Marksmanship is the human quest to “hit the mark” while using projectile arms. World history is embellished with records, both legendary and factual, of great feats and pivotal events involving marksmanship. This *On the Mark* “history of marksmanship” celebrates the events and people who hit their marks while performing great acts of human skill with projectile arms; they are people who are remembered, revered and celebrated in the culture and history of their nations. These marksmanship history stories constitute an especially meaningful heritage for modern sport shooting that can make participation in it even more meaningful.

By learning about these great events in marksmanship, we gain a better appreciation for why sport shooting inspires such passion in its participants today. The human quest to “hit
the mark” is an endless challenge for perfection in aiming and controlling a gun while overcoming the fear of missing the mark. Hitting the mark is a cause for joy and triumph whether the marksman is a first-time junior who just shot his first ten or an Olympic athlete who fired a 10.9 on her last shot to win an Olympic gold medal.

This On the Mark article presents a selected series of significant events to show how hitting the mark has always been a human pursuit and how marksmanship traditions have become such important parts of the culture and social structure of nations all over the world.

500,000 BCE -- Man’s First Projectile Weapons

A statue erected at the Enrique Borbonet Gomez shooting range near Havanna, Cuba depicts the evolution of man’s projectile weapons from primitive stone throwing to modern firearms.

Man’s marksmanship attempts quite possibly began when pre-historic people invented a game of throwing stones at a mark on a tree or the ground to see who could come the closest to the mark. Archaeological evidence shows that the spear, one of the most important tools invented by humans, came into use around 400,000 BCE. The human desire to demonstrate skill in using this new weapon probably also led to throwing contests to hit the mark with spears.
10,000 BCE – Advanced Projectile Weapons

Around 10,000 BCE, slings and spear throwers were invented to throw projectiles with greater velocity and range. It is possible that the Cro-Magnons, who lived in western and southern Europe and probably used these advanced weapons to practice and engage in marksmanship skill contests by using them to try to hit more distant targets. One of the oldest marksmanship accolades involves the skilled use of the sling and appears in the book of Judges (20:16) in the Hebrew Bible: “Among all of these people there were seven hundred elite men who were left-handed, each of whom could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.”

1,500 BCE – The First Records of Target Shooting

This tracing made of an engraved gold leaf in the Egyptian National Museum depicts Egyptian King Aye shooting his bow from a moving chariot with amazing accuracy at a cylinder target being held by two slaves (lower right). King Aye was the successor to the famed King Tutankhamen and the father of Nefertiti. He died around 1320 BCE.
The world’s first pictorial records of actual target shooting come from ancient Egypt. Several kings who ruled during the 18th dynasty (1543-1292 BCE), including King Ay, left tomb or other inscriptions depicting them shooting bows from moving chariots at targets. Their targets typically hold arrows from several previous shots, all in tight groups that confirm their skills as marksmen, charioteers and warriors and therefore their fitness to rule. The oldest record of target shooting actually portrays a woman, Queen Hatshepsut. A stone relief carving of the Regent Queen shows her shooting arrows from a moving chariot at a cylindrical target that is held by two slaves. The Queen apparently was sufficiently skilled at hitting the target that the safety of the slave target holders was not a concern.

1,400 BCE – The First Marksmanship Instruction

Ancient Egypt’s 18th Dynasty was a great military state that ruled over the entire known world. Achieving world dominance required a huge army of trained warriors. This scene from a Theban tomb painting depicts military marksmanship training that emphasized the critical role instructors play in teaching marksmanship skills and the high esteem that these ancient peoples had for accuracy in hitting the middle of the target.
The Biblical record of the David and Goliath duel (1Sam. 17): “Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead….So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone.”

The Biblical story of David and Goliath is a well-known, legendary account of accuracy with a projectile weapon. David, a young shepherd and future King of Israel, accepted the challenge of Goliath, a giant Philistine warrior, to an epic duel between the champions of the two armies to decide which army would become subject to the other. David chose a simple sling and stone as his weapon. In their high stakes combat, David hurled his stone with such force and accuracy that it struck Goliath on his forehead and killed him, hitting the only vulnerable part of his body not protected by armor. David’s marksmanship feat embraced the essence of competition marksmanship, extreme skill and precision performed under the psychological pressure of knowing the consequences of missing the mark.

750 BCE – Marksmanship in Greek Mythology

The *Iliad*, written by the Ancient Greek poet Homer, presents the first known literary record of a marksmanship contest. Book 23 of the *Iliad* describes funeral games held by Achilles to honor the fallen hero Patroclus. Greek funeral games featured sports competitions that many scholars see as the origin of the Ancient Olympics. One of Achilles’ funeral games contests was an archery
competition where the winner would be the first contestant to hit a dove tied to the top of a tall pole. Teucer drew lots to shoot first and missed the dove, but his arrow cut the cord that tied the dove to the pole. The dove flew up toward the clouds, but Meriones pledged a suitable sacrifice to the gods and felled the flying dove with his arrow to win the prize. Similar competitions to see who could shoot a bird tied to a tall pole with an arrow or crossbow bolt became popular marksmanship contests in many countries during the Middle Ages.

1200 AD – The First Shooting Clubs

City councils and the territorial nobles in Medieval German cities placed great value on having their citizens well practiced in using crossbows. They recognized that this strengthened their ability to defend their cities. Shooting ranges were erected to encourage crossbow practice, usually just outside the city wall. When the citizens realized how much they enjoyed the camaraderie of their shooting practice sessions, they decided to form shooting clubs. Their shooting clubs soon began to organize shooting festivals or competitions where they invited shooters from other cities to participate. The oldest shooting clubs were founded in the 11th and 12th centuries and most of those clubs are still active today.
**1307 – William Tell and Swiss Independence**

One of the world’s best-known marksmanship sagas features the legendary Swiss hero, William Tell. Tell’s skill and exploits as an expert crossbow marksman are part of the story of the Swiss struggle for independence and the establishment of the Swiss Confederation in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. According to the Tell legend, a tyrannical Austrian Habsburg bailiff ordered Swiss citizens to pay homage to his hat that he hung in a town square. Tell refused, and as punishment, the bailiff forced him to shoot an apple off his son’s head. Tell hit the mark, but he was then taken captive by the bailiff. Tell later escaped, shot the bailiff from ambush and went on to help organize the Swiss forces that expelled the Austrians from Switzerland.

**1500 – A Patron Saint for Shooters**

The growth of shooting clubs and the active roles shooters played in the social, cultural and religious lives of their cities led to the designation of a Patron Saint for shooters. St. Sebastian was a 3rd century Christian martyr who is commonly depicted in art as having been tied to a tree and shot with arrows. An early 16th century altar painting by Hans Holbein memorialized St. Sebastian’s martyrdom, but it also illuminates marksmanship practices of that era. The crossbowmen in the
painting are performing three phases of crossbow shooting as it was practiced in the early 1500s: cocking (lower left), loading (upper right) and shooting (upper left).

1504 – A Swiss Crossbow Shooting Tournament

The Great Shooting Festival at Zurich, Switzerland in 1504 may have been the biggest international competition of the 16th century. The competition lasted six weeks and included crossbow marksmen from several different cities as far away as Cologne in Germany and Venice in Italy. The illustration provides many details about target shooting competitions in the 15th and 16th centuries. The competitors (upper left), sat on stools and shot their crossbows, in turn, at a round wooden target (on right). A target marker worked from a small hut below the target and used a paddle to show the locations of each shot. These contests typically attracted many spectators who are shown watching the competition from the sides of the range.

1824 – The First Swiss Federal Shooting Festival

The official print of the 1st Swiss Federal Shooting Festival in Aarau shows the City of Aarau on the right and the shooting range (right center) that was built for this occasion. The cannon signaled the start and stop of each day’s
The first Swiss Federal Shooting Festival (Eidgenössisches Schützenfest) was organized in Aarau, Switzerland in 1824, the year of the founding of the Swiss National Shooting Federation. Competitors shot percussion rifles in unsupported positions at targets that were 540 shoe lengths ("Schuh Berner Mass") away. There were seven events where 10,000 Francs in cash prizes as well as silver and other prizes were awarded. This competition started a tradition that continues to the present day. Huge Swiss Federal Shooting Festivals are organized in different cities every five years. The 1969 Eidgenössisches, for example, attracted over 90,000 competitors.

1848 – The First Marksmanship Instruction in the USA

Organized target shooting began to emerge as a sport in the young nation of the United States of America in the early 1800s. The USA’s first marksmanship instruction publication appeared in 1848 when a civil engineer and sport shooting enthusiast named John Ratcliffe Chapman published Instructions to Young Marksman, with a sub-title that read: “in all that relates to the general construction, practical manipulation, causes and liability to error in making accurate performances, and the theoretic principles upon which such accurate performances are founded.” Chapman’s book expounded on the techniques of shooting rifles from benches while striving for accuracy as well as the skills of accurate standing position shooting.
1800s – German Shooting Festivals

A liberal idealist, Prince Ernst II of Saxe, Coburg and Gotha spearheaded the founding of the German Shooting Federation (Deutscher Schützenbund) in 1861. Prince Ernst II wanted to unify the divided German states into one nation and envisioned the forming of national organizations of singers, gymnasts and shooters as a way to accomplish his political goal. Unification was achieved in 1871 when Wilhelm I became the leader of the German Empire, but forming a national organization of German shooters was a step towards German unification. The new German shooting federation was comprised of thousands of clubs in virtually every city in Germany. These clubs played a prominent role in the cultural and social life of their cities and were active in organizing shooting competitions and festivals. 19th century German shooting festivals attracted massive participation in rifle standing position prize shoots where winners were decided according to the best center shots. These popular festivals also featured lots of eating, drinking, dancing and conviviality. The Schützenliesl (shooters’ maiden), who served the shooters, was a respected participant in these festivals.

1870s – International Long-Range Rifle Matches

Back positions used by 1870s long-range rifle shooters
Rifle shooting in British Empire nations focused on rifle shooting at 800, 900 and 1000 yards in variations of the prone position. Slings were not yet in use in the 19th century so the back position was often preferred. An Irish team, which won the Elcho Shield as British Empire champions in 1873, challenged a USA team to a great international team match between the two countries. The new National Rifle Association of America, which had been founded in 1861, formed the USA team. USA team members, who shot Remington and Sharps breechloaders, defeated the Irish team, which shot Rigby percussion muzzle-loaders, in 1874 at Creedmoor, Long Island, New York and again at Dollymount, Ireland in 1875. These matches were the origin of today's international long-range rifle competitions that culminate in Palma Trophy Team Matches that are contested every fourth year.

1884 – USA Distinguished Badge Program

By 1880, various U. S. Army Departments were conducting rifle competitions with M1873 Trapdoor Springfields over courses of fire that featured shooting at 200, 300 and 600 yards. All-Army Matches were conducted every two years for the top riflemen from each Army Department. General Order 12, issued in 1884 by Army Commander in Chief General Phil Sheridan, created a “Distinguished Class of Marksmen” to recognize the most consistently outstanding Army marksmen in these competitions. These marksmen became the first Distinguished Riflemen. To this day, Distinguished Badges are the most important individual marksmanship awards authorized by the U. S. Government. Today the Distinguished Badge program is administered by the CMP and the respective Armed Services. It awards Distinguished International, Rifle, Pistol, 22 Rimfire Pistol and Junior Air Rifle Badges. Earning these prestigious badges continues to be a primary goal of hundreds of America's best rifle and pistol shooters.
1896 – The Modern Olympic Games and Shooting

Pierre de Coubertin, a visionary French nobleman, formed the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 1894 with a goal of reviving the Olympic Games as a means of fostering world peace through sports competitions. When the IOC established the 1st Modern Olympic Games in 1896, Shooting was selected as one of the sports in the program. There were three pistol and two rifle events. de Coubertin, who had been a 7-time French pistol champion, played a key role in those decisions. Shooting has been on the programs of every Olympic Games since 1896, except 1904 and 1928. Even in 1896, Shooting had achieved recognition as one of the great sports of the world.

1897 – The World Shooting Championships Begin

The 1st World Shooting Championship was a 300-meter rifle competition in Lyon, France among five European nations. This 300-meter championship became an annual competition. A 50-meter pistol event was added in 1900 and many additional rifle, pistol and shotgun events were added in the years that followed. Swiss marksman Konrad Stähli won 21 World Champion titles in rifle and one in pistol between 1898 and 1914. Two World Shooting Championships were actually staged at Camp Perry, Ohio, in 1913 and 1923. The 51st World Championship was held in Granada, Spain in 2014 with over 2,000 athletes from 92 nations competing in 51 events.
1903 – The USA National Matches and CMP

A competitor in the first National Matches in 1903 shooting a U. S. Krag rifle in the prone position.

Shortly after the turn of the century, NRA leaders decided that government funding and support were needed to achieve their goals for a national marksmanship program in the USA. They began to lobby Congress to adopt their proposal to establish a “National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice” within the Department of War and to create annual “National Matches.” President Theodore Roosevelt and Secretary of War Elihu Root were enthusiastic supporters of their proposal. It became law in February 1903 and the first National Matches were held at Sea Girt, New Jersey in September 1903. The new law provided funds to transport military and National Guard personnel to the matches as well as money to purchase a “National Trophy.” This momentous law created a unified National Matches; it is also regarded as the origin of today’s Civilian Marksmanship Program (CMP).
1980 – The Modern Era in the ISSF Begins

When Olegario Vázquez Raña, a former air rifle world record holder and successful businessman from Mexico, became the 6th President of the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF) in 1980, the world governing body for Shooting changed from a European-dominated organization to a true international organization. President Vázquez Raña and his leadership team instituted several revolutionary changes that transformed Shooting into a modern Olympic sport. Those changes included separate Olympic events for women, adding air gun events to the Olympic program, accepting Olympic participation quotas, introducing electronic targets, staging “finals” to conclude Olympic events and providing live television productions. These changes promoted tremendous worldwide growth in Shooting and changed it into a spectator sport.

2016 – Shooting in the Modern Olympic Games
The sport of target shooting that emerged in the Middle Ages has now evolved from wooden targets and crossbows, through matchlock, flintlock, percussion and cartridge firearms to modern air guns and electronic targets. Today target shooting with rifles, pistols and shotguns has become one of the biggest and most popular Olympic sports as well as one of the most widely practiced participation sports in the world with 75 to 100 million shooters of all ages. Shooting is a sport that truly inspires the passion of its participants whether they are an Olympic Games’ first gold medal winner (Il Siling, China, London 2012) or a young junior shooter firing her first shots at a target.