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Welcome citizens of the 3-Gun Nation. I'm betting you enjoyed Episode Two's exciting shoot-off action!

Like any other extreme sport, watching the top guns at the top of the game work each other over in the crucible of competition can get your heart going. It did mine, and I already knew how it ended!

The subject of this week's Go-to-Guy for Gun Games (G2G4GG) tale will be from the driver's side of the shoot-off. I will share with you the good, bad and ugly that can (and does) go through your mind when faced with the unique challenge of shooting Man vs. Man.

Mastering the fundamentals of marksmanship and improving your skills on the practice range will take you a long way in the shooting sports. On match day it is just you pitting your skills against a bunch of targets. The clay targets of Skeet, Trap or Sporting Clays, or the paper bull's-eye with pistol or rifle, no matter, it is just you and the targets. Just keep your head on straight, apply the fundamentals and a good score is sure to be had. Practical shooting (this 3-Gun Nation stuff) adds the additional scoring element of time to the mix, upping the mental ante required for a good performance.

The ultimate challenge, and the equivalent of going "all-in" mentally, is the Man vs. Man shoot-off. Once popular in practical shooting and often revered more than the match that it followed, the old "Top 16" Shoot-off was a separate event. While prizes were on the table for a good finish in the main match, bragging rights for the year were up for grabs at the Shoot-off! Sadly, shoot-off events faded away after the introduction of equipment divisions. Each division is a separate match and the logistics of having a shoot-off for every division could easily add another day to the competition. Something many shooters were not able to accommodate.

Enter and exit the World Shoot-Off Championships which were held for nearly two decades at the San Juan range in Montrose, Colorado. A great concept and a fantastic match that focused solely on the man vs. man shoot-off; 15 stages of shoot-offs as a matter of fact! The thinking was, why wait for the end of the match before the real fun begins? Having shot the World Shoot-Off Championships, I can only agree!

This brings us to what you just watched on this the 2nd episode of 3-Gun Nation.....the high stakes (\$\$\$) shoot-off! Yee-Haw! Be advised that the lure of bragging rights alone can be enough to make a master class shooter miss his or her mark, but add cold hard cash to the victor of the shoot-off and the intensity is....INTENSE!

We have covered The Good (shooting in general, and in particular the shoot-off); The Bad (the reduction in shoot-off events) and now we will enter into the realm of the UGLY.

I hate to expose my weakness, but I struggle with shoot-offs. Don't get me wrong, I LIKE the shoot-off format, but I have a small problem with letting the "other" guy's performance affect my shooting. And that is rule #1. You (in your head) are not shooting against anybody, you are just whacking some steel targets (only the best steel targets from MGM) as fast as you can for fun. Got it! Bu..bu..but if I win, I get FIVE GRAND in cash! How can I get that out of my head? And the TV cameras.....millions of people are going to see me win or crash on TV!!! OK, I am sharing a little too much because that was the little voice in *my* head. Now shut...up!

On the show you saw the opening run between me and that rampant 3-gun wizard Taran Butler. Now for me, just shooting against Taran was cause enough to miss some shots, as this guy has won every major 3-gun match in the country, several ##### times! He is a Professional shooter and a Force of Nature to be sure. As I said before, the idea is to not consider who you are shooting against, but come on....this guy is the Heat!

Back to that first bout, I was lucky to have bested one of the greatest 3-gunner's in the game. I had only the slimmest of leads at the finish of the rifle set and had a touch more after laying down a fast shotgun run. But Taran quickly closed that gap and nearly put me on the trailer with a low-level strafing run across his pistol plates, only to miss one of his plates a few more times than I missed mine, giving me that oh-so-narrow win.

Did I say missed shots? Yes, both Taran and I missed several shots apiece. "But you guys are the best, how could you miss?" Missing is easy, mind control ain't! In one of Taran's interview segments he mentioned the word "panicked." I imagine that is a very rare word for my friend Taran to utter, but neither of us has ever had FIVE GRAND on the line!

Having just slipped by Taran in that first match-up, I drew Officer Keith Garcia for the second. At the time, I didn't know how tough a competitor Keith was (he certainly looks imposing), but that didn't stop him from showing me!

During the rifle portion of our Shoot-off I heard what I describe as the "deafening silence" of Keith's rifle no longer being fired. This of course meant to me that he had finished the rifle section and was moving on to the shotgun while I was still shooting rifle plates! The next thing I hear is that stupid voice in my head screaming "you are losing dude, step on the gas!" This leads us to rule #2. "Shooting faster" doesn't equal "hitting faster". When that voice in your head tells you to speed up, ignore it and just get your hits. What felt like forever to me was only about 2 seconds of difference between when Keith and I finished the rifle plates! Had I kept my cool and not tried to burn the shotgun section down trying to catch up, I might have...Woulda, Coulda, Shoulda...Didn't! While it did not feel good losing, losing to a better shooter did take some of the sting out. Well done Keith!

Many things can affect shooting performance: weather and range conditions, shooter's physical condition, equipment problems and the like. While those items do play into the match outcome, the real difference between professional shooters is mental toughness. At this level the fundamentals have *been* mastered, we know how shoot fast and accurately. On any given day any of us could win the event if it were down to shooting skill alone. But this is Man vs. Man and on race day you must have more in your bag-of-tricks than pure shooting skill if you're going to win.

The 3-Gun Nation. Good guys, Good shooting, Good TV!