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The Secret Curse of Expert Archers

By [KATIE THOMAS](#)

There is an affliction so feared by elite archers that many in the sport refuse to even say its name. Archery coaches who specialize in treating the problem are sworn not to reveal the identities of archers in its grip, even though they estimate that 90 percent of high-level competitors will fall victim at least once in their careers.

Target panic, as the condition is known, causes crack shots to suddenly lose control of their bows and their composure. Mysteriously, sufferers start releasing the bow the instant they see the target, sabotaging any chance of a gold-medal shot. Others freeze up and cannot release at all. Target panic is akin to the yips in baseball and golf, when accomplished athletes can no longer make a simple throw to first base or stroke an easy putt.

The results can be mortifying, and archery is filled with tales of those who have caught the curse, never to shoot again. The problem has spawned a cottage industry of coaches, books and specialized accessories that claim to cure target panic.

“It’s devastating,” said Terry Wunderle, a professional archery coach whose son, Vic, is an archer on this year’s United States Olympic team.

“For someone who has a good case of target panic, I could offer them a thousand dollars if they would just pull the bow back and let the pin float over the bull’s-eye,” Wunderle said, referring to the way archers let their arrows gently bob as they wait for the perfect shot. “I guarantee you, I would not lose the thousand dollars. They can’t do it.”

Few admit to being sufferers themselves. “Most shooters will deny that they have it,” said Len Cardinale, an archery coach who said he had treated “hundreds and hundreds” of cases of target panic since the 1970s. “It’s more convenient to say they need a new bow, they have to switch arrows or stand differently.”

Wunderle, who himself admitted to battling target panic from time to time, would not reveal whether any of the Olympic archers he coached had faced target panic. “I would not say it if I knew it,” said Wunderle, who also did not want his son interviewed on the subject with the Beijing Olympics a week away. “It’s like being an alcoholic. They don’t say much about it. They don’t fess up to it.”

Although few academic studies have been conducted on target panic, several sports psychologists said the condition was nearly identical to the much-analyzed yips in golf and other sports. Ben Hogan and Lee Trevino were notorious sufferers; so was [Chuck Knoblauch](#), the former [Yankees](#) second baseman who discovered he could no longer throw to first base. Some say [Shaquille O’Neal](#)’s dismal free-throw record is due to a case of the yips.

While nearly everyone agrees that the problem is primarily psychological, the latest research suggests that, in some cases, the problem might also be neurological. Sufferers might actually have a disorder known as focal dystonia, a common affliction of musicians caused when the neurons that guide a particular movement — be it aiming a bow or sinking a putt — become worn from overuse.

“It’s like a hiccup in the wrist,” said Aynsley M. Smith, research director of the [Mayo Clinic](#) Sports Medicine Center, which has conducted three studies on the yips in golf since 2000. Her research, as well as that of a team from New Zealand, has concluded that there are two types of yips — one that is purely psychological and another that is primarily neurological. In both cases, two opposing muscle groups contract at the same time, leading to what Smith and other sport scientists call a “double pull.”

Even those with a neurological disorder can develop anxiety that makes the problem worse, said Robert Bell, a sports psychologist at Ball State University who specializes in golf. “It kind of gets into the mind that this could happen, and that’s where the anxiety and the stress come in,” he said.

One of the worst cases of target panic that Wunderle treated was in 16-year-old Joey Hunt.

Hunt, who has been shooting archery “just about my whole life,” competes with a compound bow, which uses pulleys and levers to flex the bow back compared with the recurve bow used in the Olympics.

When Hunt was 9 or 10, he discovered he had lost his preternatural ability to send arrows thunking into the target’s gold center.

“I would start to bring the bow down, and as soon as it got anywhere near the target, I would click it right off, right then and there,” said Hunt, who lives in Minot, Me. “It just takes over your mind, and it’s hard to concentrate on other parts of shooting.”

Target panic, also known as gold fever because sufferers become obsessed with hitting the gold center, is rich in lore, and online message boards are filled with cautionary testimonials from those who have had the disease.

“I could draw the bow without the arrow and had no trouble holding on the dot at all,” wrote a victim on the message board at [archerytalk.com](#), referring to aiming at the center of the target. “But put an arrow on the string and Satan himself was holding it off ... strange stuff some of us endure to play this game!”

Lanny Bassham, a former Olympic rifle shooter and mental coach whose clients include the Olympic archer Brady Ellison, said the archery community had a peculiar obsession with target panic, which he noted had a horrifying ring.

“The words target panic have induced an unnecessary amount of severity and concern about this condition among archers,” he said. “I think if they had a better word for it, they’d have a lot less problem trying to cure it.”

Many archers and their coaches refuse to say target panic. Those words are forbidden around the Nichols household, which is home to the Olympic archer Jennifer Nichols and her younger sister, Amanda, also a world-class competitor.

“We try to stay away from the labels that are put on things by people in the archery industry because once you feel you’ve got that label, it’s hard to stay away from it,” said their father, Brent Nichols. “We don’t want to hear those things.”

Theories vary on how to cure target panic. Some switch their shooting hand, or change their grip slightly — techniques that have also proved successful in golf. Others use visualization techniques and positive reinforcement.

Wunderle advises his clients to imagine seeing and feeling what a good shot is, without focusing on aiming the arrow.

“Do not focus on results,” he said. “When you focus on results, it builds anxiety. And anxiety is the kiss of death.”

One of the most popular cures is to entirely remove the target. Sufferers instead practice shooting at a blank target, sometimes for weeks at a time, to retrain the mind.

“The empty bale restores your confidence in your subconscious,” said Bernie Pellerite, author of the book “Idiot Proof Archery” and a self-described expert on target panic. “Nobody flinches or punches or chokes on an empty bale.”

Hunt spent weeks shooting at blank targets, but he also purchased a special release for his bow, which helped retrain him when to shoot.

“It’s trying to engrave in your head when you should shoot,” he said. “You just pull it back, let the safety off, and pull it until it decides to go. Then you get used to every shot being perfect.”

Hunt placed second in his age group at the Junior Olympic Archery Development national championships in Oklahoma City earlier this month. His target panic, he said, had been cured.

For now.

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