

GETTING INTO THE ZONE By Howard N. Ellman

I have argued that we should put the birds first in the order of our concerns – and that the true ethical hunter approaches the sport with great respect for the game. Indeed, I contend that the hunting urge cannot be divorced from that respect without loss of the very essence it possessed when mankind first appeared on this earth, the very essence that gives the hunting imperative value even today.

In this piece, I would like to explore a method of achieving a state of mind most receptive to the desired respect for the quarry and that brings one to a sense of union with the wild spirit of the marsh. Bear with me. This trail has a few meandering switchbacks and what may seem to be detours into softcore philosophy. The point will come clear soon enough. (Relax. It will take no more than five minutes of your precious time).

In the late '50s and early '60s, a Brit named Colin Fletcher wrote a series of books on backpacking. The Compleat Walker, Thousand Mile Summer and The Man Who Walked Through Time are the ones I best remember. These were intensely practical “how to” manuals at a time when backpacking was much in vogue. But Fletcher also filled them with his insightful observations and his philosophy of the human connection with native earth. His writing is highly spiritual in many respects, while giving the reader invaluable advice on issues such as finding water in a desert, easing the pain of a scorpion’s sting or sheltering from an unexpected blizzard in the high country.

Fletcher walked alone. Under his influence, I did several solos myself, albeit none quite so taxing as thirty days in the Grand Canyon which is the subject of The Man Who Walked Through Time. As Fletcher wrote and as I experienced, there comes a point on a solo when all the voices in your head grow still. Your mind slowly, haltingly accepts the fact that you are in a setting where language plays no part. And as that acceptance sets in and verbal static subsides, the senses elevate to a startling level of acuity, as though human language facility smudged the lens through which we interact with nonhuman phenomena.

When that sublime silence sets in, you merge with the country, becoming part of it, feeling at once small but comfortable, alert but unthreatened by the impersonal forces that could affect your survival without malice or intent of any kind. The sensation is particularly compelling during the dark hours when you experience a level of night vision under the endless carpet of stars that can be achieved in no other setting and under no other circumstance.

As Fletcher observed, the more often one achieves such a state of mind, the more quickly one reaches it the next time and the next. As a flyfisherman, I find that I readily slip into the non-verbal state when concentrating on the pulses of a river in the effort to feather a fly into the precise seam of current where the big one must surely lie. I am ashamed to confess that it was several years before I attempted to understand the process and put it to use in other endeavors beside solitary walks in wild places or séances with wild rivers. Here's how I see it now. (Not original thinking, by the way. A few others with far better credentials than mine have written of this).

Language forms the bridge between each of us and other humans, the device by which we reach out from the unbreakable isolation of our individual beings. It is the tool by which we learn and teach and live. So pervasive does it become that we cannot seem to think without the aid of inner voices. Some scientists even contend that memory begins with and is dependent upon the facility of speech.

But the truth is that language is an imperfect vehicle for thoughts in pure form. The word "red" can never be the color as experienced in the optic nerve. For all we know – and we can never know – that optical experience differs for each of us. The menu is not the meal. Before the word, there is the thought, unfettered by the confines of a verbal vessel. And as human interaction is overwhelmingly verbal, the competitive and acquisitive urges, the aspects of our personae that separate us from a pure connection with the natural non-linguistic world are a product of the verbal crust that overlays our senses, developed steadily from the time we uttered our first words. Transcend that crust and you break out into an open country of new vision. For an athlete, it is that magic point where the action seems to slow down. They call it being "in the zone."

Barry Bonds and Alex Agassi describe this phenomenon as the ball appearing lazy and fat, the rotation as clear as though illuminated in neon. When they were at the top of their games as NFL quarterbacks, Joe Montana and Steve Young used to say that the furious action surrounding them seemed to take place in slow motion. Only they could operate at normal pace. Obviously neither the pace of fastballs to Bonds, serves to Agassi nor the action of an NFL game changed. It was the heightened, focused acuity of the player "in the zone" that made things seem so different, so much more manageable. They will tell you that their focus eliminated all head noise. A player in the zone is in a state of quiet mind, a state of total sensory connection with the activity in which he is engaged.

Before you reject all this as amateur mysticism, try it. Sit in a blind alone and deliberately still the inner voices. Reject the continuous stream of verbal prompts and push your senses to the highest state that you can attain. Notice the smells, the cloud patterns, the shifting wind currents. Notice them – but do not verbalize what you notice. Open yourself to receive every clue, every nuance that the setting has to offer. Unlike the world class athlete, do it in a state of calm. Let the birds come to you out of the symphony that the marsh plays for you. I bet you will find that you become a far better hunter in this frame of mind – and that you will find much greater enjoyment in each outing, regardless of the weight of the strap. With the competitive drive in the trash heap

where you put the verbal crust, you will gain that respect for the game that is the essential element of our heritage – and your actions will be informed by that respect.

OK – but what about the social aspects of waterfowling? I have two answers: When you discover the virtues of hunting “in the zone” in a state of quiet mind, you will seek out like-minded companions. If your regular buddies talk constantly in the blind, try to get the first shot on every bird, hoorah and heehaw at the tops of their lungs at every hit, jeer your misses and curse their own at the same decibel level, convert them or ditch them. Simple as that.

After all, what would you think of a backpacker walking the Continental Divide Trail while listening to heavy metal on a Sony Walkman? Or worse (and a more apt comparison), a guy with a boombox in the Lamar Valley of Yellowstone National Park filling the air with the pulsing rhythms of Pink Floyd or gangsta rap? “Idiot” would be the kindest epithet. And, my friend, what’s the difference between that idiot and the heehawing hoo-rahing companion annoying the crap out of you on the seat next to yours and spoiling your outing while all the birds flare in astonishment?

I rest my case.

If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.
