

UP THE ARCHERY LADDER

This is a copy of a reply sent to someone who e-mailed the Club out of the blue asking for a Performance Path to get into the 2012 Olympics

Thanks for your enquiry.

I'm not sure what you mean by a detailed performance path, I think the reality is a bit like Groucho Marx's take on playing Championship Bridge - "if you've got a good hand, don't get involved in fancy bidding systems, just look very pleased, then play to win as many tricks as you possibly can" - so, in archery, just keep shooting straight and get bigger scores. I suppose statistically it could be shown that your chances of success are enhanced if you happen to be born to reasonably high-performing Archer parents - there are plenty of examples around, maybe for the reason Churchill gave when someone remarked on how well Clement Attlee had performed in his acceptance speech when he won the 1946 general Election - "Well, if you feed a grub on the right kind of jelly it'll turn into a Queen". But I've also known two men who came into Club Archery from Cricket and within three years were County Champions, one in his early forties, the other in his early sixties. The younger man got better and better, and won medals in the UK Masters on more than one occasion.

Getting to Olympic Level is something else really, and apart from achieving a high level of performance, getting selected is in itself a pretty tough path. We had a member until last year who was National Indoor Champion once, and came second twice, but never was selected to shoot for Britain. He simply couldn't afford to 'do the circuit'. He stopped last year because of long-term injuries, certain made worse by his attempt using a massively heavy bow to beat the national record for long-distance 'Clout' shooting - which he succeeded at - see a picture of him doing it here, in the white hat beyond the longbow archer > http://www.arundown.org.uk/gallery_large/ld.htm

but I think there's a chance he may come back if the lay-off results in his body recovering, which we would certainly appreciate because of his coaching skills. At the time he was on top, fifteen to ten years ago, the International Competitions were much more of an endurance game than they are now, consisting of two long days when the competitors shot 12 dozen arrows at four different distances each day. Archery is a combination of control and meditation, the long events of the past and the shorter events of today require a different dynamic balance of the factors.

You might say that the performance path follows the Classification System - Unclassified > Third Class > Second Class > First Class > Bowman > Master Bowman > Grand Master Bowman. These Classifications only persist for one year, and have to be re-established annually. Most National team members will be Grand Masters - but not necessarily every year, because the higher levels of classification have to be won at Major Record-Status events, and some years the weather can conspire to deny even the best archers. The National Squad is selected on the basis of scores achieved at a limited number of selection shoots, which are distributed around the country meaning that few of the potential team members are likely to have many selection shoots on their doorsteps.

Once in the National Squad it seems these people who worked their way up for so long are not exactly given respect for their achievements, but are likely to be deconstructed and rebuilt in the image of the ideal national team member. The person I referred to above had a young protege who he coached to National Squad level about four years ago, and as soon as the young man was in the squad he was required to change his equipment and change his style. This of course coincided with starting University, so the result was a loss of interest. Very different from another of our former members who was in the GB pistol shooting team - where the squad was informed that the purpose of coaching would not be to teach them to shoot, as it was taken that their presence in the squad was enough evidence of their ability, the purpose of the the squad was to teach them to perform to their very best ability at International Events.

The difference between Archery and Cricket (or Fencing) is of course it's an Individual activity that is only subject to weather and psychological pressure, rather than the performer being the target of tactics specifically designed to cause him to make mistakes. This means that good performances are generally rewarded with good results, rather than frustrated by someone else's brilliance or persistence or luck. But on the other hand the weather is a major factor in Archery, and anyone who is either able to read the weather accurately, or who can ignore its effects, will have a major advantage - and of course that's an area that is generally not addressed by coaching. The same goes for the ability to judge distances in Field Archery - everyone will have some 'cheats' to improve their estimating, but some people can actually judge distances, not just come to an informed and optimised estimate as most of us do.

There is certainly room for the talented as well as the steady, and as in most things the individual with that little extra flair or edge will rise to the top - but this is an activity where all success has to be underpinned by tremendous consistency and mental calm. It is a rare thing for anyone to achieve Master Bowman Classification in much less than three years, although less rare to get to an equivalent level Indoors inside two years - demonstrating how important 'field craft' becomes outdoors at the higher levels. Nearly all improvement comes as a result of structured practice, and particularly at the early stages it helps to shoot quite frequently. As a club we are certainly able to coach to Bowman Level, and several of us have approached Master Bowman without much higher-level coaching. This level puts you in contention at County Level. We've had some Champions and Runners-Up at National and regional level over the years, but often in the less mainstream disciplines, particularly in Field Archery and Clout. Entering the National Events puts you in touch with top performers, and you gain by osmosis. Probably 80% of Major Tournaments are open and available to all comers, only a few are closed, or by invitation only, restricted to the very top layer of skill.

Hard to say what it is that makes a top-level archer. I once shot with the then Commonwealth Champion in rather nasty weather conditions, and was ahead of him on score in the early stages, and was surprised that he missed twice at 70 metres, but all the same he ended up winning the tournament with a substantial margin ahead of several really good competitors. He said that he had an out-of-body experience when he won at the C'wealth Games, he was performing so well and so subconsciously that he believed he was looking down from above, watching himself.



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