

## Ways to Improve Youth Shooting Programs

# Ways to Improve Youth Shooting Programs: Ideas for making Junior Shooting more effective and appealing

By Gary Anderson, DCM Emeritus

Junior shooting in America faces two daunting challenges, one internal and one external. The internal challenge is to critically and continually examine itself to improve instructional materials, coach training and competition programs. The external challenge is to become more effective in competing against other youth sports to attract the interests and loyalties of youth. Junior shooters compete against each other in the first instance; youth shooting competes against other youth sports in the second instance.

This ***On the Mark*** article offers an action program of ideas and initiatives youth shooting leaders can pursue to make their rifle and pistol training and competition programs more effective in developing young shooting athletes, more appealing to youth and parents and more competitive with other youth sports programs.

Junior shooting in the USA has done a lot in the last two decades to improve itself, but the competition is fierce. School sports programs are among the leading promoters of youth sports in the USA, but most school programs focus on football, basketball and baseball for boys and soccer and volleyball for girls. Their huge numbers help to make the challenge youth shooting faces clear. Football for boys has 1.1 million participants nationwide. Track & Field for both boys and girls has almost 1.1 million youth. Basketball for boys and girls has almost one million. Soccer for boys and girls has about 800,000. Volleyball for girls has just under 500,000 participants. Youth shooting is a

recognized high school sport in Georgia and Hawaii and is accepted as a JROTC school sport in all states, however, definitive national participation statistics are not available. A reasonable estimate is that there are 30,000 to 40,000 participants on school shooting teams in the USA.

The most popular youth club sports for boys are football, basketball, baseball and soccer. For girls, the most popular sports are basketball, volleyball, softball and soccer. Those numbers are also huge. US Youth Soccer, for example, claims over three million registered players from under six to 19 years of age. Membership in traditional junior shooting clubs, in comparison, is also on the order of 30,000 to 40,000. Youth shooting has a long ways to go to compete with the biggest youth sports. This clearly defines a challenge for everyone in national and local leadership positions for youth shooting.

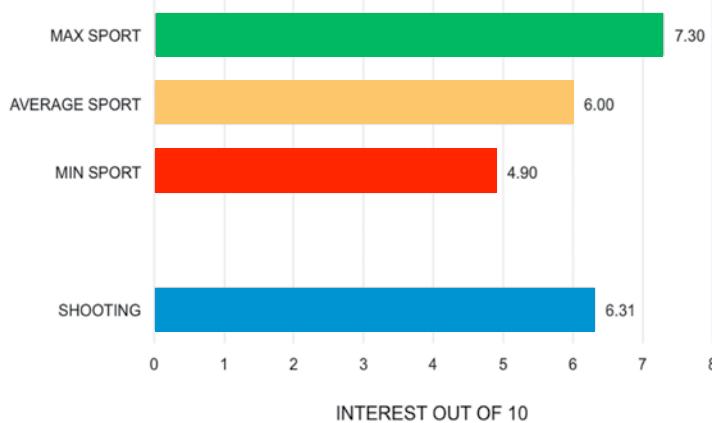
### Shooting Really is Popular with Youth

If anyone has any doubts about shooting's ability to attract youth, a worldwide survey conducted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) after the 2016 Olympic Games should remove those doubts. They asked youth in 20 countries in Europe, Asia, the Americas, Africa and Australia to rate all sports in the summer Olympics. Respondents were shown the list of 28 Olympic sports and asked to rate them on a 10-point scale with 1 meaning they were "not interested at all" and 10 meaning they were "extremely interested."

*The Antolik panorama mural (below) on the south wall of the 10m range in the Gary Anderson CMP Competition Center at Camp Perry, Ohio, is one of the shooting world's best examples of the use of art and color to make shooting ranges more appealing.*



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**FAVORITE SPORTS AMONG YOUTH – WORLDWIDE**

*The IOC's worldwide survey of youth showed that their personal interest in Shooting was higher than that in the average Olympic Sport.*

The good news from this IOC survey is that youth throughout the world rated shooting above the average Olympic sport and in the top half of all Olympic sports. The highest ratings were in India where youth gave shooting an average rating of 7.57 out of 10. The next highest ratings were in China (7.33), Korea (6.63) and the USA (6.33). This professional survey tells us that youth all over the world consider shooting to be a highly appealing and interesting sport.

Youth Shooting Sports leaders should start efforts to improve their programs with the knowledge that youth are interested in shooting, consider it to be a very attractive sport and would like to participate in it. Youth shooting leaders must recognize that it is not difficult to interest youth in shooting. Their challenge, as articulated in the CMP corporate vision, is to offer high quality youth shooting programs in many more American communities.

## Topics to Consider in Making Junior Competitions Better

- **Shooting Really is Popular with Youth**
- **Shooting is a Sport for Girls and Boys**
- **Initiate a Range Improvement Program**
- **Highlight Shooting Heroes**
- **Shoot in More Competitions**
- **Provide Total Athlete Experiences**
- **Encourage Spectators and Fans**
- **Start a Local Development Program**
- **Support Leadership Development**



## Ways to Improve Youth Shooting Programs

**THE VISION OF THE CIVILIAN MARKSMANSHIP PROGRAM IS THAT EVERY YOUTH IN AMERICA HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE IN FIREARMS SAFETY AND MARKSMANSHIP PROGRAMS.**

### Shooting is a Sport for Girls and Boys

The world standard for sport in the 21st century is gender equality. Both sexes must be equally welcome in all sports; 50 percent of youth sports participants must be female. The leading organization in promoting equality in sports is the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the governing body for the Olympic Games. The IOC's blueprint for the future, **Agenda 2020**, establishes a goal "to achieve 50 percent female participation in the Olympic Games." This goal extends far beyond the Olympic Games and challenges all sports organizations, including youth sports programs, to work towards real gender equality.

Fortunately, many youth shooting programs in the USA are already in full compliance with this equality standard. Most junior school and club teams are not only open to female participation, many are close to the 50-50 standard for girls and boys. In fact, teams that do not include girls are probably at a disadvantage. In 3-position air rifle, where both sexes compete together, females hold more than half of the national records. The few junior clubs that continue with all boys or a few token girls need to take the necessary steps to welcome female participants. These steps should also include developing female leaders as coaches and range officers.

### Initiate a Range Improvement Program

One of the best ways to attract more youth and parents to shooting is to make shooting ranges more comfortable and attractive. Too many shooting ranges are still poorly lighted facilities decorated in dreary shades of gray and black. A range improvement program can change that.



IOC President Dr. Thomas Bach (r.), shown here with ISSF President Olegario Vázquez Raña (l.) said: "Olympic Agenda 2020 underscores the IOC's commitment to gender equality by calling for a 50 percent female participation at the Olympic Games."

Using Olympic Games shooting venues as a model may sound unrealistic, but Olympic "Look" examples are not that difficult to emulate. Olympic "Look" schemes make sports facilities more attractive by using color themes and graphics. There are lots of things club and school ranges can do to make their facilities more attractive:

- Provide a clubroom or assembly area next to the range where participants and visitors can relax, enjoy social contacts and prepare for shooting.



These Olympic "Look" examples in the Rio 2016 Olympic shooting venue illustrate several low cost treatments to make ranges more attractive: 1) a color scheme, 2) a clean, painted floor, 3) dynamic graphics, 4) a modern shooting pictogram and a countdown clock.

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- Adopt a color scheme with bright, appealing colors; paint the assembly area and the range.
- Find shooting posters or make banners with shooting graphics for placement on assembly room walls.
- Provide better lighting for both the targets and firing line; 1,500 to 2,000 lux on the targets is recommended; 800 to 1000 lux is needed on the firing line.
- Place a countdown clock on the range; shooting athletes must be able to control their pace and timing.
- Adopt a lead management program that follows recommended hygiene and cleaning practices to protect the health of participants.

### **Highlight Shooting Heroes**

Athletes who become great champions while demonstrating sportsmanship, fair play and extraordinary hard work are an inspiration to almost all youth. Placing photos of shooting champions and brief descriptions of their accomplishments on range assembly room walls is an effective way to make their inspiring personal stories available to young shooters. Photos of shooting champions in firing positions also reinforce coaching instructions.

Young shooters in the USA are especially blessed to have the first gold medalist of the 2016 Olympic Games, Ginny Thrasher, as a role model. Thrasher's path to Olympic gold involved her in programs like 3-position air rifle competitions and CMP junior rifle camps that are now available to junior shooters all over the USA.

A key reason for highlighting young heroes is to build on the "Olympic dream." Most young shooters will not aspire to win medals in the Olympic Games, but the pride they gain by knowing they are part of an Olympic sport can benefit all junior shooting programs. Shooting's status as an Olympic sport makes it more appealing to youth.

### **Shoot in More Competitions**

Youth shooting programs should offer more than lessons on gun safety and how to shoot. When youth learn sports skills, most will want to test those skills in competitions. Successful youth sports offer competition opportunities that emphasize participation and skill development and are managed by qualified officials. Here are some ways to do that:

- **Evaluate competition procedures.** The best youth sports competitions are governed by national standard rules and are conducted by trained, certified competition officials. Programs that sponsor competitions must make sure they follow the appropriate National Council, CMP, USA Shooting or NRA rulebook. The CMP is



*USA shooting athlete Virginia Thrasher (center) won the first gold medal in the 2016 Olympic Games. Photos like this posted in a shooting range almost certainly can inspire young shooters to take pride in shooting and work harder on their own skills.*

developing a comprehensive, new Range Officer Training Program to ensure that trained officials are available to conduct junior competitions.

- **Annual competition plans.** Successful youth shooting programs need annual competition plans so youth and parents know what is available to them. Air rifle, PPP air pistol and BB gun programs now have Orion National League programs that offer internet-based, virtual matches as season-starters. Virtual leagues can be especially useful for teams where there are no other teams within reasonable driving distances. Where there are other teams in nearby communities, shoulder-to-shoulder matches should be scheduled. In addition, every junior team should plan to participate in annual qualifying competitions for CMP, Junior Olympic and JROTC national championships. More advanced programs always include selected major competitions and national championships in their competition plans.

- **Include finals in junior matches.** Finals make competitions more exciting and offer conditions that are more like other youth sports. Competing with the best athletes in front of audiences that cheer when scores are announced after every shot can be just as exciting as scoring a touchdown in football or kicking a goal in soccer. The problem junior clubs face is that finals are designed for electronic targets that very few junior clubs can afford. That, however, does not mean clubs shooting

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### Links to explore for finding new competition opportunities:

- Orion National Leagues (air rifle and BB gun) <http://www.orionscoringsystem.com/orion/Home.aspx>
- National Three-Position Air Rifle Championships (CMP and Junior Olympic 3-PAR) <http://thecmp.org/air/national-three-position-air-rifle-championships/>
- USA Shooting Junior Olympic Championship (rifle and pistol) <http://www.usashooting.org/7-events/njosc>
- USA Shooting Youth Pistol Program (PPP) <http://www.usashooting.org/membership/youth-programs/youthpistol>

on paper targets cannot conduct finals. Clubs with Orion electronic scoring can use volunteer spotters who estimate the values of each shot for entry into a spreadsheet. This allows “provisional” rankings to be announced after each shot. With Orion, targets can be retrieved immediately after the last shot and scored within a minute or two so final results can be announced.

### Provide Total Athlete Experiences

Youth who participate in most sports are expected to follow strict practice schedules with regular training activities every week. Practices in most youth sports begin with stretching and warm-up drills, include skills instruction and end with conditioning exercises. Too often in youth shooting, team members show up when they feel like it, start shooting without any warm-ups and end their training with their last shots. When young shooters compare these kinds of experiences with their friends in other youth sports it's easy to conclude they are not practicing a real sport. Here are some ways to be sure youth shooting participants have “total athlete experiences”:

- Establish team rules where team members are expected to attend all practice sessions, except during real family or study emergencies.
- Start every shooting session with warm-up and stretching exercises.

- Designate a dry fire area in the range assembly area. Have rifle and pistol shooters practice aiming and dry fire exercises to warm-up before shooting.

- End every practice with fitness training. Rifle athletes should emphasize aerobic training. Pistol athletes should emphasize strength training for shoulders, arms and hands.

- Encourage team members who have their own equipment to establish home training programs (air gun or dry firing).

- Build pride by wearing sport-oriented team uniforms during competitions. Have a dress code and encourage team members to dress and act like athletes.

### Encourage Spectators and Fans

Boys and girls who participate in most youth sports play in front of audiences. There are bleachers on the sides of the field of play where spectators watch games. Most are parents, relatives and friends, but they are spectators and they cheer enthusiastically. This is an area where youth shooting is not competitive with other youth sports. Most junior shooting ranges barely have enough room for a relay of competitors and one or two Range Officers. Concluding that shooting is not a spectator sport is not acceptable, however. Progressive youth shooting programs must seek ways to encourage spectators and fans.



*Including finals in junior matches, especially where spectators can be present, is one of the best ways to make youth shooting competitions more like other youth sports.*

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- Start with simple things like keeping the assembly area clean and providing small tables and chairs where visitors can sit down and visit while shooting takes place.

- The rapid scoring of targets and display of results can make the spectator experience much better. Many junior matches now use Orion Scoring Systems (<https://www.orionscoringsystem.com/orion/Home.aspx>) to quickly produce updated electronic scoreboards for display in the assembly room. The Orion system scans and scores targets within a minute or two after they come out of the range so scores, ranked in leader board order, can be displayed on a computer or flat screen TV.

- One of the most innovative and productive ways to bring fans to youth shooting is by promoting Internet fans. The ISSF has been successful in developing a worldwide audience for World Cup competitions (<http://www.issfsports.org/>) by offering live results display and video live streaming. The Orion Scoring System has pioneered in the posting of near-live results for junior competitions. Each Orion user has its own webpage where match results are posted on the Internet as targets are scored. Coaches and junior shooters promote Internet fans by providing match site links to family and friends. 4-H BB gun matches have been remarkably successful in attracting Internet fans. Orion reported an average of nearly 800 hits per BB gun match in 2016. The Orion system also allows individual competitors to tweet images of their shot groups and scores through their personal Twitter™ accounts, which becomes yet another way to engage Internet fans.

- Match sponsors can make youth shooting more appealing by applying sports presentation techniques during shooting competitions. Modern sports presentation methods include the use of music before and during competitions, athlete introductions, announcer comments in competitions and efforts to celebrate winners as soon as they are known.

## Start a Local Development Program

One of the weaknesses in USA junior shooting programs is that the path from starter programs like 4-H BB gun shooting to clubs or schools that sponsor 3-position air rifle or smallbore rifle programs is not integrated. These programs are almost always run by separate organizations. 4-H programs typically start youth at age nine or



*International ranges now must provide warm-up or dry fire areas like this. The photo shows pistol athletes in a World Cup warming up before a training session. The athletes are doing aiming exercises on a blank wall.*

ten, but they are finished at age 15. School programs start at age 14 and end at age 17 or 18.

Junior club programs may start at a younger age, but graduation from high school is usually the end for most junior club shooting. Juniors fortunate enough to shoot on a college team face another four-year start and stop experience.

There are advantages to starting youth at younger ages and BB gun programs are a great way to do that. BB gun shooting is generally fun-oriented and does a great job of teaching safe gun handling and basic position skills while introducing youth to the rewards of competition. Where there are both a 4-H Shooting Sports Club and a junior club or school program in the same community, they should form a partnership that allows older BB gun youth to automatically advance to 10m or 50 foot three-position shooting.

2017 Area Five NJROTC Championship				
Team - Spoter				
Rank	Participant	Prone	Standing	Kneeling
1	King George 1	746 - 17	637 - 5	681 - 9
2	Calvert 1	735 - 24	608 - 4	690 - 14
3	Patuxent 1	754 - 27	601 - 4	673 - 12
4	Annapolis 1	741 - 24	583 - 5	683 - 14
5	Thomas Johnson 1	712 - 15	582 - 7	651 - 5
6	Herndon 1	733 - 17	561 - 2	640 - 8
7	Loudon County 1	689 - 10	558 - 7	613 - 4
8	Calvert 2	680 - 10	543 - 4	616 - 7
9	King George 2	172 - 3	123 - 0	163 - 2
10	Thomas Johnson 2	686 - 9	491 - 2	633 - 7
11	Norview 1	675 - 12	512 - 2	616 - 5
12	James River	720 - 17	476 - 3	591 - 4
13	Norview 2	665 - 11	482 - 0	587 - 2
14	Kennedy 1	686 - 10	443 - 2	579 - 6
15	Osborn Park 1	665 - 11	464 - 2	573 - 4
16	Thomas Johnson 3	679 - 13	463 - 1	533 - 2
17	Huntington 1	659 - 7	453 - 1	563 - 2
18	Annnarie 2	698 - 14	455 - 1	513 - 4

For complete results visit [www.orionresults.com/laplata](http://www.orionresults.com/laplata)



*An Orion electronic leader board for a 3-position air rifle team competition. Incomplete scores are ranked according to 10-shot series averages. Every Orion user has a web-page link that it can give to Internet fans so they can check results during competitions.*

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Where there is no established BB gun program, junior clubs should consider offering younger youth in their communities an eight to 12-week BB gun shooting orientation course. It can teach gun safety, the shooting positions, basic shot techniques and offer an introduction to informal inter-club competition. The Daisy Shooting Education Program offers a “Ten Lesson Guide” for use in starting a BB gun course for younger juniors (<https://www.daisy.com/education>). Youth who enjoy this experience and want to continue shooting can then be invited to join the club’s regular shooting program.

Junior clubs that focus on smallbore rifle shooting should consider offering an eight to ten session Rimfire Sporter Rifle orientation course for youth in their communities. The **CMP Guide to Rimfire Sporter Rifle Shooting** offers rules, instruction and competition guidelines (<http://thecmp.org/wp-content/uploads/Rimfire.pdf>). Linking junior air rifle and smallbore programs to state junior highpower rifle programs is also a viable option for a broad-based development program.

Another shooter development option that makes a lot of sense in some communities is for junior rifle clubs to become “junior shooting clubs” that offer both rifle and pistol competition options. Junior pistol shooting is held back because junior shooting organizations are almost all junior rifle clubs. This means that when a young person joins a junior shooting program, they have only one choice, rifle. They will never learn about pistol opportunities or have a chance to try pistol shooting. 4-H Shooting Sports has been an encouraging exception to this. Many 4-H clubs do offer pistol options.

One way junior shooting clubs can expand their program opportunities is to become a true junior shooting club that offers both rifle and pistol competition options. A good way to do this is to require new enrollees to complete a basic rifle safety course where new shooters learn gun safety, safe range procedures and marksmanship basics. The course should end with a presentation on rifle and pistol competition opportunities that regular club members will have. New shooters can then choose which path to follow.

To do this successfully, it will be necessary to recruit and train new adult volunteers to lead the club pistol program. Start by studying the **CMP Guide to Junior Pistol Shooting**. Download it from the CMP website at <http://thecmp.org/wp-content/uploads/JrPistolGuide.pdf>. Pistol coach training is available from USA Shooting and the NRA.



Youth shooting programs should consider offering BB gun or Rimfire Sporter Rifle orientation courses as a way to introduce younger juniors to the sport of shooting.



Junior rifle clubs should consider becoming “junior shooting clubs” where youth can choose between rifle or pistol competition opportunities.

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## Support Leadership Development

One sure way to make youth shooting programs more effective and competitive is through better leadership training. A club or team must start by encouraging more parents and interested adults in the community to become coaches or range officers. A situation to avoid is a junior program that is dependent upon only one or two adult leaders. When burnout inevitably comes, that program will fold. Continuing to serve community youth with a vibrant shooting program demands a leadership development program. Fortunately, several good training and support options are available.

- The CMP offers a well-established JROTC Marksmanship Instructor Course (JMIC) for JROTC instructors and their assistant instructors (<http://thecmp.org/training-tech/jmic-jrotc-marksmanship-instructor-course/>).
- The CMP GSM Master Instructor Course teaches club instructors how to teach range safety and basic marksmanship teaching methods (<http://thecmp.org/training-tech/gsm-rifle-master-clinics/>).
- The CMP Range Officer Training Course that is being introduced in 2017 will offer comprehensive online training for 3-position air rifle range officers.
- The Safe Sport Program promoted by USA Shooting and the U. S. Olympic Committee is a must for any adult who is working with young athletes (<http://www.usashooting.org/11-resources/safesport>).
- USA Shooting has done a lot of work to provide advanced coach training for rifle and pistol coaches (<http://www.usashooting.org/membership/coaches/coachacademy>).
- The NRA is active in providing a variety of coach training programs that offer entry-level coach training (<https://coach.nra.org/>).

There are many steps the leaders of community youth shooting programs can take to pursue an action plan to improve the work they do with young shooters. The ideas and examples in this article can start this process. Ideas that come from other successful youth sports programs can lead to further improvements. Shooting is popular with youth and has the inherent, positive qualities that give its participants outstanding personal growth experiences. Youth shooting programs are capable of competing with other youth sports to earn the loyalties of youth and parents if youth shooting leaders will actively seek ways to make their programs better.



*The CMP is introducing a comprehensive new program to train and certify range officers and match officials in 2017. Training is a fundamental step in developing new leaders in youth shooting programs.*

## 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.

