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Although coaching reduces his practice time, John Downey typically finishes in the top three in state competitions. Here he uses a combination bow. *Photos by Mike Broder*

Archer Gets the Point and Returns to a Childhood Passion

By NED RACINE, Editor

(July 31, 2008) Captivated by archery as an eight-year-old and drawn back to the sport by the interest of his teenage son, John Downey, a Metro software engineer, now coaches some of the best young archers in the country.

Downey left archery for 15 years, until his son Kenneth, then 16, showed an interest in the ancient sport. They found a range within 10 minutes of their Simi Valley home, the Conejo Valley Archers Club, where Downey is now a club officer.

"I always enjoyed it as a kid," Downey said, adding that his interest in archery was probably stirred by seeing one of the many Robin Hood movies. After being Kenneth's first coach, Downey realized how difficult it was for a father to coach a son. So he began teaching others.

"The guy who was running the program needed some help—it was getting too big for one person to do—so I ended up taking some training at the Olympic Training Center," Downey said. "I took my second-level training through the Olympic coach at the Olympic Training Center (in Chula Vista, Calif.)."

That coach, Lloyd Brown, coached the U.S. team to the 1996 Olympic gold medal.



John Downey preaches form and consistency in coaching his students.

Downey, who has worked at Metro for 11 years, next co-founded a Simi Valley chapter of Junior Olympic Archery Development (JOAD), an international organization that teaches young people (typically nine to 19) how to shoot an Olympic-style recurve bow.

What is a recurve bow? Time for a little bow history. The classic bow, seen in numerous Robin Hood movies, is named a “long bow.” These “D” shaped bows bend equally from the tips to their middle (the riser or handle).

“In a recurve bow, the tips at the very end bend away from the part you hold in your hand, so it’s no longer “D” shaped; it’s sort of “W” shaped,” Downey explained. Through this shape-shifting, a stronger, more powerful, more compact bow is created.

Although the form of recurve bows hasn’t changed in thousands of years, their materials can be cutting edge. For example, Downey’s Olympic-style competition bow includes ceramic foam, carbon fiber and fiberglass.

And no 13th-century archer would recognize the modern arrows. They are made of thin-walled aluminum less than one-quarter inch in diameter and thicker in the middle to prevent fishtailing as they leave the bow. Instead of feathers, the new arrows use plastic vanes.

A recent invention—in archery time, at least—is the compound bow, which uses mechanics to make “pulling” the bow easier. “You’ve got cams, which are essentially pulleys, at either end of the bow,” Downey explained. “So when you pull back the bow, it gets easier and easier and easier to hold, which is opposite to the recurve bow or the long bow.”

When coaching, Downey wants his students to strive for consistency and good form.

“You want to have good form, so that you are doing it properly, but what is more important in some respects is to do everything the same, every single time, so that you are very, very consistent in how you shoot a bow,” he said, comparing the consistency to that required of a baseball pitcher.

During tournaments, his oldest JOAD competitors shoot up to 90 meters (about the length of a football field), typically shooting at a goal the size of a dinner plate. To do well in a tournament, he said, an archer must put the majority of his or her arrows in that dinner plate.

As for his own shooting, Downey typically places in the top three at state tournaments, even though coaching cuts into his practice time. He doesn't seem to mind.

"Several of our college-age members have been on the USA college team that competed overseas for the World Championships," Downey said. "Over the years, more than 50 national or California State titles have been won by club members."

Downey's first student, Kenneth, tried out for one of the three positions on the U.S. Olympic Team this year, but was not chosen. In August the younger Downey heads for the U.S. Target Nationals, in Colorado Springs.

"It's a great sport," Downey said simply. "It's something that just about anybody can do. You don't have to have a great deal of upper-body strength. I've got 7-year-old girls who can outshoot 40-year-old men."