

Great Competition Shooting

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By Gary Anderson, DCM Emeritus



Most junior shooters learn rifle or pistol marksmanship skills so they can test those skills in competitions. The young shooting athletes in this photo are competing in the 10m Air Rifle Women Junior event during the 2017 Junior World Championship in Suhl, Germany.

One of the main reasons youth learn rifle or pistol marksmanship skills is because they want to compete; they want to see how well they can do in organized contests where scores are kept and ranked and awards are at stake. This **On the Mark** article discusses why competition shooting is important, how to prepare for competitions, how to perform well in them and how to keep competition experiences positive and beneficial.

Why Go To Competitions

Youth shooting sports leaders and parents need to understand and explain why young shooting athletes should be introduced to competitions. Here are some fundamental reasons for participating in competitions.

1. **Competition is Part of Life.** It is virtually impossible to go through life without experiencing competition in some form, whether in school, business or a professional

career. The International Olympic Committee calls sports competitions a “*school for life*” where young athletes “*experience life values such as excellence, respect and friendship.*” Sports offer youth a healthy way to learn how to compete and strive for excellence while following the rules.

2. **Competition is Part of Sports.** The reason most people learn sports skills is to use them in competitions. Competitions offer the ultimate test of sports skills.

3. **Competitions are Fun and Provide Memorable Experiences.** People who participate in shooting competitions enjoy those experiences. They meet new friends and travel to interesting places. Trying to do well in competitions is fulfilling, meaningful and memorable.

4. **Competitions Teach Personal Achievement.** Modern Olympic Games founder Pierre de Coubertin explained the true value of sports competition when he

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athlete’s “hold” was) and shot technique (how precisely he/she executed their shot technique). An athlete who performs well in a competition must have a good hold and execute shot technique correctly.

Match Pressure. Sometimes called pre-match anxiety or “start fever,” this is the heightened sense of nervousness that occurs when an athlete is in a competition where scores are kept and rankings and prizes are at stake. Match pressure is both a physiological and psychological phenomenon.

When Should Competitions Start?

Youth shooting teams should structure their training and practice programs so all new shooters have a definitive opportunity to decide if they want to shoot in competitions. New shooter instruction must provide information about competition opportunities available to team members. Teams that travel extensively should make sure new participants and their parents understand the requirements for being on “the team.” This is essential because rifle or pistol team participation usually involves purchasing personal equipment and attending regular practice sessions.

When Is A New Shooter Ready for Competition?

Competition shooting should not start until after the athlete has learned good shooting positions, developed the ability to properly execute basic shot technique and can comfortably complete an established course of fire. Athletes should be able to keep all shots within the scoring rings on the competition target before they go to their first competitions.

What Are The Best First Competitions?

The best advice is to start small and local. Club record matches are a great place to introduce new participants to competitions if they use rulebook time limits and Range Officer commands.

said, “The most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well.” The “struggle,” to fight well, means trying to do the best we can do with the possibilities available to us. In shooting competitions, possible goals for this struggle include completing a course of fire, beating one’s score in the last match, earning an Achievement Medal, working to win a Distinguished Badge or winning an important championship. Every competition shooter has the possibility to strive to win personal victories and to apply those lessons in their lives.

Definitions

A few special terms used in this article need to be defined so readers will have a common understanding when they appear.

Hold. When shooting athletes talk about their “hold,” they are describing how stable their sight picture movements (rifle) or sight alignment and sight picture movements (pistol) were.

Shot Technique. To fire a shot, a shooting athlete follows a specific “shot technique” sequence that starts with shouldering or lifting the gun and includes preparing the position, aligning the sights, bringing the gun onto the aiming point, breath control timing, trigger control, hold control and follow through. This sequence may be both conscious and sub-conscious. Competition shooters are concerned with how well they “perform” this sequence.

Performance. The components of marksmanship “performance” are hold stability (how good or bad an

Youth marksmanship participants should not be required to compete, but every youth-shooting participant should have an OPPORTUNITY to compete.

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Every year, CMP National Ranges at Camp Perry, Ohio, and Anniston, Alabama, host large monthly air rifle and air pistol matches as well as numerous championship competitions (<http://thecmp.org/air/cmp-competition-centers/>).

A step up from there are virtual matches like the Orion National Air Rifle League (<http://www.orionscoringsystem.com/orion/AirRifleLeague.aspx>) where teams compete with each other in their home ranges using electronic scoring and Internet communications to compare results. After new shooters can comfortably handle these tests, they will be ready for shoulder-to-shoulder matches at other ranges.

Who Should Go To Competitions? There may come a time during the competition year when it is necessary to limit the number of athletes who travel with the team, but it is a mistake to limit competition opportunities too early. One of the great lessons in shooting athlete development is that early practice and competition scores bear little or no relation to how good someone ultimately becomes. Teams should establish conditions for going to competitions like regular practice attendance, but a team policy should be to give all team members who want to compete an opportunity to compete.

How Many Competitions Should Youth Shoot? The short answer is this depends upon team and athlete goals. A serious competition shooter should shoot at least one shoulder-to-shoulder match per month with one or two major championships at the end of each competition year. Shooting more than two matches a month that involve travel away from home is usually too many.

Preparing for Competitions

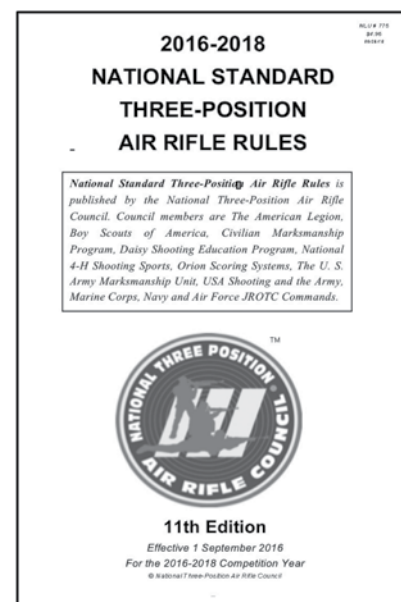
One of the keys to successful competitions is preparation. Surprises magnify anxiety and distract from good performances. A team that arrives well prepared and knowing what to expect will have taken an important step to reduce anxiety and increase their chances for good match performances.

Basic Match Information. A first preparation step is to obtain the match program that describes the competition course of fire, dates and times of firing. It is also useful to obtain information about the range where the match will take place. Team members should know what to expect regarding the staging area, target placement, target lighting, firing line lighting and any out-of-the-ordinary range features.

Pre-Match Administration. A second step is to enter the athletes who will compete in the match. Advanced entries are necessary to ensure a place on the line in many junior matches. If the match is in another city, travel arrangements are required. If an overnight stay is involved, hotel reservations may be necessary. Most travel teams today have both girls and boys and will need both male and female adult supervisors.

Knowledge of the Rules.

Every athlete who goes to a match is expected to know and follow applicable competition rules. Rules for gun handling, equipment, firing positions and match procedures need to be explained and understood in advance. Coaches should give new shooters who are



The National Standard Three-Position Air Rifle Rules now govern a majority of the junior rifle competitions in the USA.

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getting ready to attend their first match instruction covering the competition rules.

Pre-Match Rehearsal.

Athletes should rehearse the competition course of fire under simulated competition conditions during one or two practice sessions before an upcoming match. Pre-match rehearsals need to include the warm-up and preparation steps that will be followed during the match.

Equipment Checklists.

Some matches are lost because a team member forgot to bring an essential piece of equipment. This problem is easily prevented if each team member dedicates a page in his/her Shooter's

Journal to an equipment checklist. Packing for team travel should always be done with each athlete's equipment list in front of them.

Team Uniforms. More and more junior shooting teams are discovering that having a team uniform to wear when arriving at or shooting in a match is a source of pride for the team members and a way to demonstrate the team's professionalism. Athletes who earn the right to wear the team's colors as a competition team member will feel an added sense of responsibility to focus on good performance at competitions.

Managing Match Pressure

Match pressure is real, but manageable. To understand what is possible, imagine being in Ginny Thrasher's shooting boots when she fired the last shot in the 10m Air Rifle Women Final during the 2016 Olympics. She had a meager 0.7 point lead. Her last remaining rival was a vastly more experienced two-time Olympic gold medalist. A worldwide live TV audience of 119 million people was watching. Spectators at the range included United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, Chinese Vice Minister Liu Yandong and IOC President Thomas Bach. \$75,000 in prize money was at stake plus the potential prestige of being known for the rest of her life as an "Olympic gold medal winner." In the face of



Many air rifle sporter class teams now wear team uniforms while they shoot. The different colors identify different teams.

such immense pressure, Thrasher found the inner strength to shoot a 10.4 on her last shot and win the 2016 Games very first gold medal. Well-trained athletes can manage match pressure.



The split screen television image that enabled 119 million worldwide, live TV viewers to see the last shots of America's Ginny Thrasher and China's DU Li in the duel for the 2016 Olympic Games first gold medal. It was a fantastic demonstration of managing match pressure.

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One of the keys to great competition shooting is developing performance techniques that facilitate match pressure management. Nervousness and anxiety can cause an athlete's hold and shot technique performance to deteriorate, but with proper techniques, these effects can be mitigated and managed. These techniques, however, cannot just be applied at matches; they must be learned and perfected in practice. And at the competition, the athlete must muster the self-discipline to apply these techniques for every shot. Here are some strategies and techniques to manage match pressure:

Pre-Match Warm-Up. A pre-match warm-up can reduce or slow body tremors and produce steadier holds during the competition. A brief stretching routine helps to relax muscles and prepare them for their static work in holding the rifle or pistol steadier. Back, leg and arm massages contribute to improved holds. A mandatory warm-up exercise for pistol athletes, and many rifle athletes, is doing aiming exercises or dry firing on a blank wall.

Establish Score Goals. With modern electronic scoring and results display systems, it is becoming almost impossible for athletes not to know what their scores are and even how they rank in the competition. To deal with this new reality, athletes should go to matches with specific score expectations, but score goals must be backed up by practice scores. Score goals can be used both as a means of evaluation and an incentive. A pistol athlete, for example, might have a score goal of shooting 90 or better on each series. A rifle athlete might have score goals of 98 prone, 90 standing and 94 kneeling.



Doing aiming exercises or dry firing at a blank wall is now a standard warm-up for pistol athletes and even many rifle athletes.



Many elite rifle athletes begin each shot by visually checking butt-plate location in the shoulder to ensure that it is in exactly the right spot. The athlete is Olympic gold medalist Virginia Thrasher, USA.

Emphasize Correct Shot Technique. One of the best ways to control match pressure is to have a consistent, well-practiced shot technique that follows a carefully developed shot plan. Good shot technique uses specific conscious actions on which to concentrate while firing the shot. Elite rifle athletes start by checking butt-plate and elbow locations when they shoulder their rifles. They have fixed ways to breathe, approach their aiming points, apply initial pressure on the trigger and achieve hold or sight picture control. Paying attention to these steps keeps their minds focused on positive actions that ensure good performance while preventing them from being distracted by negative or extraneous thoughts.

Breathing. Breath control is part of the shot plan, but it is also an effective means of achieving targeted relaxation. When breathing before starting to aim, the athlete can learn to link conscious exhaling with a cue phrase like "let go." For rifle athletes, a totally relaxed support arm is a key to hold stability. Conscious breathing also gives the mind a positive focus in the seconds leading up to the decisive time

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of aiming and pressing the trigger. An athlete who is under intense pressure may also use conscious inhaling and exhaling with a relaxation message to mitigate anxiety reactions.

Pre-Shot Checks. The shot plan can also combine the conscious inhaling, exhaling and relaxation done before starting to aim with a pre-shot routine. During successive exhalations, the athlete may 1) mentally check body or support arm relaxation, 2) position balance and 3) mental readiness to switch attention to hold control or sight picture.

Arrival At the Match

When to Arrive. As a general rule, teams should plan to arrive at least an hour before they are scheduled to start shooting. Late arrivals and trying to rush preparations increase anxiety. As soon as the team arrives a team leader needs to check in at the Statistical Office, pay entry fees and obtain squadding information (start list). A key to good team performances is for the coach or an adult leader to take care of all of these logistical details so team members can focus on preparation and performance. Team members should find a place in the staging area to begin their preparations, relax and chill out before the competition starts. Athletes should complete pre-match warm-ups well before they are called to the line.

Equipment Set-Up and Call to Line. Athletes should have fixed routines for dressing and organizing their equipment before being called to the line. When the Range Officer calls them to the line they should have fixed equipment layout schemes for setting up their firing points. Focusing attention on the steps necessary to set up equipment can help to avoid distracting or negative thoughts. After organizing the firing point, athletes must pay careful attention to building their firing positions while emphasizing body relaxation and stabilizing the inner position to ensure good holds when firing starts.

During the Match

Sighting Shots. Well-prepared athletes arrive at matches with their rifles or pistols zeroed. The primary purpose of sighting shots is not to zero guns, but to establish performance routines where shot technique is being done correctly. The recommended progression is to 1) build the position, 2) do a few aiming exercise repetitions to be sure the hold is stable, 3) dry fire a few repetitions to establish shot technique and then 4) fire sighting shots. Sight adjustments must be made if shots are not going



When competition shooting is not going well, taking a break and stepping back to talk to the coach may help to correct a performance fault.

on call, but the emphasis during sighters should be on performing shot technique correctly.

Performance Routine and Rhythm. Several years ago, elite shooters and coaches emphasized working on getting good shots by aborting shot attempts when the hold or shot technique was not right. Today, with the best athletes destined to shoot in finals where single shots are fired with short time limits, the emphasis is on preparing to fire the shot in advance by using breathing and pre-shot routines so shots can consistently be fired on the first hold. Today's young shooting athletes should learn to do detailed pre-shot preparations that allow them to fire almost all of their shots on first attempts.

Sight Adjustments. Keeping rifles and pistols precisely zeroed is fundamental to obtaining the highest possible scores. Confirming that the sights are zeroed during sighting shots is not sufficient. The athlete must continue to track shot locations in relation to shot calls and may need to make small sight adjustments during a record firing stage.

Stay in the Now. A simple admonition for new competition athletes is to approach a competition by trying to shoot a series of one-shot matches. This means thinking only about firing the present shot, now. The idea is to avoid thinking about past shots, good or bad, and certainly not to see oneself on the victory podium before the match is over.

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Correcting Performance Faults. Great competition shooters develop the ability to analyze each shot to recognize and correct performance faults. When shooting is not going well, it is not a good strategy to just keep on shooting. It's OK to lay the gun down and take a break. Stepping back to talk to the coach often helps. There are many things that can cause performance faults. Correction strategy should involve a mental review of the shot plan to decide if any steps are not being performed correctly. Return to shooting with a renewed will to follow the shot plan.

Shooting in Finals. Not all competitions have finals, but when they do, athletes who make the finals must have a plan for shooting in it. The plan should start with expecting to enjoy the experience. Finals usually have spectators and cheering so be prepared for this. The steps taken during the regular match to 1) build the firing position, 2) use the sighting time to do aiming exercises, dry fire and fire practice shots and 3) to follow an established performance routine must continue. If the athlete uses breathing and pre-shot checks to prepare for firing each shot, it is absolutely essential that these same techniques be used during the final. The bottom line--don't change anything. The techniques and strategies used to manage match pressure apply even more so in finals. Also, even if a team or its members do not make the final, all athletes should attend the final to support the athletes who are there.

After the Match

Journal Entries. After finishing the competition, team members should sit down and complete their Shooter's Journal entries for that day. It's important to record match experiences while they are still fresh in mind. Journal entries should include evaluations of hold stability during the match and how well shot technique was performed. Comments should note whether the athlete reached his/her personal target scores for the match. If yes, note what was done right to make that possible. If not, comment on what needs more work before the next match.

Checking Scores. As soon as targets are scored, each athlete should check the preliminary results list to be sure their scores are posted correctly. Most match sponsors will gladly correct clerical errors. If there has been an obvious



The best time to make Shooter's Journal entries for a match is right after finishing firing. The athlete here is Sarah Sherer, 2016 USA Olympian.

error in scoring, a challenge to get a shot or score rechecked is proper, but attempting to challenge every close shot is unsportsmanlike and should be discouraged.

Award Ceremonies. Many match sponsors conclude competitions with award ceremonies. If the match has an award ceremony, it is important for all teams to attend even if they are not expecting to receive awards. This shows respect for the winning teams as well as for the match sponsor and their efforts to organize a great competition. Athletes should wear their team uniforms when receiving awards. Hopping up on the award podium in ragged jeans and a nondescript T-shirt does not exemplify the sport we all want shooting to be.

Congratulations and Thank-You. A last step in post-match activities should be to graciously accept congratulations from others for great match results or to offer congratulations to other teams and athletes who fired great scores. No team should depart without also saying thank-you to the officials who conducted the match.

Growing a Positive Team Culture

Competition experiences can be good or bad, exhilarating or disappointing. To keep competition experiences positive, coaches and parents must create an organizational culture that emphasizes athlete-centered

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values and prevents negative outcomes. Youth shooting coaches and parents must do all they can to keep their athletes' competitions positive and enjoyable. A positive organizational culture will project values like these:

1. **We respect competition rules and practice fair play.** We believe every training and competition result must be achieved while following the rules, practicing fair play and respecting other competitors and competition officials. There are no acceptable short cuts to good scores.

2. **We evaluate competition performances, not winning or losing.** Every team member's competition is evaluated according to how well they performed the skills they learned in training. Team members expect to produce competition scores that are within the range of scores they shoot in practice.

3. **We accept all team members as persons of worth regardless of their competition results.** We do not believe any team member deliberately shoots bad match scores. No team member should fear rejection because of a bad match. If a team member has a bad match, we will work with them to identify and correct performance shortcomings.

4. **We see nervousness, anxiety and match pressure as normal, positive feelings.** It is normal to feel nervous and anxious before and during competitions, but we will learn to manage and enjoy those feelings. Our team members will learn strategies and techniques to help us manage match pressure effectively.

5. **We enjoy trying to do the best we can in competitions.** When we go to matches, we expect to have fun and enjoy the experience, but we also expect to work hard during the competition to perform the skills we learned in practice as well as we possibly can. When we finish a competition knowing we had a good performance and met our score expectations, we will have had a great competition.



These Junior athletes are reporting to their firing points for the start of a final. Athletes who qualify for finals should expect to enjoy the experience and shoot finals shots the same way they fired shots in the qualification competition.

About the Author

Gary Anderson, Director of Civilian Marksmanship Emeritus, retired as the full-time CMP Director at the close of 2009. He continues to work with CMP as the senior marksmanship instructor. During his remarkable career, he won two Olympic gold medals, seven World Championships and 16 National Championships. He is a Vice President of the International Shooting Sports Federation, the President of USA Shooting, a former Nebraska State Senator and was one of the two Olympic Games Technical Delegates for Shooting during the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

In June, 2012, the International Olympic Committee awarded Gary Anderson the IOC's highest honor, the Olympic Order, "for outstanding services to the Olympic Movement."

In 2014, the CMP expanded their world-class air gun center at Camp Perry and renamed the facility the Gary Anderson CMP Competition Center, in honor of Anderson's contribution to the organization and the marksmanship community.

