and to instigate a conscious muscle movement to shoot means that you

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no longer are working on up-to-date information, which in turn leads to jerky movements driven by anticipation.

So, returning to my unhappy archer at the beginning of this article and how we effected a change in how he was performing, the major part of the intervention was in talking the problem through. This counselling took place over two hour-long sessions on the range. I listened and he talked about how and why

he was punching, my only input being to challenge him to defend the use of terms such as 'have to' and 'it just happens.' During these sessions the archer became aware of what he could control and what he was trying to control that previously they had let happen during the shot. He was desperate to start on the road to recovery with the training methods he stated originally, but we con-

tinued to discuss and analyse his shot routine and slowly his faith in his own skill returned without an arrow shot. He began to say things like "I control" and most importantly "trust" and "relaxed". At the end of the first session the archer shot six arrows bare boss up close without a punch, and then went home to return for the next session the following day. After our counselling session, the following day he began shooting at 50m at a target, and although he was nervous that the form would deteriorate back to punching (which it did for the odd shot), he focused on trusting his skill and letting the shot happen. I have seen the archer a couple of times since and he is happy and relaxed in what he is doing and back to shooting very well. He does still punch the odd shot, but never two in a row and there are not the same feelings of anxiety. In fact he is more confident than ever now that he trusts his skill. As he said to me, "this punching thing was all in my head!"