As the 2007 season comes to a close, your actions now can have a big impact on your performance in 2008. If you are anything like me, you’ll know the changes you want to make in yourself, your shooting form or equipment for the next season by the time October comes around. Use these next few months prior to the indoor season to make those changes. New Year’s resolutions are a big mistake for archery enthusiasts because the New Year is just too late. The off-season is short, but it’s important to make the most of it.

Changing yourself

You have to be brutally honest and ask yourself the question: “Am I in good enough shape to be at my best for archery?” It’s a hard question to come to terms with. When I started shooting professionally, I was coming off nearly six years of training for high school and college athletics. Most days consisted of hours of workouts. I didn’t have to pay any attention to diet; I would eat a pizza every night before bed, and that was after eating everything I set my eyes on during the day. I had a 32” waist with less than 7% body fat.

I shot very strongly in those years but reality soon set in after dropping competitive athletics. Entering my 20s, I found myself nearly 30lb heavier with over 4” extra on my waistline. I was still shooting OK, but when you are shooting against the best ‘OK’ just doesn’t cut it. I think this is the trouble with most archers – they’re shooting OK, but it’s hard to stay in a sport where you don’t see any improvement and the outcome is average at best.

I remember shooting with Randy Ulmer. I watched him pull away from the rest of the field on a really difficult course set aside a ski resort slope. I asked him why he felt he was at such an advantage to the rest of the shooters. His reply was that he puts in just as much time staying fit as he does shooting; when other people are busy sucking for air he is able to take advantage of a lower heart rate and breathing rate and make good shots, allowing him to add points while others dropped points. That was my wakeup call. I knew I was one of the people he was talking about. That is also when I started looking at photos of myself and other shooters that were struggling. It was obvious how out of shape we all were. In my opinion, archery is a pretty unhealthy sport overall. There aren’t that many people that are as serious about their health as they are about shooting every other night at the club.

But overall fitness is important; it does improve scores and it will increase longevity of participation. I have become more serious about my fitness and over the past five years, I have seen the improvements in myself, motivation and my scores.

Here in the UK, there is a big push for people to get in better health. There are plenty of health clubs and community health or leisure centres to choose from. Most clubs will offer special deals and rates to new members, or trial memberships. Some offer special 30-day risk-free membership – this is just what the doctor ordered. Most of these places have specialist...
instructors that can give you starter lessons with routines and programs that would best suit your needs. I have seen several top archers make a commitment like this and they have subsequently peeked as performers. But within a year or two, they slowly regress to old habits and their health and performance decline.

The key is to not burn yourself out. Set a pace that will allow you to aim towards long-term fitness goals and not overnight wonders. See yourself in perfect shape for the championships at the end of the year and not in perfect shape a month from now. You need to be realistic and setting realistic goals will keep you motivated. Also, stick to it! Whenever I travel to places for an extended period of time I try to get a temporary membership so that I can maintain my normal routine and have no excuses for backsliding.

Here in the UK, I joined the local leisure centre (www.leisure-centre.com) so I can keep at my routine and continue training year round. This club offers a fitness studio along with a full-size swimming pool – swimming is another great form of exercise. Running or cardio-type exercising is a very good way to start out. With 20-30 minutes of exercise you can reduce your overall weight and gain energy. After a month of cardio, incorporate some kind of resistance or weight training into your schedule as well. This will help you become steadier and increase tournament stamina. Also use the time you spend exercising to reflect on your archery. Mental rehearsal is very powerful and you can use your 20 minutes on a treadmill to think deeply about making good shots and remembering good times you have had shooting.

**Changing your shooting form**

There is growing demand for intermediate to advanced level coaching. If you are one of the people who have been in limbo about getting some professional advice on your shooting style, I would recommend seeking it during the off-season. Coaching is one of the best investments I make in myself each year. Whether it is on a mechanical, physical or mental level, it is a must for improvement. There are a few things to keep in mind when seeking coaching to help you change your shooting form, or any other aspect of archery for that matter.

I have a saying: “anytime you change anything, you have changed everything.” No change is easy and it has been proven that in order to form a habit it takes about 21 days of rehearsal. If you are determined to learn something new and you’re willing
Planning ahead

John Dudley

Two things that I change most frequently in students are draw length and target panic. I seldom find a shooter that has a perfect draw length. Most people shoot what feels the best at the time or start out shooting "what looks about right". However, what one local club member thinks isn’t necessarily the correct form. With this in mind you should be prepared to seek advice in changing your shooting form. Most likely there will be a major change that will take some getting used to.

Target panic is another serious problem among shooters and one that is difficult to overcome. It takes an incredible amount of time in most cases and the best time to start is during the off-season. I remember when I first got over my target panic. It took at least a month’s shooting and focus on the things I was told by my coach. There are several good resources for learning to have better form. Do your research and use someone that has proven results from reputable people. You may already know of something you need to change or maybe your coach has already made recommendations about something that you have been unwilling to try. I have written in the past about establishing a shot routine – a systematic method of building repeatable shot sequences. But again, to learn a routine like this takes time.

Changing your equipment

Most archers will frequently change their equipment. We are just a month away from all the exciting new bows and accessories of 2008. These new choices or purchases on equipment are best made during the off-season. Likewise, maybe you purchased a new piece of equipment last year but just never felt comfortable with it during the season. Well this is the time to build that comfort and trust in what you have. If you had something mid-season that you thought would improve you but never felt comfortable with, then most likely you weren’t able to give it enough time to become part of your routine. The changes in your equipment are very closely related to the changes you may need to make to your shooting form. If your coach makes the recommendation that you change your draw length, you are going to have to make those changes to your equipment as well. The same is true for those of you fighting target panic. It is likely you will need to work with a new release aid that is designed for this situation.

Beginners that have just finished their first season are usually primed to make several changes. You may be ready to take a step up in equipment selection and get into a higher-end bow or set of arrows. Most beginners quickly grow out of the limbs on their bows and need to get heavier limbs installed. These items usually require ordering in. For that reason, you should think ahead and do it now. I would also recommend you use this time of year to make a good assessment of your string and cables. The off-season is the ideal time to replace your strings and cables and break them in before the start of the new season. Strings and cables are wear-and-tear items. They should be continually maintained to help improve score and safety.

'In archery anytime you change anything, you have changed everything'

Strings and cables are wear and tear items. They should be continually maintained to help improve score and safety.

Falling apart at the seams: now's the time to make essential equipment checks

John Dudley

Good shooting.