

Q&A With Lynda Kiejko, Team Canada Shooter

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Q: What excites you the most about Rio?

Once I fire that first shot, I'm officially an Olympian. After that, I just get to shoot. I get to do what I love to do. This is such an incredible opportunity that I get to do it on such a great world stage.

I'm following in both my dad's and my sister's footsteps, and creating my own path as well. I don't want to just follow in their footsteps, I want to make my own path and make my own imprint in the sand.

Q: What is your training schedule?

I work out five days a week. I'm training now five to six days a week as well. My goal right now is between 2 and 3 hours, sometimes 4 hours, at the range every day.

If I'm shooting one pistol, I'm aiming at 100 to 120 rounds per day. If I'm shooting them both, that's going to be a bigger day.

For pistol, a match is 60 rounds plus 10 rounds of sighters. For air pistol, a match is 40 shots plus finals, 20 shots plus some sighters, so about 70 to 80 shots. Throw in 25-metre Finals, then there's probably another 40 to 50 rounds on top of that. It depends on what I'm targeting.

The 25-metre pistol hasn't necessarily been my strongest event. A gold medal from Pan Am says a little bit otherwise. It is definitely coming up. And when I train, 25-metre, my air pistol gets better. And typically air pistol is my stronger event.

Q: How do you train to avoid interference between 25-metre pistol and 10-metre air pistol?

I don't think the two disciplines necessarily interfere with each other. I find them very complementary. They have very different skill sets.

I find that I focus mentally on my checklist: "OK, this is the process and these are the items that I have to work on today. These are the skill sets that I'm going to be using and harnessing in my brain." Then you click that box. It's like you turn on one switch and turn off the other switch, and make sure that you're using the right neural pathways and muscle memory.

There are bad habits that everybody's going to have. I find that the bad habits that I might have in air pistol, there's no allowance for them whatsoever in 25-metre pistol. When I shoot at 25-metre pistol, it actually helps get rid of some of the bad habits that I can get away with in air pistol. Overall it improves my technique across the board.

Q: What do you focus on differently today vs. 15 years ago, when you were already a high-level competitor? What has changed?

Fifteen years ago I was really wrapped up in defining me as an athlete. I was a lot more tied to my successes or my lack thereof. It was a much stronger emotional tie between my performances and specifically the outcomes.

Now we're focused more on the inputs: What can I do? What's the process I go about? Can I evaluate my success based on how I execute versus what the outcome is? Because sometimes, you've got good shots, and sometimes they're not quite as good as you want.

When you look at the target, you've got a 10 ring, and in a Finals event, you score everything to the tenth of a point. So in pistol shooting, even during the qualification match, it'll still tell you the tenth of a point of a shot score is. But in a qualification match for pistol, even if you shoot a 9.9, in a qualification match it counts as a 9. There's a whole point lost. A 10 is a perfect shot. A 10.9 would be your absolutely perfect shot right in the centre of the target. A 10.0 is just making a 10, and a 9.9 is 1 millimetre out. There are times when you have great execution and it's a 9.9. There's other times when you'll do exactly the same thing and it'll be 10.0. That 1 millimetre of difference makes a big difference in the outcome, but in the process I can still be very satisfied with my execution, knowing that I did really well, knowing that it's maybe a matter of chance or of circumstance that would change a 9.9 to a 10.0. So really looking at the process of how I go about things, and helping to detach from the outcome.

The outcome now becomes the cherry on the cake rather than the cake. I think that's probably the biggest difference from where I was 15 years ago.

When I think about my performance at the 2003 Pan American Games, I got a bronze medal. People were so excited. That was the best I had ever done. I walked off the line and I bawled. I cried terribly hard, because I had missed the Athens Olympics by 0.7 of a point. It was so crushing, and I didn't have the performance that I was hoping to have. I was really tied to the outcome, whereas now, looking at things and looking at how I put them together, I can evaluate things a little bit differently and detach my analysis of my performance a little bit further away from the actual outcome and be pleased with my performance.

It took me a long time to figure that one out.

Q: How do you manage the wobble, when your sights are on target and the gun seems to wobble?

If there's a wobble I put it down. I try not to shoot when there is a wobble.

I've now been training for 24 years. When I see my sights that look like they're shaking like a leaf, everybody else says, "Oh my God, you didn't even move, you're steady as a rock." There's a lot that's in the perspective of how you're seeing it and what you're seeing.

A lot of it is training. I've shot how many hours and how many countless bullets and pellets? It's astronomical how much lead I've put down range in the past couple of years

versus what I did 20 or 15 years ago. It's a significant difference now. A lot of things are second nature, there's a lot of muscle memory there. You're always going to move, but it's always working with the movement to see where it is, and recognizing the shot when it's good, and if it's not good, putting it down and starting again. A big piece of that is focusing on the process. When you execute all the different steps of the process, the shot breaks and it's exactly what you want it to be.

There's not necessarily a magical, "All you have to do is X and you're going to handle that wobble." It's going to be different for everybody.

Q: Have you always been a top shot?

When I started, I was a terrible shooter. When I started, there was nothing "natural ability" about me, nothing at all. The only thing I've really got going for me is my blind determination. When I'm committed to doing something, I'm going all in. If I'm going to accomplish something, I'm going to put my best self forward. I'm going to put all of my efforts and energy and intention into it, and give it my best shot and go from there.

Q: What's it going to be like to be in Rio?

It's about going down and being safe and smart about it. It's about going down for a major game. I'll be in the bubble. Once you're in the bubble, things are going to be fairly safe. They're very regulated, they're very screened. When you get to the major games there are going to be loads of security checkpoints for getting in and out of the village as well as into the venues. Security-wise, inside the bubble it's going to be really quite safe. There's going to be lots of opportunities to interact with other athletes and get to see people.

I am so excited for the opening ceremonies, walking as an athlete in the Olympic Games is probably one of the pinnacles for me. It's going to be so exciting. It's just an amazing energy and excitement and experience that you get from the opening ceremonies.

I do have some family and friends who are traveling down with me. They are going to be outside that security bubble because they won't be staying in the village. They're coming as spectators. Their safety and security is important to me. We've done the best that we can looking to get them in a safe area, and that they have access to what they need to have access to. They're not inexperienced travellers.

I've been to Rio twice now. This is actually going to be my third trip to Rio, and I have never had an incident down there at all. A couple of my trips have been smarter than others, more paranoid, I guess.

I know a few people who have had issues, and it's pretty much straightforward. They're the ones who are still wearing jewelry, they're the ones who are still flashing things about, or walking by themselves at weird hours of the early morning or late night. I think it's just common sense when it comes to travelling. Just use common sense. When you're in a place that's got extreme poverty, people are going to be looking for opportunities, and there's a sense of desperation there. They're doing the best they can,

and sometimes it's a matter of circumstance. So don't present them with the circumstance that makes you a target.

I am going to compete. I think it'll be pretty exciting and I'm thrilled to have people coming with me to cheer me on. That's such an incredible opportunity to share.

Q: What is it like to attend matches with your family?

My husband has travelled with me, and actually my daughter has travelled with me too. We've taken our toddler all over the world. I went to the Commonwealth Games 15 days after I gave birth. They're calling us to the line to compete, and I was sitting in the stands, nursing. I was like, "Uh, I'll be right there, just give me a second." No big deal.

It's a matter of perspective and compartmentalization.

My husband is incredible. It's a partnership. There's no bigger support of me than probably my husband. The sacrifices that he has made in the last couple of years specifically to help me get to this point, I don't think there's anybody else who understands how hard an athlete has to work. To have him there, to share in the successes with me is just as exciting, because he's been there with me, alongside me, and so it's not somebody I want to shut out. Just having him there, that support, is calming for me. It's support, it's encouragement. It helps to bring things into perspective and keep things real.

For perspective, I'm a mom, I'm an engineer, I've got this huge other life outside of sports, and he definitely helps to keep that in perspective. Successes or defeats or failures or frustrations, regardless, I don't change as a person. It's how I handle those situations that defines who I am.

Q: How much of competition is physical vs. mental?

My dad used to say, "Shooting sports is 10 percent physical and 90 percent mental." I'm not sure it's entirely that way. I've definitely had some physical issues in the past couple of years, like one muscle gets too tight and all of a sudden my position is way off. There are some physical things that are going to affect you, but a lot of it is mental. Can you squeeze the trigger at the appropriate time? Can you trust yourself to do what needs to be done? It's the mental aspects of shooting that make it the biggest challenge and open the biggest victories as well.

I've talked to some of my friends who are world record holders, world champions, incredible, incredible shooters. Their performances are astounding. When you talk to them, I'm like, "What's your secret? You look like a rock." They look at me: "I'm shaking like a leaf. My heart jumps out of my chest every single time I go to shoot. I'm a nervous wreck." And you're like, "What?" It just sounds crazy.

Everybody's just as nervous in every competition. It's just a matter of how you direct that energy and use it for your benefit versus letting it overwhelm you.

Q: How do you pay for training and matches? This year, as a “carded” athlete, you get funding from Sport Canada, but that covers only a small portion of your costs.

I am fortunate, I’m a carded athlete this year. It’s been incredible. I’ve stepped up my training, the amount of competitions I’ve gone to, the ammunition I have definitely stepped up. I’m using much higher quality ammunition than I was previously. Those all have costs associated with them. It all adds up.

The MakeAChamp has been phenomenal. When we started looking at it and looking at what our deficit was going to be this year to compete — and that’s not including any of my husband’s or my daughter’s expenses to travel with me, those are my costs — when we really look at those costs and look at what our deficit was going to be, we’re still going to be out of pocket. And I think that’s fair. This is a dream of mine that I’m working towards.

I’ve been completely floored by the response to my MakeAChamp campaign. That’s the first time I’ve ever used a platform like that. I absolutely hate asking people for money. It’s just really tough. I am overwhelmed. So many people really wanted to help support me. Relieving some of that financial burden is a huge relief. It’s huge. I’m still working.

My original plan was to take a solid month off, but when we looked at the bottom line, the home costs don’t change, the day-care costs, the mortgage, groceries — none of that changes. So it depends how much of a deficit you want to run in preparation for everything else. My company is also taking a huge investment in me, letting me take extra time off. There is an impact to their business. They’re allowing me to have a lot of flexibility.

Q: How much does a year of training cost, when you include ammo, gunsmithing, travel, etc.?

It’s hard to pinpoint, because it depends on how many World Cups you’re going to go to. In ammunition costs, you’re going to spend a huge amount in one year. One case of ammunition general ballpark is in the range of \$2,000, and that’s only 5,000 rounds I think. It’s been a heavy-cost year as we’ve been putting all those things into place, and doing extra travel and extra competitions and preparation for it. Normally I might go to one or two World Cups and a lot of local matches, but I’ve gone to three World Cups this year, one more international match, as well as all the Canadian matches I could squeeze into my calendar, and an international training camp.

My costs this year versus a typical year are three to four times what I would normally spend.

You’re looking at one or two World Cups, and World Cups cost generally in the ballpark of \$3,500 to \$4,000 when all is said and done, with travel, registrations, accommodation, food. When you put all that together, that’s about it.

I try not to add it up because it makes me cry about how much money I spend.

Q: Which range do you go to in Calgary?

In Calgary, I train at the Calgary Rifle & Pistol Club. It's my home range. They are phenomenal. It's a private club, anyone can buy a membership and shoot here, but it is really geared more towards competitive shooting. It's a great setup.

Having a range and a provincial association that have invested in these electronic targets is setting up our next generation of shooters. It's setting them up for so much more opportunity than I had at the same age. I can't say enough for the Calgary Rifle and Pistol Club. They have bent over backwards for me.

Q: What is it like to be a shooter in the context of Canadian laws, and the murders in Orlando and Dallas?

I'm a law-abiding citizen. I lock everything up, I put everything away. I travel with it appropriately. I make sure I don't have my ammunition stored in the same place, you know the long laundry list of laws that we follow. I follow them because I respect them.

This is precious sporting equipment. It can unfortunately be used in the wrong ways, but usually the people who are using it in negative ways aren't the law-abiding citizens. Those aren't the people who are following the rules. If someone has the intent to do something dangerous, having a rule in place isn't really going to stop them. It's hard for me to say what the solution is, but it is tough when we have laws that make it harder for us to enjoy the sport that we love, and to introduce new people to it.

I was traveling when all the things were breaking in Dallas, and in Florida as well. It's tragic that these incidents happen and that people resort to guns to inflict violence and pain on other people. It's awful. I've grown up as a competitive shooter. The calm and the peace, and the mental acuity, and the drive and determination that has been brought into my life has been such a positive influence. It's really saddening to me that someone would cause such detriment to such an incredible sport, and cast such a terrible shadow on it.

All the people I know who are competitive shooters, there is not one person who would do any sort of heinous act because all of us respect guns and gun safety. That's going to be paramount.

Someone was laughing because as a kid, my sister and I would go around and "Bang, bang!" with our fingers. Dad would fold it and put it in our pocket and say, "That's not safe. Put it away." Dad wanted us to know from a very young age that gun safety was paramount and not to be taken lightly.

Q: How can the gun community promote our activity, whether it's recreational shooting, hunting or world-class competition?

It's going to be around education. I have a very good friend, and her husband wanted to buy a gun and she was so terrified of guns. She said, "I just don't want them in the house." And I told her, "You're in my house. I own guns, but you don't know where they are. I mean, I've got them locked away. It's no big deal." I took her and her husband

shooting. I said, “Come to the range with me. I will be there. I will make sure that we follow all the laws and all the safety requirements, make sure that we have everything in a safe manner.

At one point during the evening, she accidentally had her finger on the trigger before she was ready and she fired a shot. Well, we were pointed in a safe direction, so she still hit the target. She’s firing down range, and she got a little bit nervous. I told her, “You did exactly what you were supposed to do, and that’s exactly why we did it that way. Because that way, even if there is an unexpected discharge, you’re pointed in a safe direction. There’s no possibility of anyone getting hurt.” After that experience, I created a surcharge. If I take people to the range, they have to pay for their own ammunition. Because she and her husband had so much fun through the entire night that I was astounded at how many rounds they went through. Most people on their first time out shooting might go through 20 or 30 rounds. No, between the two of them, 200 rounds. I was like, “OK, guys, we’re done.”

Anybody who says, “No way, I’m scared,” I invite them to come with me. And I just say, “Come and try. If you only want to shoot one shot, that’s fine. If you only want to hold the pistol and see it and understand a little bit more about it, that’s totally fine.” It’s non-confrontational. It’s totally open. It’s just education.

When I had a little bit more free time, I’d run a few ladies events. It was an open range, “Come in, ladies, try out shooting, see what you think, leave your husbands behind.” All of the wives of these competitive shooters and hunters — we get loads of women coming in who had either never shot a gun, but say their husband had, or their boyfriend had. They just wanted to come in and try it out. We had such rave reviews of people coming in, saying, “That’s not even close to what I thought it would be. It’s entirely different. It was just so much fun.” I think we ran two days, and we had about 80 to 100 women show up just to come and test out for the day. We didn’t have one negative comment come back. Everybody was so excited about it.

It just comes back to education. And it’s a personal invitation, too. When you’re talking to someone, help to re-educate them.

It’s the personal invitation. When people understand personally and you have a personal conversation with them and you make that personal connection, then they trust you, and they’re willing to actually hear what you’re saying. ... I think that’s generally the way I approach it. Whenever somebody’s got a question or concerned or interested, I invite them to come out and give it a try. And I’ve had lots of people take me up on that offer.

Right now it’s kind of tough for me to take people out to the range, because of the heavy-duty training. But if anyone is ever interested, I always make sure that we get a rain check and find a time that they can come out.

I’ve been in the sport for a long time, and it has done so many great things for my life. I think it’s only fair that I share those experiences and that other people get to benefit from some of the great things that shooting sports have to offer them.