

Merlin Bows

Technical Advice Sheet

Release Aids & Aiming

Back to Basics – For Better Shooting

with Chris Jones of Merlin Bows

In This Issue: Release Aids and Aiming

I. RELEASE

Having introduced the very first compound bow in England nearly thirty years ago, I've had more years of shooting practice, and archery trial-and-error, than I care to remember. Though the technology in our industry has improved in leaps and bounds throughout the years, it still becomes easy to get so caught up in equipment and technological advances that we forget the basic principles of proper shooting upon which we still must rely. With this series of articles, I hope to bring many of us, whether experienced tournament archers or beginning shooters, "Back to Basics – for Better Shooting."

With the recent advent of such tournaments as the NFAA Outdoor Nationals and the NAA National Target Championships, many shooters are facing concerns about their form as it relates to aiming and release. Many shooters find that whether shooting field or target, proper aiming and release, combined with consistent form, is the best recipe for success. In this article, we'll discuss the correct way to choose a release aid for yourself, and discuss a "back to basics" approach to releasing and proper aiming.

To begin, a release aid is exactly what it says it is: an alternative method of releasing the bow string at full draw, instead of the common and more traditional way of loosing the bow string by hand with either a finger tab or shooting glove. The release aid is predominately used in conjunction with a compound bow, as rules disallow this type of accessory in the Rules of Shooting for recurve bows. Exceptions are only allowed in the case of certain physical disabilities.

There are a multitude of brands and designs for release options on the market, but all offer the same principle of operation. Try to work with a well-known brand, and where possible, with one that includes instructions on setting the pressure. If the release aid is set too light, the mechanism may possibly release while you are drawing the bow; if it is set too heavy, you may struggle with the release, resulting in fatigue and the loss of proper form - especially on more difficult shots.

On selecting the right release aid to use, there are four basic types, and personal preference is the only criteria, as comfort is always a factor.

For target shooting I strongly recommend a release aid with a rope, or a release with a closed jaw that allows for the use of a d-loop, rather than connecting directly to the string. This helps reduce any distortion of the bowstring at full draw.

The four common types differ only in the form of triggering: either the index finger, thumb, little finger or third finger can be used. The index finger or thumb mechanisms are by far the most popular as the thumb and index finger are stronger and more independent. They are easier to control during the execution of the shot. This is not a recommendation to choose thumb or index finger, but rather an observation in popularity.

The correct operation or execution of the release is a complex one and a question I am constantly asked. The shot is won or lost in the split second the release goes off. There are certain parts of your technique that may need to be improved, but first, let's explain the proper way to operate the trigger on your release.

1. At all times the finger or thumb has to be ***well positioned*** on the trigger. The tip or edge of the finger/thumb is no good. You need to be able to exert direct pressure in the direction of the trigger mechanism. You cannot command the shot if your finger/thumb is only barely touching the trigger.
2. Your finger/thumb has to ***be on the trigger during the aim***. Too many archers bring the finger/thumb from nowhere to the trigger when they take the shot. This is called a punch, often popular when shooting in windy conditions – punching is a bad habit that will work against the shooter more often than not.
3. You must practice to be able to ***take at least 80% of the trigger pressure*** during the critical aiming sequence and only release this when your aim moves away from the ten ring.
4. You should be able to take the shot. This is called ***progressive triggering***. It is not a snatch or a sudden movement. The even progressive pressure causes the release to go off. You will not know the exact split second it goes off, but you need to be able to command the shot. Your nervous system reacts against unfamiliar, unexpected movements, so by commanding the shot and being aware of this sudden movement your nervous system will be accustomed to this and your shots will be more controlled.

The most important part of accurate shooting is ***shot reaction***. Tension - or indeed, lack of tension - the instant the arrow goes, causes most arrows to miss the mark, even though the aim was good. This brings us to aiming. Your ability to use progressive triggering increases, the more accurately you can aim.

Most archers who punch the release either cannot aim in the ten ring for the duration of the shot, or they cannot direct concentration to the aim and mentally panic. This causes them to punch the release.

II. AIMING

The main difference with the compound bow over the recurve is the ability it gives the archer to aim and to practice aiming, and this should always be one of the top priorities for any serious archer. I would say that 95% of the compound archers reading this do not practice aiming; instead, I'd bet that you go to your usual Tuesday or Friday night league, shoot the usual round and measure your degree of improvement against your score. Enjoyable? Yes! Constructive? No!

Your aim, and by extension, your shooting, **will improve only with practice**. By practicing the aim you will undoubtedly improve your aim. If you can hold the sight steady on the target you will find it becomes easier to execute the release. (As a side note, some archers find that it helps to subtly change the balance of the bow by experimenting with different kinds of stabilization).

Hopefully I have now convinced you to be more aware of the aim, so now we must **pay attention to the picture or image** and the **importance of alignment** during the aim.

If I said I could eliminate 50% of the arrows you miss, I am sure you would be interested. There are four basic misses: High, Low, (70% equipment or sight mark, 30% form), Right and Left (10% equipment or sight mark, 90% form or shot alignment) and this right and left constitutes probably 50% of the missed shots.

Some years ago I was practicing with a close friend and well respected top professional, Dean Pridgen. I had been shooting very well and suddenly I started to miss right and left and it was he who told me to **learn to shoot in a straight line**. It sounds simple, but it is a very important thing to learn – and even after many years of shooting, I became very curious about this principle of *natural body line*.

Now, there are many ways to set up your aim, and here, I'll share with you a technique that has worked well for me, as well as for many successful tournament archers: at the target that I wish to shoot, I take my stance on the line and prior to the draw, I fix my focus on the center of the target - and this is the important part - **my visual line does not detract from the center of the target before, during or after the shot**. This is to say that when I draw the bow, I move the scope and peep sight into my visual line. I do not draw the bow, look through the peep and sight to find the target.

If you can imagine a beam of light transmitted from the eye to the target, I bring the sights in to that beam of light.

Great care should be taken on the visual picture you see through the peep sight. A lot of people use this little gismo just to look through, but it is a sight, a rear sight, as on a rifle or pistol and it is every bit as important as your front sight. On each and every shot, **your front sight should be centered as much as possible within the peep sight**. By not centering the front sight correctly, within the peep sight, your groups will move all around the target you are aiming at.

Remember, getting “Back to Basics” can often help with inconsistencies in shooting which are the result of poor form habits, such as rights, lefts and generally inconsistent shots. ‘Practice makes perfect’ is the old adage, but *perfect practice makes perfect* is the reality.