

SHOOTING WITH THE PROFESSIONALS

BACK TENSION (pt. 1)

by Professional Archer JOHN DUDLEY

Time and time again it seems the question comes up: "What is back tension?" To be honest that is a really good question because the reality is there aren't very many sources of information that truly and thoroughly explain it. More times than not I find that people are more confused about "back tension," than they are about properly executing it. I have actually written in the past about how I first used it to help me in curing my target panic.

However, eight years later I wouldn't write the same article as I had years ago. The reason being that "back tension" as I perform it today is different than what I had written about before. Before, I was simply using a stereotypical "back tension" release aid to get a surprise shot and get away from punching the release. However, I was not using back tension to get the surprise shot. I will tell you that the two methods are different but definitely related and I believe they should both be used together to execute a perfect shot. I know a lot more about this topic now than I knew then. That is why I quickly agreed when Ted called me and asked me to write for 'The Glade' readers an article explaining "back tension." I will forewarn you that this article will be a two-part series so you will need to buy the Fall (Autumn) edition as well to get the

conclusion. To make this easy I am going to break this down in two sections, the first being learning the surprise shot or un-anticipated shot and the other being utilising back tension to get that same shot. Let's get started . . .

Back tension or just a surprise shot?

This is the question I think I need to bring to the table. Do you think there is a difference between back tension and surprise shots? For sure there is. The difference being that a surprise shot can be made without back tension. This is something I had missed out on in my earlier writing and also in my shooting. I first assumed that because I myself had learned the surprise shot that I was using back tension. However, I know now that I wasn't using back tension. I had found my own method to cure my target panic and allow me to trust in having my pin stay on the target.

I wrote the article about curing target panic using relaxation. It was about how to use a hinge style release aid or "back tension release" to make surprise shots. Since I wasn't punching the release anymore I had assumed I was a back tension shooter. I got a lot of good feed-back from people that used that method to cure the panic they had as well. So I guess the article did serve its

purpose in helping others get over their problems even though it wasn't a good article in relation to teaching 'back tension.' It was simply a means of making the archer wait on the shot to fire without them making it fire. It was my cure for punching the trigger when I was in a pressure situation. This is the example of a surprise shot and not knowing when the release will go off.

Some archers can slowly squeeze a trigger release until it fires. Most people though can't do that when they have pressure on them and that is what leads to punching and target panic. Most of the top pros are using a pulling motion or a "back tension" motion to activate their release to get the surprise shots but some of them are just waiting on the release. Not all top pros have the exact same way of firing it, but what they do

have in common is that they have come to realise the importance of the surprise shot. Learning the surprise shot or un-anticipated shot is critical in an archer's ability to meet their potential or exceed their potential.

When it comes to back tension I personally believe that proper back tension is far more productive to the archer over the long run than any other technique in shooting including the first method I will talk about. This is why I have written many articles about this new Evolution release from Carter. This is a release aid that will teach you how to perform true back tension or pulling through the shot. It will also teach you what you are doing wrong at times.

For example, the top question I get about the Evolution is "Why is it sometimes harder then other times to fire?" The answer is easy. It's because the user is not doing the same thing all the time. So the release also teaches you consistency as well as motion. That product has been years in the making and it taught me about the times I was pulling and the times I thought I was pulling but wasn't. Before I get the cart ahead of the horse here, I want to first describe to you what you need to make absolutely sure you are doing and, that is, making this surprise shot.

Again, there is a difference between the two even though they go hand in hand. But, in my opinion, I would not have trusted a back tension motion if I hadn't first learned the surprise shot. Most people have learned this using a hinge release and for the first part of this series I am going to share with you my way of learning it on a hinge release.

The "Hinge"

Many people mistake a hinge style release as being a "back tension" release but, more times than not, it is not being used properly. I commonly see the release just being rotated until it fires by squeezing their hand or twisting the release. Thus giving it a nickname "twist an X." These methods are not back tension as I will describe it later, but like I said there is an importance of learning the surprise shot as a stepping stone to getting the foundation laid so that we can build on it later. I do want to go on record and say that there are some fabulous shooters that do shoot a hinge



My style of almost 10 years ago



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My original Colby

correctly and admittedly better than I ever had. Jamie Van Natta, Braden Gellenthien and Jessie Broadwater just to name a few. I also want to state that the hinge style release is responsible for teaching many great archers how to make good shots so I don't want to take anything away from that design when I later get into talking about a Carter Evolution.

The hinge made me what I am today, and taught me to be patient when I was in shoot offs and my nerves had me feeling like pooping my pants! But it took years and years and tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of practice arrows. I was first given a hinge from Randy Ulmer; he was shooting a Carter Colby at the time. I was a semi-pro and shot with Randy during practice at an IBO World Championship. He came to me and said I had the potential to be a great shooter someday but needed to stop punching the trigger.

He gave me one of his releases and said:

“Practice with this all winter and it will change you forever.” That is what I did! I spent weeks up close learning to make this new shot and get over my fear of having my pin on the scoring ring. I remember perfectly the first time I was able to hold my pin on the ring for the entire shot and wait until the release went off. From then on my mind

knew what it needed to do. The hinge was responsible for that.

The way the hinge works is simple. It is like a trap door in function and there are two main parts, the head of the release and the handle. The head is the part that pivots like the door and on it is the hook which loads to the loop. Then there is the handle that you hold, that contains what is called the “moon” or the trip switch so to speak. The moon is what the hook slides along until it reaches the end. This is when the hook that is bearing all the load of the bow suddenly is no longer being supported by the moon and trips, causing the bow to fire. The head pivots on the handle between the pointer finger and the middle finger like a teeter totter. This is important because to prevent misfires the release must be drawn with the weight on the pointer finger. When you hear of people hitting themselves in the mouth with a hinge release it is because they have drawn the bow and

shifted weight past the middle finger causing it to pivot and fire earlier than expected. Now that you understand the function of the release lets talk about how I used it to learn this surprise shot.

“Just relax”

This is a technique of shooting a hinge release that I first learned about 10 years ago. This was a self-taught technique that got me over my target panic. It is a technique that uses relaxation to get a surprise shot. To use this technique you should shoot at a close target, maybe three meters and preferably a blank boss. I would strongly encourage you to practice up close for awhile just to get the feel of a surprise shot and are confident with it. To start, adjust the position of the half moon so that you have enough travel or range of motion in the release to assure it is safe for you to draw without a misfire. You can test it using a piece of release rope.

After you are comfortable with the setting of the release, load the release on the loop and lay your thumb on your pointer finger. These two fingers will be used to pull the bow back to full draw (Photo A). Once drawn, find an anchor that is comfortable and move your other fingers into position on the release (Photo B). This will be your middle finger, ring finger and pinky finger. I like to teach the first time hinge users to draw without the last three fingers on the release to make sure there is a confidence built that the release won't go off. After you are comfortable doing that you can draw with your other fingers on the handle but bearing no load. Now that you have anchored, all fingers are in position and feel comfortable, think about relaxing your pointer finger and thumb on your release hand. It will almost feel as if your release is slipping off you pointer finger and thumb. This will cause the release to slowly rotate around the middle finger and fire. The result will be an unanticipated shot.

Make sure to remember to maintain good back pressure while executing the relaxation in the hands. You shouldn't get weak and creep forward while doing this. When executed properly the release hand should naturally follow through away from the body if you have a good back pressure. At first you may find that it takes a lot of relaxation and pivoting to get the release to go off or possibly it fired too quickly. This is because of the amount of travel you have the release set at or the position of the half moon making it slow or fast. After a few times of practicing you should be able to set the travel to make it fire in about 7-9 seconds once you are settled on your target and start the relaxing.

The biggest benefit to this technique is the release won't fire if you are tense. It will teach

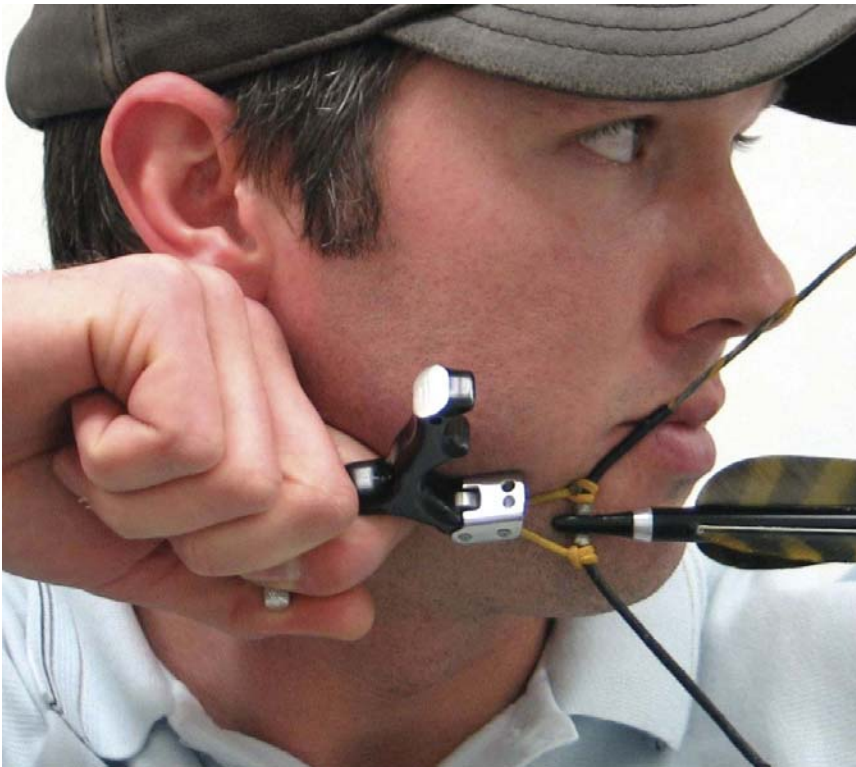


Photo A



you to not force the shot and to just let down and reset your shot sequence if the shot doesn't fire. If you are not relaxed you won't be able to cause the release to fire. Do keep in mind the function of the hinge release and that you need to let it rotate around the middle finger to fire. If you are not willing to relax the pointer finger and thumb then it is not going to work. This movement is very simple but it works and promotes being patient. But if you are battling target panic then there is more to getting the surprise shot than just this movement.

Facing your fear

If you are like the majority of the archery world and are battling target panic then this surprise shot may be easier said than done. Hey, believe me I know where you are coming from. Learning a surprise shot is definitely nerve racking and can be difficult. However, it can be overcome. I am not afraid to admit that I had target panic and that overcoming that panic is what has eventually allowed me to make this back tension shot that this whole last few pages has originated from. If you are having trouble mentally executing this surprise shot then there are some things I think you need to come to terms with.

First we need to define target panic. According to Webster's dictionary panic is: a sudden terror, often unreasoning or uncontrollable fright. This makes target panic sound really scary. To make things worse — there is not just one form of target panic. Everyone battles this problem in a little different way. I believe that target panic is just a form of anxiety. In my college psychology class I learned that anxiety is: a distress or uneasiness of the mind. With the right counseling it can be cured.

My personal TP problem was in the form of freezing beneath the target and not being able to put my pin on the target. To compensate for this I usually did one of two things. I either sighted my bow in about three inches high or I would lift my bow and punch the trigger at the same time. This is where that hinge release and the relaxation method came into play and helped me get over that.

Listen, the first step to overcoming any problem is admitting you have one. So, if you have done that then you are moving in the right direction already. The blank boss shooting may not be the problem for you, it never was for me. The problem came once there was a target and I tried this surprise shot. Hence the name "target panic" right!?

With that said it is now time to work on aiming part and mentally getting over the anxiety that you have and that I had. I have found that blank boss shooting doesn't cure

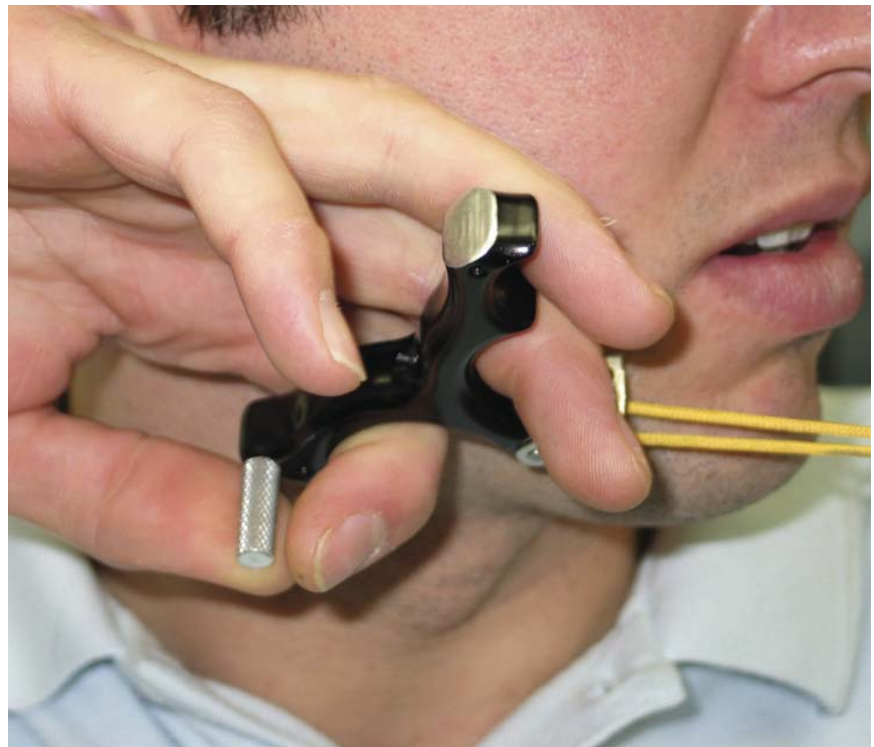


Photo B

target panic. If you have target panic you have a problem with a specific target not a blank boss. Who fears a blank boss? I sure didn't ever get anxiety over a blank boss but, to learn back tension you will need to have surprise shots shooting on any and all targets.

You should begin this process of being able to get your pin on the target no further than a few meters away from one. Draw back, anchor and get the pin in the centre of the target, aim and relax. If you are close enough the gold will be huge and it will be hard to not have your entire scope filled with it. If your Target Panic is really bad you may flinch a few times once your pin is on the target. If so, don't fear, because it will take some time and patience. Don't give up; just remind yourself you want to be a better archer. It helped me to mentally say in my mind "AIM, AIM, and AIM." If nothing else, once you have pulled back don't go through the relaxing motion until you have got really good at just leaving your pin in the gold. Within a short period of time you will be able to hold your pin on the target, aim and relax until the shot properly fires. If your pin is not sitting perfectly still don't worry about it too much.

You need to get the surprise before you get the steadiness. Your ability to get over your fear lies in your willingness to truly want to defeat it. Some people fear the surprise because of the fact that their pin is not steady and, here is what I have to say to that. In regards to your steadiness in aiming think of it this way. In the next edition when we talk

about the back tension motion you will come to realise the lack of importance to this. If you think I am crazy let me ask you this: When you drive a car, can you hold the wheel perfectly still while driving straight down the road? No, you constantly move the wheel slightly left and right and the car tracks straight. Believe it or not the pin in your scope is doing the same, but it is always returning back to centre and, that's where your arrows will go.

Relaxation cured my target panic and over time I had learned to make good shots with no anxiety. I can now use virtually any release that I choose, but that did take a lot of time. From time to time I get out that hinge release and shoot with it for period of time. It reminds me of what I am doing right and I am thankful I learned it.

In conclusion to this first segment I would like to again remind you that I believe to thoroughly teach you back tension I need to first make sure you have the surprise shot in order. Most people that I work with in my individual lessons don't have this part down. In the Fall edition you will get the remainder of this article and you can expect me to walk you through incorporating the back muscles and having an active back half of the body to get the surprise. The process will be different than this way of relaxing the hand, but if you spend the next few months perfecting this it will all come together really nicely!

Good luck with this and have fun!
John Dudley