

How to Structure an Effective Shooting Session

By Dan Durben, Olympian, National Champion and World Cup Medalist

Many newer shooters tend to show up at a range for practice or a match, simply pick up a rifle, and begin pumping pellets or bullets downrange. It's no wonder – this is the fun stuff. But, shooters can gain much more benefit from a training session and achieve higher, more consistent performances in matches by structuring their shooting sessions to include more than just pulling the trigger.

The keys to an effective shooting session are proper preparation and analysis. Building these good habits early in their development will help shooters accelerate improvement in their performance.



Step 1 - Physical Preparation

Perform some light stretching and warm-up exercises. Most normal stretching routines that stretch and warm up the major muscle groups work well. When done together as a group, the stretching can become a good team building exercise before a practice or match.



Step 2 - Equipment Preparation

Develop a checklist of equipment adjustments in your journal or diary that is a quick reference to ensure everything is in the right place. Major adjustments to include are location of the handstop, the length of the sling, and the location of the buttplate. Include any other components that you may adjust or that are important to you such as the location of the rear sight, the number of clicks to adjust on the sights for the next position, and the front and rear aperture sizes.

- Make sure your scope is set up in a convenient location so that you can easily see through it without straining out of your position.
- Keep some important tools, such as allen wrenches and screw drivers, close by in case quick adjustments are needed while shooting.
- Organize the rest of your equipment so that it does not interfere with the range officer or other competitors.

Step 3 - Mental Preparation

Review notes in your journal or diary from previous training sessions and matches.

- Write down specific goals or plans for this training session or match. This should state specifically what you are trying to accomplish or work on during this session.
- Perform some relaxation and imagery exercises. Many shooters will go through progressive relaxation, tensing and relaxing different muscle groups combined with mental images of relaxing scenarios to calm down and improve focus, concentration and body awareness. This is especially effective for shooters who get nervous before matches.



Step 4 - Position Preparation

Develop a checklist of key position reminders in your journal or diary. These may include comments about hand position, foot position, keeping the right shoulder relaxed, making sure the front sight is centered in the rear aperture, checking balance – anything that is important for you to develop a good position.

Get into position and tune your balance and natural point of aim so that the rifle points at the center of the target with a minimum of muscle tension. To do this close your eyes, relax, and see if the position stays stable; then open your eyes and see if the sights point at the center of the target. If balance or natural point of aim is off, adjust and repeat until this is accomplished.



Step 5 - Shot Preparation

Once you are in position with good balance and natural point of aim, begin shot rehearsal exercises. Mentally rehearse shots by picturing yourself performing perfect shots in your mind. Follow this with some dry firing or holding/aiming exercises.

Next begin taking sighting shots. Use the first few sighters to get settled in, to literally “sight in” (making sure the shots are hitting the target where the rifle is pointing), and to work on a specific aspect of a good shot, such as smooth triggering or good follow through.



Step 6 - Record Shots

Use the last few sighters as a transition into the record shots. Shoot these last sighters with the exact same method, rhythm, and cadence that you use for record shots.

Develop a shot plan. This is a personal step-by-step plan describing what you do to shoot good shots. Follow this plan for every record shot.

Step 7 - Written Analysis

Immediately after shooting, write down an analysis of your performance in your journal or diary. Try to answer the following questions:

- Were your goals for this session achieved? Why or why not?
- What went well and why did it go well?
- What needs work and what is your plan of action to address this?
- What is your plan for the next session or match?
- Did you notice anything else, or do you have any other comments and ideas that may be helpful?

