

Basic suggestions about finding or dealing with an instructor or coach

1. Is an instructor or "coach" really necessary?

No, but without one you may never reach your full potential - problem is that you will never know.

2. Is a "coach" a plus?

Yes, same reason.

3. Define "coach".

The term "coach" is bandied about quite a bit these days. Most of us used to be called "instructors" and sometimes "mentors". A coach in this venue is anyone who can shoot with you on a regular basis and has the ability and/or training to see what you are doing, enforce the things you are doing correctly and correct the things that aren't helping.

Credentials and certifications are nice, but not always necessary or meaningful. In some organizations, level 1 and sometimes level 2 certifications are paper only and are given out fairly easily (read – for a fee).

4. Finding a coach.

While you could use the USA Archery website, it's usually not necessary or even helpful. The coaches listed pay to be listed there and a number of excellent coaches don't bother. Most towns or regions have ranges or clubs within driving distance. They can be found via the Internet or the Yellow Pages. Go to several; watch and ask questions. There may be "certified" coaches or instructors around or there may not be. However, there will typically be some folks with decent shooting skills and seem to be the ones that people consistently go to for help or instruction, or you might see someone giving instruction. Get recommendations and talk to those people (and their students). As long as you don't approach them while they are at full draw, most will be willing to help or at least point you in the right direction.

5. How often do I need to work with a coach?

Depends. In my experience, a new shooter really needs at least one session per week with a coach, plus one or more sessions of independent study (shooting). The reason is that the fundamentals need to be taught and reinforced. As a shooter develops, the "coach" is there to see what the shooter is forgetting, or just doing wrong and what can be improved on. At that level and above, the student actually dictates the amount of time the coach needs to spend with him. Not by what he wants, but by what he needs. The coach needs to be able to throttle information and criticism to ensure that the groundwork has been established before moving on.

Example: I watch my students every time they come to the range. Whether I say anything or not depends on what I see. If they are still working on a previous exercise and not messing it up, I let them shoot. If they appear to have gotten the last technique down and ready for something new or are really messing something up, time for more one on one.

Corollary: If I see a flub on one arrow, I don't worry about it (don't say anything). If I see the flub recurring, then it needs correction.

6. What about one-time "celebrity coaching" seminars?

Couldn't hurt if you have no other access to instruction, but may not be as beneficial for the student as for the "coach".

For new shooters, it's a pretty common occurrence to forget or modify what was taught as soon as they are left to their own devices. That's the real purpose of the coach or instructor - to see what the shooter can't see and know if the modification will ultimately be beneficial or detrimental. Sometimes those modifications need thorough testing and require observation during the testing phase.

A more advanced shooter may only need to check-in with a coach once a month, or even just a few times a year. Hopefully, by that time the foundations have been well established and refinement is the name of the game.

7. What about a "trad" or "instinctive" coach?

One thing about "trad" is that the requirements are typically somewhat relaxed, and a lot of the stuff that some instructors try to impart may or may not make a significant difference. If you're happy with the way you are shooting, it's all good – minor tweaks are all that's necessary.

The few "trad" coaches I've seen do little more than try to teach their style of shooting, which is great if you're trying to mimic a certain style.

The instinctive thing is sort of a contradiction in terms, kinda hard to teach an instinct. One well-known traditional bowhunter once wrote (paraphrasing) - if you want to become a better hunter, take a target shooter to lunch. What a coach should be doing is stressing shot to shot consistency – aka form. A secondary feature might be how to adapt that "textbook" target form to less than optimal shooting positions. The caveat there is that the textbook form needs to be established FIRST.

When I train traditional or "instinctive" archers, we develop basic form first, and then go into the aiming process. The exact method may vary slightly from student to student, but it typically involves using alternate aiming methods to remove the actual aiming from the equation and then returning back to "instinctive". A large part of that is developing sight pictures for different distances and training the shooter to accurately judge and shoot at those distances.

8. What if you don't live anywhere near a range or club, or the only one near you is compound-only?

While not impossible, the first part is really unlikely - most times you just haven't looked hard enough. If it really is the case, then books, videos and the Internet may be your only option. In that case, I can't recommend the buddy system strongly enough. Having another pair of eyes watching and possibly video taping what you're doing (and vice-versa) can really help.

In the latter case, a GOOD compound shooter should be using a form that's very similar to a stickbow shooter. It may be a little harder to determine to whom to listen, but it shouldn't be impossible - when in doubt, ask.

Hope that helped.