

Archers get a lot of input during their beginners courses but what help the developing archer gets after that can vary considerably. This is often because archers and clubs are unaware of the options available to them. At the same time, few developing archers are aware of what it is to be coached or what it means to participate productively in a coaching relationship. Archers are often surprised by some of the things they encounter in a coaching relationship and it is important that these are understood.



In the first part of this article John Neal discusses the options open to clubs and archers and in Part 2 will talk about participating in a one to one coaching relationship.

How to be coached: Coaching options

The Challenge

It doesn't matter how well we shoot already, the vast majority of us would like to shoot better. Fact.

Even those of us who profess to be 'happy with our shooting and don't want help', secretly harbour the desire to do that bit better than before – how many of us score our arrows even if we don't shoot a recognised round? And do we know our personal bests by heart? So for those gripped by the desire to improve our standard of archery, what options are open to us?

Well, one thing is certain - we aren't going to do it solely from reading a book or watching an instructional DVD! Sure, we can learn what we are *supposed* to do that way but it's a long hop from *knowing* to *doing*, in our game. Knowing what we should be doing, and understanding how to achieve it are completely separate problems. And coaching ourselves is almost impossible - it needs a certain objectivity which few can apply to themselves. We need that external input and second opinion to question assumptions, verify conclusions etc.

It's an old adage that "failing to plan is planning to fail". Without "planning" we will fail to define what we are trying to achieve, fail to plan a route to improvement and fail to achieve it. So I think we have established that we need someone to help us and that means a coach of some sort. But what sort of coaching arrangements might be available to us?

The Options

There are several possibilities and options for coaching - not all will suit every archer and those accessible to us will vary greatly depending on our

location, our willingness to travel and many other factors. We'll look at the options which might be available to clubs and individual archers and the benefits of each.

Ad hoc sessions with club coaches

In many cases clubs will have coaches who are prepared to spend some time with developing archers. They will usually be happy to take a look at us and suggest possible areas for improvement in our technique or equipment set up. In many respects this is likely to be the most convenient and easily arranged option. We usually know the people concerned, they will know us and it should be easy enough to approach them and ask for help.

And you *will* need to ask! Don't think that because no-one has volunteered their services that they aren't interested. There is a sort of unwritten etiquette among coaches which requires the archer

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to approach the coach. This is mainly good manners - many people feel they are doing just fine, thank you very much, and will be offended by an assertion they appear in need of help! It's also a courtesy to other coaches who may already be working with an archer.

However, in a club setting - particularly if your club is lucky enough to have several coaches - one thing we need to guard against is too many people trying to help. If we have a number of areas which might need to be worked on, different coaches may tell us to work on different things. It's not that they are wrong, they simply see differing priorities but it

gets very confusing to the archer and slows progress if we get varying advice from week to week. This can happen all too easily where a number of coaches work in an uncoordinated environment.

Coaching clinics

An option popular among some clubs is to hold "coaching clinics". These can be run by club coaches but are also often organised through the County Coaching Group. The goal of these events is typically to provide each archer with a short assessment of their shooting form and equipment setup and to identify the highest priority technique area for the archer to work on. Part of the session will then typically be spent with the archer working on that area.

One or more follow-up sessions will also be scheduled, ideally a few weeks apart and with the same team of coaches. This gives the archer time to go away and work on the area identified, following which progress can be reassessed at a subsequent session. If progress has been made it may then be appropriate for the coach to suggest a further area for development. Alternatively it might be necessary to look at further ways of improving the initial area.

The key to getting the best out of coaching clinics is to schedule follow up to ensure we don't fall back to old habits.

Personal coaches

Ad hoc input from coaches or coaching clinics can help us achieve improvement and may well be sufficient for many archers. However, for the archer aspiring to shoot to the highest standards, much more than a few ad hoc sessions will be required. What we need is a well coordinated *programme* of work designed to develop us in all areas of the sport. This will include not only input on equipment setup and technique but also on physical training, mental skills and a training programme designed to set and monitor specific goals, perhaps over several years.

In such an arrangement a productive coaching *relationship* needs to be established in which the coach becomes something much more than one of several occasional observers providing intermittent input. A personal coach becomes the first port of call for pretty well every aspect of the archers programme. This provides consistency of analysis, planning and monitoring which helps keep the archer "on the rails" as it were. Between them, archer and coach work out how best to work towards the archers objectives.

A personal coach will help plan and monitor technique development with month by month and year by year goals to help steer us to our aspirations. This will often require skills and knowledge the aspiring archer does not yet possess. They may also be aware of techniques to help speed this process other than just standing there shooting!

Choosing a personal coach is difficult, partly because not all coaches are able to make the commitment in time but it's also the case that there needs to be a good "fit" between archer and coach. The coach needs to be someone we respect and trust and generally feel we can work with. Similarly, the coach must be able to communicate effectively with the archer, be able to motivate them and generally be on the same wavelength as them while maintaining a degree of objectivity. The trick,

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as an archer, is to talk to coaches, find out about them, their experience of archery in general, as well as, as their coaching background and think about whether you would feel comfortable sharing your archery aspirations, hopes and fears with them. If you can, then it's worth asking if they would be prepared to help you on a regular basis and you can then discuss what "regular" means - everybody's needs are different.

Squad coaching sessions

The role of "squads" in the development of archers may vary hugely and will depend on what squads, if any, operate in our vicinity. Some Counties have County Team selection processes which mandate attendance at squad training sessions while others make squad training sessions optional. However, where squads are run, and the aspiring archer (if necessary) qualifies to attend them, they can often provide significant additional input - both from other good archers and from more experienced coaches. This is true even where an archer has a well established relationship with a personal coach and a well run squad would invite / expect personal coaches to attend with their archers. In this way, the squad coaches do not replace or interfere with an effective personal coaching relationship, rather they seek to augment it. Effective working and communication between us, our personal coaches

and squad coaches has to be both a goal and an outcome where squads are a feature of our training.

Other archers

New archers inevitably look to the better performers in their club, County etc as exemplars of how to shoot. Some of these may be experienced club archers with many years shooting under their belts (and, maybe, many medals on them!!) while others may be elite archers performing at MB and GMB classifications. Setting ones sights on their standard can be a mixed blessing as many of these role models have developed their technique over a long period of time and often with considerable investment in training of various kinds. The aspiring archer may feel disheartened by what they perceive as slow progress when they try to emulate these, sometimes, elite performers.

However, such archers, like many coaches, feel that helping new and inexperienced shots is a way of putting back into the sport something of what they have been able to get out of it. This presents some people with a dilemma which is important to keep in perspective. Firstly, elite performers are often not coaches and may not be equipped with some of the skills and knowledge possessed by trained coaches. However, many of them may have been coached themselves for many years so have considerable experience of being on the receiving end of coaching.

It's important to understand what elite performers can contribute. Firstly, their technical knowledge of equipment, its setup and tuning is often second to none. Some may also have a good grasp of the sort of fitness programme developing archers might need to meet their aspirations. Similarly, they are obviously good examples of "how to shoot" and adopting their basic style of shooting may lead to improvement if the aspiring archers' technique is not good. However, as we have already observed, knowing what we *should* do is a different problem to actually achieving it and in this respect experienced archers may or may not be able to work with us in a way which achieves the latter - if only because they may not be able to spare us sufficient time. It is unlikely, for instance, they will have the time to help us plan and monitor our medium term goals.

Where elite archers are able to spare time with us it is important to make the most of such opportunities but if they are going to be few and far between we will need to find someone who can monitor our progress and make sure that any improvement we achieve from such sessions is maintained and further developed. This will usually involve working

with a coach and this illustrates the need for aspiring archers to understand the relative merits of various forms of coaching.

The relative merits of working with a qualified coach or an "experienced archer" are a complicated trade-off, about which we, the recipient, must be the final arbiter. But I'd like to leave you with this



thought - as aspiring archers we seek best advantage by ensuring we have up to date, modern, equipment - why wouldn't we want to ensure the advice we get on technique was also up to date and modern?

Paying for coaching

The question of paying for coaching has been a thorny subject in the UK for a great many years. But why is this - a quick look round the web sites suggests you'd have to pay £20 - £25 an hour for one to one badminton coaching, anything from £20 - £30 an hour for tennis, £30 - £40 an hour for swimming and let's not even contemplate the cost of an hour with a golf pro!! So why do we have hang ups about paying for archery coaching? Let's take that as a rhetorical question for now and the fact is that at present the vast majority of archery coaches do not charge for their services. However, this is something archers should expect to change in coming years and already, some coaches are - in my view, justifiably - asking for payment.

Don't overlook the fact that qualified coaches have expended considerable amounts of time and money on formal training courses and usually even longer engaged in practicing their skills with more experienced coaches. They are also required to engage in considerable bureaucracy (CRB, certificate renewals, assessments etc) in order to retain their qualifications and all this for somebody else's benefit - not their own. At the very least these coaches should not be "out of pocket" in providing the services they do. Coaching clinics typically attract a per archer charge, though in Essex, this only pays for reimbursement of travelling expenses - no "fee", per se, is paid to the coaches running these sessions.

It's interesting that many people have no difficulty with the notion of paying for coaching at archery shops and many archers avail themselves of the services offered. In some cases these sessions may be conducted by a qualified coach while in others they may be conducted by experienced and knowledgeable archers. As we have shown, each has its merits.

There are those who believe that paying for coaching would encourage people to take such sessions more seriously and to focus on getting as much out of them as they can. I'd like to think it also encouraged coaches to deliver up to date and effective coaching but as with the recipient this is ultimately down to the individual.

Next time on, "How to be Coached" . . .

In Part 2 we'll look at what we need to be prepared for if we enter into a regular and more formal coaching relationship. We'll look at some of the challenges we will face, some of the things we might be asked to do and how to get the most out of the work we do with whomever we work with.



John Neal is a County Coach in Essex/Suffolk and works with archers of all abilities in both group and one to one coaching arrangements. As Essex County Coaching Organiser (Performance) he coordinates the Essex Coaching Clinic scheme and was a principal organiser of the JEDI scheme. He shoots a compound bow competitively but is equally happy to coach archers shooting all bow types. John has also tutored on both Level 1 and Level 2 Coach courses.