How to Make an Olympic Archery Team
By Tom Parrish – High Performance Director for USA Archery

Every year, target archery continues to grow in popularity in the United States and with each Olympic year, archery gets more and more public exposure through the media. The more the merrier! Those of us who have been competing in archery for years already know what many others are just finding out – archery is fun & cool! It is a great sport that can be done by almost anyone and can be done for a lifetime. Not everyone can make it to the Olympic level, but anyone can have a lot of fun participating in archery and striving for his or her personal best.

Immediately following each Olympic Games, the USA Archery National Office gets many questions from people who are wondering – “How do I get started?” and, “how would I go about trying to make an Olympic Archery Team in the future?”

Getting started in archery is easy. The first step is to locate a local archery club in your area. There are over 380 registered USA Archery clubs across the U.S. The advantage of locating a club in your area is that there you will have access to knowledgeable people who can help you learn to shoot, help you to acquire equipment and provide you with a practice location. Most clubs have at least one certified coach and often have some very good archers, all of whom are friendly, helpful people who are more than willing to share what they know.

If there is not a club near you, then your task becomes a bit more difficult, but not to worry. There is a lot to be learned from books, tapes, magazine articles and conversations by email or phone with accomplished archers or archery coaches. You may be able to acquire a personal coach to periodically aid your progress. A quality coach is almost a necessity if you wish to achieve the highest levels of the sport. It is imperative that you learn proper technique from the start (no bad habits to overcome), that you get help in designing a smart and effective training plan and that you receive regular feedback from a knowledgeable person.

Keep in mind that the archery skill required to qualify for a U.S. Archery Team and to be competitive on an international scale is not developed overnight. It takes years of practice and training. It typically requires 6-10 years of training to reach the Olympic level (although a few people have done it in less time). A young archer starting in 2004 and desiring to go to the Olympics, should probably set his or her sights on 2012. If all goes well and they are ahead of schedule, they might have a shot at the 2008 team. That would be a bonus, but 2012 would be much more realistic.

There is much to learn as a beginning archer. The most important thing is to develop perfect form and shot execution. The importance of this cannot be stressed enough. This is one of the reasons that a personal coach is of such high value, even during the early stages of one’s archery career. At the same time, it is not important initially, that an archer be able to compete in tournaments right away, or that he or she is able to shoot high scores right away. Those things will come with time. What’s important is learning how to shoot the bow properly. This can take a good amount of time and a great deal of repetition in order to make the shot consistent. The world is full of archers that can hit the middle of the target. The list of those that can do it shot after shot after shot is much shorter.

There are no shortcuts to acquiring this level of skill and consistency. It takes hard work, dedication, determination and drive. It takes a person with a “can do” attitude and a serious work ethic. This is not to say that it won’t be fun. If a person loves to shoot a bow and arrow, then they
won’t have a problem putting in the hours. They won’t always be perfect and there will definitely be disappointments and set backs along the way – that goes with all competitive sports, however, desire, dedication and attitude will be the main factors in determining success.

There are a lot of people who want to make it to the Olympics, but every four years there are only three men and three women in the U.S. who qualify to go. To become the best of the best you have to be willing to do what most people won’t do. There is no magic formula, but there are ingredients to the recipe of becoming a champion archer: 1) you must learn and develop proper (almost perfect) form and shot execution; 2) you must be in relatively good shape. There is a certain amount of strength and endurance required to compete at the highest levels; 3) you must have the proper equipment and have it set up and tuned specifically for you; 4) you must have a strong mental game. Learn to be a tough competitor. You can do that without being unsportsmanlike. In fact, the greatest archery champions are those who win (or lose – sometimes) with grace and always conduct themselves with integrity. You can be friendly and gracious to your opponents and still be a fierce competitor while on the line shooting your arrows; 5) you need guidance from a good coach. There are many who have gone far on their own, but I don’t know anyone who has gone to the top without help from others, and especially important is help from a good personal coach.

Now for the nuts and bolts: 1) find a coach or some source of guidance right away; 2) with advice from your coach, acquire the appropriate equipment for your current needs; 3) be patient, but work hard. Learn how to shoot correctly and then practice it – a lot! There is no substitute for repetition when it comes to skill development. Don’t rush to shoot heavier bows or to compete at the longer distances right away. Work your way up gradually and follow your coach’s advice as to when you are ready to take the next step. Again, don’t rush. Be patient, but work hard and work smart! 4) Be prepared to travel and to incur some expenses. There will be costs for: equipment, travel to tournaments, registration fees, membership fees, coaching fees and other miscellaneous expenses. Fortunately, the costs involved with archery are less than with many other Olympic sports. 5) Learn everything you can. Go to tournaments and talk to other archers. Ask questions. Read up on archery topics. Be careful, though, to cultivate a positive attitude. Don’t let the negative opinions of others set any false barriers to what you can accomplish.

If Olympic caliber archery is your goal and you are willing to put in the time, effort and expense required, you could someday be shooting with the best. I wish you the best and look forward to seeing you at a future Olympic Games!

For direct information on available archery clubs, archery coaches or other archery resources, contact the USA Archery office in Colorado Springs at (719) 866-4576 or visit our website at www.usarchery.org.