

How Much Practice?

Here's the question. Some bowhunters struggle to find spare time here and there to practice before the season opens. Various others find the time to practice almost daily. Just how much should you shoot for noticeable results?

What bowhunter doesn't love to shoot his or her bow? I sure do. Particularly on days when I'm on target and my arrows fly exactly where I want them to. That's sweet. Bowhunters in general just love to fire arrows on the range working out kinks from their pet rig to make dead certain their bow shoots flawlessly once the season finally rolls around. It's part of the game. When your mind, body, and equipment work like a neatly oiled machine, game tags get filled and the freezer stays full.

The sport of archery is complex. No matter how good you may shoot now, there's always room for at least some improvement down the line. The guy or gal who practices archery more often is destined to be more confident and capable with his or her equipment, sure. But, too much practice can and often does have a potential downside. You can actually start to shoot poorer – for two reasons. You burn your mind and your body out from overdoing it. That's overkill. In turn all the good habits you had slowly turn into bad, and then things just seem to slowly deteriorate from there. Ask any serious archer, he'll tell you. He'll tell you that sometimes less is more.

In essence, the wrong kind of practice is akin to bowhunting without a broadhead. It makes little sense. Archery is a sport that allows little error in terms of bad time. If you practice nonchalantly you can develop bad habits that will only become worse should you not jar your brain and realize that a bad shot followed by another and another is pure poison on your skill. You must take note and act accordingly.

What passes for "practice" can and is interpreted in different ways. You might think if you shoot 8 or 10 arrows you've practiced and I might

shoot 30 or 40 before I feel like I've done anything. To each his own. Here's the thing: Develop a stringent shooting regimen if you are serious about improving your skill, but be careful to not overdue it if you can meet your individual needs with a few select goals in reach.

Just like a bodybuilder trying to build strength in his chest, he doesn't want to do the same exercises over and over every day. He'll go nowhere but downhill. After a heavy day of training he'll want several days off in between, at least. Or if he lightly trains for a short period one day he might come back the next day for another light day or perhaps the day after and repeat his routine. Same thing for archery. Again, less is often more.

Randomly shooting arrows with no concrete purpose in mind will lead to frustration. The majority of the people I know bicker because they don't have as much time to shoot as they'd like. Then there are others who shoot constantly but never seem to get anywhere. Most people fall somewhere in between. Truly understanding what a good practice session is about is where it's at. Mine will be slightly different from yours and yours from your neighbor's and so on. Regardless, here are four steps to help anyone step up their accuracy.

The Mind

For bowhunters we practice to make darn sure that when a buck or bull steps out in the clearing we will, without second-guessing, send a shaving-sharp broadhead through those vitals every single time. So, essentially, practicing is just a means to that end. Every time we shoot an arrow at a paper bulls-eye on the range we envision that arrow at some point in time slicing flesh instead of paper. Thoughts like this turn the crank in our head.

Shooting a bow is every bit half-mental. It's not all muscle. You have to aim. Sometimes this can be far from easy. The cat in the bag is aiming every arrow you shoot during practice like it is the

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only one you've got. How so? Well, focus. You cannot allow yourself to be distracted. Arrows will spray all over the target and you won't be able to get in the groove properly. See the target and the target only. Then shoot.

To tip the odds in my favor when I go to the practice range I shoot every arrow like it is "the one arrow." Regardless of the distance I never hurry, rather I concentrate completely, double-check my form and composure, aim solid, and shoot that arrow with the utmost care and concern. I then wait 30-seconds to one minute before I shoot another and repeat the process all over again. I'm not just shooting arrows to be shooting. I want to shoot every arrow with as much care and discipline as I would on a 10-point whitetail. That's how you build your skill.

This can be taxing on the mind so I usually only shoot 20-25 arrows per session, never more, sometimes less. It just depends on how I feel that day. Never continue to shoot after you've tired yourself mentally or physically or things just seem to be off plumb that day. It's better to pack up and try again in a day or two. It can be tough to leave the range on a bad note but believe me you're much better off in the long run if you just forget about it and look forward to the joys of your next practice session.

Warm Up

This may sound silly to some macho guys out there but warming up before going outdoors to practice makes sense. Besides just doing some basic stretches of the shoulders, back, and arms I pull on a neat little instrument called the Bowfit Archery Exerciser. It simulates the drawing of a bow kind of nice. It helps me loosen up my shooting muscles before I get to the range. I even do this to loosen up a bit in the mornings before I head out to hunt.

Form

A great shot is built on great form. Consistency on the range means duplicating everything you do shot-for-shot, to the tee. Everybody draws, anchors, and releases a bit differently but it's how you duplicate this motion each time that dictates the end accuracy. Rarely will shots at game be target-style neat, meaning that an animal won't allow you a textbook upright stance and all the time you want to get it. Establishing a routine for your shooting style is mandatory and if you practice it correctly enough I'm convinced that even when you find yourself at an



awkward position in the field you'll find that it will repeat itself beautifully and you will make those shots consistently.

As I said a little earlier, everybody draws, anchors, and releases a bit differently. That's okay. As long as it's proper and repetitive you are at no disadvantage. For the sake of argument here's my shooting rou-

tine: I suck in a big breath and draw; when the string gets to my face I let half out; my bow hand is loose on the grip so as not to choke it; I lock my anchor and bring my sight pin up from below; when I settle on target I let fly and hold the sight pin there until the arrow hits.

That's how I shoot at targets whether I'm standing or kneeling. That's how I shoot at game whether I'm standing or kneeling. Slow and controlled practice time on the range ensures that I can repeat this motion without ever thinking about it. I can do this because I deliberately practice this way all year long. I don't just go out onto the target range and shoot 50 arrows here and there at bull-eye targets for chips-and-giggles. Every shot is rehearsed in detail.

Practice Sessions

Especially if you begin to shoot only two weeks before the season opener in your neck of the woods don't go overboard. Start out slow and controlled to break-in muscles, work on aiming, and prevent any bad habits from taking hold. Shoot maybe 20 or 30 minutes every other day right up until the first day. If you do what you are suppose to do an allow yourself more time than that then it is probably best to keep practice time down even shorter. Give yourself at least six weeks time. Practice 10 to 20 minutes a day, two to three times per week. In that time you shouldn't shoot anymore than 25 to 30 arrows per session. Keep practice sessions short and controlled and be dead serious about them.

Archery and practice go hand-and-hand. The bottom line is shoot as often as you can but never sink the ship. I know that at times it's tough to squeeze practice time in with the congestion of every day life. Sometimes you just have to force the moment and make it happen. Short, controlled practice sessions makes this a little easier and more doable in most instances. So get out there and be all that you can be!

Jason Butler is a freelance outdoor writer and photographer who lives in Richmond, VA. As much as Jason likes writing about the outdoors, he'd rather be there.