



TARGET PANIC

BY RANDY ULMER

DEFINITION

Target panic is a crippling condition that affects many novice, as well as experienced, archers. It can strike any archer at any time. Some people say 90% of all archers will experience some form of target panic during their shooting careers. Depending on the definition of Target Panic you use, I suspect the number is higher. Because Target Panic has never been clinically studied, we aren't sure what causes it-or even what it truly is. All of the available literature on the subject is anecdotal at best. Because there are no scientific studies, everything we think we know about this condition is based upon people's opinions and experiences -and a whole lot of speculation. I would venture to say that more people leave archery

due to this syndrome than for any other reason. It is important for us as bowhunters to understand that such a condition exists, so that even if we have no current symptoms, we can minimize the chances of eventually coming down with a clinical case of the syndrome. If you have never experienced target panic, you may be getting fairly disinterested in this article about now. Please continue to read! Fortunately, you can 'vaccinate' yourself against target panic-and the prevention is closely related to the 'cure'.

Some of the generally agreed upon signs and symptoms of target panic are: The inability to place the sight in the center of the target. 'Freezing' above or below the target (usually below). The inability to release the

arrow at all. Punching the trigger (inability to execute a surprise release-inability to squeeze the trigger). Moving the sight through the target and punching the trigger as the sight goes by the center ('drive-by-shooting'). Prematurely releasing the arrow before the sight is on the target center, or at least a very strong desire to do so. Loss of composure. Loss of confidence. Jerking the bow just before shooting. 'Double clutching' the bow. (the shooter's body acts as if the shot was fired before it actually is fired). Shooting with just a few seconds left on the shot clock (tournament archers). Last, but most importantly for us bowhunters is 'buck fever' - the overwhelming flood of emotion that sometimes occurs when shooting at game.

When most people get to the point that target panic begins to seriously affect their shooting, they are often unsure what is happening. They may remain in denial for an extended period of time. They may be embarrassed about the condition and try to struggle through it without seeking help. It often becomes debilitating before they seek help (or quit archery altogether). Education is essential! Starting archers out correctly with proper physical (form) and mental training will minimize the likelihood of them ever developing the condition.

Most remedies for target panic are simply methods for breaking down one's shot process and building it over again. In my opinion the best prevention for target panic is to build the shot process correctly in the first place and at the same time, instill the discipline to maintain it. Target panic is like cancer- prevention and early detection are our best tools to fight it!

Before I get into my personal thoughts and opinions on the subject of Target Panic, let me begin with a disclaimer: I am not a psychologist; sports or otherwise. I do not have any specific expertise in this area. However, I have been shooting archery for over 50 years and have found myself in just about every high pressure situation an archer can be placed into, from drawing back on monster bucks to one-arrow shoot offs for professional world championships. I do have strong opinions on the matter. However, it's important to remember that just because my opinions are strong, doesn't mean they are right!

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I believe in each of us there is an anxiety that surrounds and

permeates the shot process. This anxiety is especially pronounced in the moments before and during the release. Typically, the more important the outcome of the shot, the higher the level of anxiety. This anxiety continuum ranges from mild to severe. Some archers are always able to keep it under control. Others can not. With full-blown, clinical target panic, this anxiety affects the mind in a particular way that 'short circuits' the shot process at a critical juncture.

The general consensus among most 'experts' is that target panic is something you either have or you don't have-kind of like being pregnant-you either are or you aren't. I disagree. I believe that target panic is a name we give to a particular outward manifestation of a much larger and more complex psychological issue. This issue is the general anxiety that we all have surrounding the shot process. The bottom line is that the worse this anxiety (Target Panic) is, the more likely it is to prevent you from being the best shooter you can be.

On a side note: I would love to see the term Target Panic eliminated from the vernacular. Because the term itself may contribute to the syndrome. When one is labeled as having target panic, it is much like being told you are HIV positive-you will probably begin to feel sick immediately. All of your day-to-day aches, pains and sniffles will be connected in your mind to the virus. As archers, we all have a continuous flow of self-doubts, feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence when we shoot. If we have been labeled as having Target Panic, these normal day-to-day issues will be placed at the feet of our Target Panic. The label itself becomes somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Even with

that being said, I am going to continue to use the term in this article for convenience and continuity.)

CAUSES

It would be wonderful if we truly understood what causes Target Panic. Unfortunately, we don't. As I mentioned earlier, there are no scientific studies available, so we are forced to speculate. Our best guess is that Target Panic is what psychologists call a 'conditioned response'. You are conditioned by one set of stimuli to respond in a certain way- kind of like Pavlov's dogs. Or it may be a deep-rooted 'motivational conflict'. Fortunately, we don't have room here to go over these theories. There are probably as many reasons an archer experiences anxiety during the shot as there are archers. We do not know why some people's anxieties escalate to full blown clinical Target Panic and others do not. It may arise from being overly concerned with the outcome of the shot or from trying to control the exact timing of the shot rather than focusing on form and execution.

Some have speculated that there may be equipment factors contributing to the condition. Actually, a couple of equipment issues may contribute to Target Panic. The first is holding too much weight at full draw. This isn't an issue for most compound shooters now because of the high let-off of today's bows. The second is the index finger release aid. I do believe that the use of the index finger to trigger the shot somehow facilitates the likelihood of 'punching' the trigger along with other problems attributed to Target Panic.

The bottom line is that we don't have to fully understand the etiology (what causes it) of the 'disease' to treat it successfully. The etiology of Target Panic is very complex and probably



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different for each individual. The treatment would probably be more efficient if we fully understood the cause. Again, we don't understand it, so in the next issue of Mississippi Bowhunter Magazine we will focus on the prevention and the treatment instead!

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

You may hear of many quick-fixes reputed to 'cure' target panic. Unfortunately they seldom, if ever, work. There have also been many gadgets designed and marketed to 'fix' Target Panic. Many bowhunters

spend a great deal of money and time on these. To the best of my knowledge none are effective as a long term solution. Many of these ideas or devices will work for a short period of time until your subconscious becomes familiar with the new routine and recognizes and overcomes the 'trick'.

I am going to outline a treatment protocol for Target Panic. This regimen will not be easy! It will be very long, boring and time-consuming. You must be fully committed to the cure for it to be successful. Unfortunately, even after you have completed the regimen, you will need

to continue practicing preventative measures to avoid a relapse. The reason so many people struggle and fail to manage Target Panic is that they don't fully commit to the treatment protocol. It is not easy. However, the great thing about working on this condition is that the treatment program will make you a much better over-all archer in the long run.

Another Disclaimer: this is only a quasi-scientifically based treatment protocol. It is loosely based on the principle of systematic desensitization. We will try to establish different associations during the shot process.

While working through this protocol you will slowly 'unlearn' undesirable behaviors and replace them with different more desirable behaviors.

I'm going to borrow a page from the AA 12 step program here: The first step to curing Target Panic it is to admit that you have the problem and also that you have no control over it. I mean this! Once you have come to this realization and are willing to admit it (at least to yourself), you can proceed with the full treatment protocol.

It is best to wait until the off season to begin the program so you will have plenty of time before the hunting season (or the tournament season) to fully adapt.

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