

THE WORK OF THE RANGE OFFICER

By Gary Anderson, Director of Civilian Marksmanship Emeritus

Editor's Note: This article on "The Work of the Range Officer" is the first of a planned series of articles by Gary Anderson on How to Conduct Competitions. Coaches and junior shooting leaders are encouraged to copy this article and use it to assist them in training adult volunteers and parents to become Range Officers.

Coaches, instructors and leaders of junior shooting teams and clubs are not only responsible for teaching young shooters gun safety and how to shoot, but they are also responsible for conducting live fire practice sessions and organizing competitions where the team or club hosts participants from other teams and clubs. The key person in conducting range firing is the Range Officer.

Junior shooting coaches or instructors must either fulfill this role themselves or, ideally, train other volunteers or parents to be Range Officers. This article examines the duties and activities of the Range Officer and provides guidelines for performing that work.

Note: Throughout this article, the title Range Officer will be abbreviated as "RO" and the title Chief Range Officer will be abbreviated as "CRO."

Range Officer Responsibilities. The Range Officer (RO) is the competition official who is directly responsible for the safe conduct of firing on the range during competitions. The RO is also responsible for the application and enforcement of the competition rules that apply for that competition. In most competitions, the RO is the official who has the most direct contact with shooters and thus the best opportunities to ensure that all competitors have a fair, enjoyable match. How the RO performs his/her duties not only determines whether the competition is safe and legal, but just as importantly, whether participants enjoy equal competition conditions and truly positive experiences.

Range Officer Qualifications & Training. Becoming a good, effective RO takes time, effort and experience, but it is a position that many interested adults have the possibility of fulfilling. The basic requirements for being a good RO are:

- **Motivation.** The most important qualification to be a RO is motivation. The RO must have a sincere desire to promote the sport of shooting and help shooting athletes have safe, fair, enjoyable competitions. It is not necessary to have prior shooting experience.

- **Knowledge.** The second most important qualification is knowledge. The RO must have an excellent knowledge of shooting competition rules. This knowledge may have been gained by being a competitive shooter or it can also be acquired through study and training. Much can be learned by just going to competitions and observing or volunteering to help. Anyone who wants to become a RO must obtain a copy of the appropriate rulebook and study it from cover to cover.



The Range Officer is the competition official who has the most direct contact with competitors. The work of the Range Officer must not only ensure the safe and legal conduct of shooting, but it must also make shooters' competition experiences rewarding and positive.

- **Experience.** With a desire to serve and a basic knowledge of the rulebook, the next qualification is experience. New ROs can start by conducting live fire practice sessions. From there, they can work under the supervision of an experienced RO as an Assistant Range Officer. Gaining experience as an RO is most productive when new ROs are encouraged to ask lots of questions.

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It is better to admit that you don't know the right rule and seek help than to make the wrong decision. Shooters become good by practicing; the same applies to ROs.

- **Empathy.** ROs often deal with competitors who are in stressful situations. Sometimes competitors become frustrated, angry or upset. Effective ROs understand this. A smile or a quiet, understanding tone of voice can do a lot to calm down a frustrated or angry competitor, coach or parent.

Range Officer Requirements. There must always be at least one RO who is in charge of the range and firing activities on the range. The number of ROs depends upon the size of the range and skill level and experience of the competitors. As a general rule, there should be one RO for ranges with 10 or fewer firing points. On larger ranges, there should be one more RO for each 10 additional firing points. If competitors are inexperienced, it may be necessary to appoint additional ROs so that the ratio of ROs to competitors could be as low as one to five. The key is to have enough ROs to ensure the safety of everyone on the range and to attend to all concerns that competitors may have.

Chief Range Officer. When there are two or more ROs working on a range, one of them must be designated as the Chief Range Officer (CRO). The CRO is responsible for controlling the overall conduct of shooting and is specifically responsible for "calling the line," that is, for giving the commands and instructions to safely control the movement of competitors to the firing line, the actual conduct of firing, target operations and competitor movements off of the line.

Range Officer Equipment. Every RO who works on the firing line must have certain key items with him/her in order to perform their duties:

- **Rulebook.** Every RO must carry the appropriate rulebook, which for experienced ROs is always well-worn and marked with tabs and notes.
- **Range Officer Script.** An RO or CRO who is responsible for calling the line to control firing should have an RO script. This is a document that gives the precise words to be used in controlling firing. The RO script can usually be taken directly from the appropriate rulebook. New ROs should work from the script; experienced ROs will have the script memorized.
- **Stopwatch.** The first step in dealing with a competitor who calls for a RO is to start a stopwatch so that

RANGE OFFICER SCRIPT SIGHTING STAGE

WELCOME TO THE CMP-SANCTIONED (NAME) RIMFIRE SPORTER MATCH.

RELAY (NUMBER), MOVE YOUR RIFLES AND EQUIPMENT TO THE FIRING LINE. GROUND YOUR RIFLES.

After equipment is in place:

IS THE LINE CLEAR?

Range Officers signal YES or NO

YOU MAY GO DOWNRANGE AND PLACE YOUR SIGHTER TARGETS AT 50 YARDS (sighter targets do not need to be labeled).

After competitors return to the firing line:

ARE ALL PERSONNEL BACK FROM DOWNRANGE?

Range Officers signal YES or NO

ALL PERSONNEL ARE BEHIND THE FIRING LINE. THE LINE IS HOT! YOUR PREPARATION PERIOD WILL BEGIN IN ONE MINUTE.

After one minute

The first page of a Range Officer Script for Rimfire Sporter competition is shown above. ROs who are responsible for controlling fire on a range should always work from a precise script with the proper commands and instructions. The script may then be practiced and memorized.

if the problem causes a delay where extra time is permitted the amount of extra time permitted can be precisely determined.

- **Notepad and Pen.** ROs should document all issues and problems by noting the firing point, time, competitor number (start number), the problem and any action taken. If there are questions later, this documentation will help resolve the problem. A form called a Range Incident Report is used in many types of competitions to document issues and problems.

- **Range Officer Identification.** ROs should always wear some visible means of identification so that any competitor or coach who needs a RO can find one

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quickly. Usually this means wearing a bright colored cap or vest. A vest also offers the possibility of pockets for carrying a rulebook, stopwatch and notebook. All ROs on a range should wear the same identification.

- **Start List.** Competitions that are conducted properly will have a “start list” or squadding document that lists relay and firing point numbers together with shooters’ names. Competitors use start lists to know where and when they are to fire. ROs need start lists to make sure competitors are in their correct positions and to document issues and problems.

- **Other Equipment.** There are a few other items of equipment that can be useful to ROs. A pair of binoculars or a spotting scope can be used to check targets. A carpenter’s angle finder is useful to check prone position arm angles or pistol shooter ready positions (rapid-fire events). A cleaning rod may be needed to check an air gun for a double loading. Pellet discharge containers (PDC) are often used to clear loaded air guns.



The Chief Range Officer controls competition firing by giving range commands and instructions to the shooters. In large competitions the CRO may be responsible for 50 or more competitors in each of several relays.

Giving Commands and Instructions.

In every competition, the CRO or the RO is responsible for controlling firing by directing competitors through a precise series of commands, procedures and instructions. This process follows a series of steps that are summarized as follows:

- 1) **Preparing the Range.** The first step in the firing procedures is to make the range ready for firing. This usually includes preparing or hanging targets, obtaining permission to conduct live fire and making sure all personnel are back from downrange and that it is **safe to begin firing**.

- 2) **Call to the Firing Line.** Prior to firing, shooters should remain in a ready area with their equipment. When it is time to begin a relay of competitors, the CRO instructs them to move their equipment and guns to their assigned firing points and to begin their final preparations for firing. During this phase, all guns must remain cleared with safety flags inserted.

- 3) **Preparation Period.** Every type of competition firing is preceded by a preparation period when shooters can get into their firing positions, remove their safety flags and dry fire. The length of preparation periods varies from one to ten minutes according to the rulebook that is being used.

- 4) **Starting Firing.** Formal commands to LOAD and START or COMMENCE FIRING are used to autho-

size competitors to load their guns and begin firing.

- 5) **Supervising Firing.** While competitors are firing, ROs are responsible for monitoring safety and responding to any problems competitors may have.

- 6) **Concluding Firing.** At the end of the firing time or if an emergency STOP is required, the CRO will again use formal commands to STOP or CEASE FIRING and UNLOAD to unload all guns and insert safety flags.

- 7) **Transitions.** After a firing stage or a course of fire is completed, the CRO must either start the next stage of fire or give instructions to remove equipment from the firing line.

A key to the safe and efficient conduct of fire is for the CRO to use consistent commands so competitors know what to expect and the CRO establishes a command presence. All commands should be given in a loud, firm, clear voice.

RO Duties During Firing. During firing, ROs must remain on the firing line at all times, constantly observing the competitors. RO responsibilities during firing include:

- **Safety.** The ROs’ first priority is competitor gun handling to assure that muzzles remain pointed downrange or up and that loading and firing is done in accordance with range commands.

- **Checking Competitors In.** After competitors are

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called to the line, the RO should use the start list to confirm that all competitors are present, that they are on their assigned firing points and that their targets are marked or prepared correctly.

- **Assisting Competitors.** ROs must remain alert to respond to competitors who ask for assistance or who have problems. Competitors will normally raise their hands to call for RO assistance. Competitors' coaches may also ask for RO assistance.

- **Rule Enforcement.** ROs must observe competitors' equipment, firing positions and actions to ensure that they comply with applicable rules (see below).

- **Malfunctions or Problems.** If a competitor reports a possible interruption, malfunction or problem, the RO must immediately start a stopwatch and go to that competitor, approaching so that the two can speak without disturbing other competitors. Determine what the problem is and take appropriate action. Make a record of the problem and the action taken in the RO notebook. If extra time is warranted according to the rules, inform the competitor and authorize him/her to continue shooting.

- **Irregular Shots.** A common problem occurs during firing when a competitor fires a sighter "out of the box," receives or fires a crossfire shot or fires a shot on the wrong bull. A RO must know the rules for irregular shots and give proper instructions on how to proceed. When targets are retrieved, be sure to make notes on the targets if there were any misses in the scoring area, irregularities, crossfires or penalties.

- **General Range Behavior.** The RO also plays a key role in controlling the overall range environment behind the firing line. When someone or something is making noise or causing a disturbance, the RO should act to stop this. On the other hand, the RO should not insist on absolute silence by everyone behind the firing line. Those days are over. In today's sports environment, spectators should be welcome at all shooting events when there is room for them behind the firing line. When spectators or visitors are present, they should be allowed to speak in low or normal voice tones.

Rule Enforcement. Rules are designed to precisely control the conditions of competition to ensure that the playing field is level and that all competitors compete un-



ROs should encourage spectators to watch shooting competitions when space for them is available. Spectators should be allowed to speak in low or normal voice tones. Shooting needs spectators and they should be able to enjoy themselves during competitions.

der fair and equal conditions. It is the RO's duty to make certain all competitors follow the rules. It should also be clear that no RO has the authority to ignore a rule or to change a rule for any reason.

- **Rule Interventions.** When shooters bring their equipment to the line, ROs must check to be sure it was inspected if there was an equipment inspection or, if not, to check that it is legal. The time to check positions is during the preparation period and sighters, not later during record shots. ROs should never interrupt a competitor while he/she is attempting to fire a shot unless an immediate safety threat exists. If a competitor's prone position is too low or a foot is forward of the firing line in standing, for example, the RO must explain the fault and tell the competitor to correct it. This is recognized in the rules as a "warning." Only if a competitor ignores a warning and refuses to correct a position fault should this become a cause for deductions or disqualification.

- **Balancing Education and Enforcement.** ROs should recognize that almost all position faults are innocent violations and that the RO must also serve as a teacher by instructing competitors on how to correct any rule violations. RO's have a high duty to help competitors do things right, not just to catch them doing something wrong!

- **Rules Issues.** When questions or protests come up, handle them politely, calmly and respectfully. Stay calm and in control at all times. Wise advice in such

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How Should Range Officers React to Challenging Situations?

Range officers are sometimes faced with situations where they feel competitors are doing something wrong, are not responding to them or where there is a safety concern. Even though such situations may cause great stress, the worst way to handle them is to yell at or berate competitors. The best way to handle such situations is to remain calm and under control. ROs must speak in a clear, firm voice, but must not display emotion.

Becoming angry and yelling at competitors only leads to unproductive confrontations and situation escalations. Being able to give clear instructions with a smile and even a sense of humor will calm most distressed competitors, coaches or parents and bring quick resolution. Being empathetic by understanding how the competitor is under stress is a key. In all challenging situations, the one person who must always remain calm and under control is the RO.



situations is to “open the rulebook before you open your mouth” especially when the RO is unsure about the precise wording of a rule. If there are other ROs on the range consult with them before making a decision. When making a decision, be sure to point out the rule that applies.

- **Penalties.** Only in the case of deliberately concealed violations or violations that give a clear competitive advantage should penalties or disqualification be considered. If disqualification is considered, the RO must remember that this is a decision that must be made by more than one person. Some competitions will have juries to decide disqualifications. In other competitions, the RO must discuss this with the CRO and Match Director before deciding so that more than one person is involved in any disqualification decision. In each case, the accused competitor must be given an opportunity to know the precise violation and to provide a defense.

Physical Fitness and Appearance. ROs usually work long hours where they must remain on their feet. It is essential that they have sufficient physical fitness to remain alert and engaged throughout each long day on the range. The RO has a position of authority and is a visible representative of the sport of shooting. ROs must always present an appearance in dress, demeanor and language that is a credit to the sport of shooting and that commands the respect of shooters, coaches and parents.

The RO's primary responsibilities are to ensure that competitions are safe and that all competitors have fair, sportsmanlike and enjoyable competition experiences. ROs must always remember that they are there to serve competitors and the best interests of the sport. Good competitions are never possible without good ROs, but when ROs fulfill these responsibilities well, their work is especially rewarding and fulfilling to them and beneficial to the sport of shooting.

About the Author

*Gary Anderson, Director of Civilian Marksmanship-Emeritus, is a regular contributor to **On The Mark**. He served as DCM for 10 years and remains an effective advocate for firearms safety training and rifle practice. Gary's primary role at CMP has been to develop and sustain successful youth shooting programs at both regional and national levels.*

