

## A New Athlete's First Days

# A New Athlete's First Days on a Shooting Range

By Gary Anderson, DCM Emeritus



*No junior shooting program has the resources to produce a huge painted mural like this one depicting the iconic Taj Mahal on the downrange wall of a finals range in New Delhi, India. Nevertheless, this massive work of shooting range art can inspire junior shooting programs to produce modest artistic displays on their shooting ranges. The messages shooting range art conveys to youth and their parents should be obvious.*

The first days a young person who wants to learn how to shoot spends on a shooting range will have a decisive impact on their future in the sport of shooting, whether they progress to become successful competitive shooters, lifelong shooting sports participants or citizens who look back at their junior shooting experiences with fond and positive memories. This ***On the Mark*** article examines what those first impressions and lessons should be. There are lessons on gun safety, safe range firing procedures and how to clear, load and unload rifles or pistols that youth must be taught before firing can begin. There are other lessons that are taught in indirect ways through the range environment and the words and actions of coaches and adult leaders. These include learning how shooting is a sport, how the program is committed to protecting junior athletes' safety and health and how the program will help them achieve excellence while respecting the bounds of ethics and fair play.

This article is especially oriented to the development of new coaches, adult leaders and junior programs. Information in this article should be part of their training. The topics in this article can also be used by any junior shooting program to evaluate their instruction, range firing and competition activities to be sure their youth are having safe, enjoyable and healthy experiences.

## The Shooting Range Environment

The first impressions new shooters and their parents have regarding the sport of shooting are likely to be visual and aural. If the shooting range is well-lighted and clean, its furniture and equipment are neatly arranged and its walls display attractive messages or images of target shooting, those first impressions will be positive and encourage further active participation. What new youth and their parents hear on a range will also be decisive. If the coach and range officers speak in calm, respectful terms and if the youth who are there speak with voices that show how they are enjoying themselves, that too will be a positive motivator.

There are several steps junior programs and leaders can take to ensure that the first and lasting impressions of young participants on shooting ranges are positive:

- Keep the shooting range clean, orderly and painted in warm colors.
- Make sure the instructional area, firing line and targets are all well lighted.
- Find instructional posters or photos to place on the walls. All images should portray shooting as a sport.
- Display images of shooting heroes to inspire athletes to strive for excellence.
- Have a firm policy that expects coaches and adult leaders to speak firmly and respectfully to youth, and never to yell or use abusive language.

## Shooting is a Sport

One of the first lessons to convey and continually reaffirm is that young shooters are participating in a sport. Help them understand how target shooting is a sport in the same way soccer, basketball, swimming and gymnastics are sports. The modern marksmanship sports, shooting, biathlon and modern pentathlon, have histories that go back to the training of warriors and soldiers, but today they are sports and are no longer about military, police, hunting or self-protection training.

It may be helpful to explain how so many modern sports originated as life protection or martial activities, but today have become pure sports. Archery, fencing and throwing the javelin in athletics are obvious examples. Wrestling, boxing and taekwondo began as forms of hand-to-hand combat. Equestrian activities once figured prominently in military training. Gymnastics and weightlifting were practiced to better prepare soldiers for the rigors of war.

Participants must be taught to think of themselves as athletes in a sport and of their rifles and pistols as sports equipment. The vocabulary used by coaches and adult leaders is critical in teaching this. The term “weapons” should not be used; rifles and pistols used in target shooting should be described as sports equipment in the same way that a skier’s skis are sports equipment. Another key word is to call participants in the sport of shooting “athletes,” just as participants in youth soccer, volleyball and baseball are called athletes.

Learning about the fascinating history of target marksmanship can become a source of pride for juniors. A starting point for sharing this heritage with youth could be an **On the Mark** article (Winter 2016) titled the “*History of Marksmanship*.”<sup>1</sup> Coaches who are aware of this 3,500 year history will know how humankind’s marksmanship purposes have changed from enhancing combat effectiveness and civic protection to producing higher scores in sports contests while focusing competitive energies against inanimate targets, never against opponents. In this sense, target shooting is a sport that teaches non-violence.



The three key components in the sport of shooting are the athlete, a rifle, pistol or shotgun (sports equipment) and a target. In shooting, an athlete’s competitive energies are directed against the target, never directly against an opponent.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR SCORING RIFLE SPORTER TARGETS**

**TARGET SCORING INTEGRITY:**  
Anyone who acts as a target scorer is serving as a match official. Scorers are responsible for accurately and impartially scoring all shots on the targets they score.

**SCORING IN PAIRS:** A convenient method of scoring is for competitors to score in pairs. In this method, competitors on odd and even numbered firing points exchange (evenly 10, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, etc.) and score for each other. If family members or close friends are present, they may assist in this exchange.

**SCORING:**  
1. Check if they are in  
2. Count 1 score then the 10  
3. Score a score of 10 on and above  
4. Score a score of 10 on and above  
5. Score a score of 10 on and above  
6. Score a score of 10 on and above  
7. After all stage and 10 scores  
8. After all stage and 10 scores

**HOW TO BUILD A STABLE PRONE POSITION**

**STEP 1:** Place the shooting mat or ground cloth on a 20-30 degree angle to the firing line. Kneel on the mat, put the sling on the arm and prepare to lie down. Be sure the sling is extended so it will be too long at first.

**STEP 2:** Lie down on the mat. Extend the left elbow to support the rifle and upper body. Imagine a straight line from the left hand down the left side of the body to the left foot. Place the left elbow under that "spine."

**STEP 3:** Place the butt plate in the shoulder as looking through the sights is comfortable. Adjust the height of the rifle by moving the left hand forward or backward until the sights are at target level. Keep the sling loose during this step.

**STEP 4:** With the sights at target level tighten the loose sling until it is tight enough to fully support the weight of the rifle. Then rotate the body over the left elbow (pivot point) until the sights point naturally at the correct target.

**HOW TO BUILD A GREAT STANDING POSITION**

**STANDING Position Key:**  
1. 90 degree body turn  
2. Left elbow directly under the rifle  
3. Erect, comfortable head position  
4. Hand-orient configuration allows rifle to target  
5. Position is relaxed and balanced over both feet

**STEPS TO BUILDING A GREAT STANDING POSITION:**  
Step 1 - Take your position on the firing line with your rifle. TURN YOUR BODY 90 DEGREES AWAY FROM THE TARGET. Your left side and hip should point towards the target.  
Step 2 - Lean back slightly as you shoulder the rifle. Place the butt plate high enough in your shoulder to give you a reasonably erect head position. Keep your wrist straight as you hold the rifle.  
Step 3 - Support the rifle with your left arm resting on your left side or hip. Let the left arm relax onto your side WITH THE LEFT ELBOW DIRECTLY UNDER THE RIFLE.  
Step 4 - Relax as you hold the rifle. If the sights point above or below the target, change your hand-wrist configuration to a lower (a below) or higher (b or c) hand position.

**HOW TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE SITTING POSITION**

There are two good sitting positions: crouch-legged and cross-legged. The best choice for each shooter depends on their body proportions. Shooters with proportionally longer arms and/or longer torso are best suited for the cross-legged position. Shooters with proportionally shorter arms and longer torso are best suited for the crouch-legged position. Keep shoulders ahead of crossed-leg position.

**Building a Cross-Legged Sitting Position:**  
1. Sit on the mat and turn the body 45-60 degrees away from the target.  
2. Cross the left (support) leg over the right.  
3. Pick up the rifle and put the sling on-keep it long and loose just like you started in prone.  
4. Shoulder the rifle to be sure to keep it well up in the shoulder—place the elbows in the V formed by the knees.

**Sitting Position:**  
must get both elbows down  
A leg can still build a steady crossing the left leg over the right with the left elbow on the arm remains free just as in a kneeling position.

Placing instructional posters on shooting club or classroom walls helps to make a program’s training more effective.

<sup>1</sup>This OTM article can be downloaded at [http://thecmp.org/wp-content/uploads/OTM\\_History-of-Marksmanship\\_web.pdf](http://thecmp.org/wp-content/uploads/OTM_History-of-Marksmanship_web.pdf).

## A New Athlete's First Days

### FUNDAMENTAL GUN SAFETY RULES

*Whenever handling guns on or off the range, always apply these safety rules:*

- *Keep gun muzzles pointed in safe directions, never at another person.*
- *Keep gun actions open and unloaded until you are authorized to shoot.*
- *Keep your finger off of the trigger until starting to aim at your target.*

An early lesson that resonates with youth is learning that shooting is an Olympic sport. It is one of 28 sports on the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic program and is actually

members of their high school or JROTC rifle teams and hundreds who go on to shoot on college rifle teams.

one of the most popular Olympic sports. In the 2016 Olympics, shooting proved its popularity when the 15 shooting finals attracted an average worldwide television audience of 48.1 million viewers.<sup>2</sup>

Very few junior programs will ever have an athlete become an Olympian, but all young athletes in shooting can live the Olympic dream by practicing the Olympic values of "excellence, fair play and respect." Moreover, thousands of programs will have juniors compete as

### SAFETY FLAG USE IS MANDATORY



### Gun Safety Knowledge and Performance

Every junior shooting program must be prepared to present gun safety instruction before participants can begin shooting. It is not necessary to devote a lot of time to this instruction, but it is absolutely essential that these topics be taught and understood:<sup>3</sup>

• **Fundamental Gun Handling Rules.** The starting point for all marksmanship activities is making sure participants know and practice basic safety rules. Three fundamental, redundant rules focus on key features of every gun, the: 1) Muzzle, 2) Action and 3) Trigger. These rules are simple, but active supervision is required to help new athletes master the habits of always pointing gun muzzles in safe directions and keeping their fingers outside of trigger guards until starting to aim.

• **Safety Flags.** A safety flag is a device inserted in rifles or pistols to visibly confirm that guns are unloaded and cleared. Depending upon the type of gun being used, the safety flag may have a probe that inserts into empty chambers and a flag that protrudes from an open action or it may be a length

<sup>2</sup>Shooting's average worldwide viewership of 48.1 million ranked well above the average Olympic sport that had 40.9 viewers and compared favorably with the highest ranked sport that had an average of 62.4 million viewers.

<sup>3</sup>Many air rifle programs use a CMP publication entitled "A Junior Shooter's Guide to Air Rifle Safety" as a student text for teaching rifle safety and safe range procedures. Copies of this guide are available free from the CMP or copies may be downloaded at <http://thecmp.org/wp-content/uploads/JrSafetyGuidetoARSAFETY.pdf>.



of weed trimmer cord that protrudes from both the breech and muzzle when inserted in the bore. Rifles and pistols used on target ranges must have safety flags inserted in them at all times except when on a designated firing line during authorized dry or live firing.

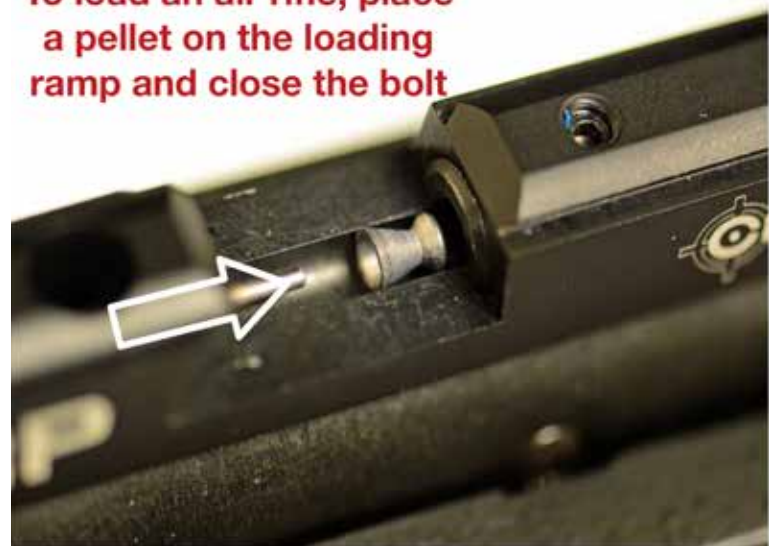
• **Rifle and Pistol Terminology.** While teaching safe gun handling, range procedures and marksmanship techniques, it is necessary to use specific terms to describe parts of rifles or pistols. To be sure all youth understand terms being used, programs should obtain or create charts like the one illustrated above and post them on the range.

• **Parts of the Shooting Range.** Another set of terms that needs to be taught early are the parts of a shooting range and what their functions are. Key parts of target ranges are: 1) the assembly area or ready area, 2) firing line, 3) firing points, 4) targets and 5) backstop. The firing line has particular significance in ensuring range safety. It is a defined line at the front of the firing points that firers cannot touch or step in front of, except after the range is cleared, and the Range Officer authorizes downrange movement.

### HOW TO LOAD AN AIR GUN



To load an air rifle, place a pellet on the loading ramp and close the bolt



### A CLEARED GUN

1. Is UNLOADED
2. Has an empty or removed MAGAZINE
3. Has an open BOLT or ACTION
4. Has a SAFETY FLAG inserted
5. Has been CHECKED by a Range Officer

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### STANDARD RANGE COMMANDS

- **TAKE YOUR POSITIONS**
- **YOUR PREPARATION PERIOD STARTS NOW**
- **YOUR PREPARATION PERIOD HAS ENDED**
- **LOAD**
- **IS THE LINE READY?**
- **START**
- **STOP**
- **CLEAR ALL RIFLES/PISTOLS**
- **IS THE LINE CLEAR?**
- **THE LINE IS CLEAR**

• **Safe Loading Procedures.** New athletes must learn two safety-critical procedures before they can do any live firing: 1) how to clear their rifle or pistol and 2) how to load and unload it. The word “cleared” is an especially important term in controlling range safety. Learning how to clear a gun starts with learning how to open and close the gun’s action. With that established, teaching how to load and unload the gun can proceed. Depending upon the gun being used, there are fixed steps to follow to properly load and unload it. Charts or instructional slides like the one on the previous page should be developed to provide instruction. Visually checking gun chambers (and magazines) is the standard way to make sure firearms are unloaded.

The only sure way to confirm that air rifles or air pistols are unloaded is to insert an air gun safety flag (clear barrel indicator).

• **Dry Firing.** Initial instruction must explain dry firing, namely that it is cocking the firing mechanism without loading a cartridge or pellet and going through the steps for firing a shot to simulate the firing of a shot. It is an especially effective method of practice. Good programs incorporate dry firing repetitions in most range firing exercises. Developing a positive attitude towards dry firing and its benefits is an invaluable early lesson for successful future shooters.

• **Range Safety Procedures.** Range safety procedures ensure the well-being of all competitors, Range Officers and spectators. This instruction can be brief, but it is necessary for everyone who fires on supervised ranges to know these key concepts:

- There is always someone in charge. This may be a Range Officer or Coach, but their instructions and commands must be followed. All actions on the range are controlled with standard commands given by Range Officers.
- Assemble in the ready area with equipment and move onto the firing line only when instructed to do so.
- After athletes are called to a firing line, there will be a pre-preparation period and a formal preparation period. Athletes may set up equipment and take their firing positions during pre-preparation periods, but they may not remove safety flags. During preparation periods, they may finish their preparations, remove safety flags and dry fire. The lengths of these periods vary according to the stage of athletes’ instruction or competition rules.
- No gun may be loaded until the Range Officer has given the command **LOAD**. No one may fire a shot until the command **START**<sup>4</sup> is given.
- Firing periods in practice may or may not have time limits. Firing periods during competitions are governed by specific time limits defined in the rules.
- The command **STOP**<sup>5</sup> is given at the end of a firing period. The **STOP** command may also be given at any time in an emergency. This command must be strictly obeyed. It means take your finger off of the trigger and do not attempt to fire any more shots.
- After a **STOP** command, all rifles or pistol must be cleared and checked by a Range Officer. No gun may leave a firing line until it has been checked by a Range Officer.
- **Range Commands.** Range Officers must use “Standard Range Commands” to control range firing activities. Using established standard commands ensures that anyone who fires on a range will know how to respond, whether they are new juniors or experienced champions. The chart (above) identifies standard commands that must be explained during initial instruction.

<sup>4</sup>Some shooting disciplines use the command COMMENCE FIRING or TARGETS to authorize firing.

<sup>5</sup>Some shooting disciplines use the command CEASE FIRING to stop firing.

• **Safe Storage of Guns and Ammunition.** Policies for the safe storage of rifles or pistols and ammunition vary from one program to another. Safe storage begins when a firing activity finishes and guns that have just been fired are cleared and checked. Many programs require guns to arrive at the firing line and depart from it in gun cases. When guns reach the armory or home where they are stored, safety flags are normally removed, actions closed, and triggers released. Program policies must define whether this occurs when guns leave the firing line or when they reach the storage facility and how youth share in the responsibility for safe gun and ammunition storage.

### Instituting Program Values

Youth who participate in your program are participating in a youth sport where program leaders are responsible for fostering program values and priorities that make youth sports experiences safe, fun and healthy. This requires paying special attention to:

• **Participant Safety.** Junior programs must take all necessary steps to ensure that no injury-causing incidents involving the use of guns ever occur. Every youth shooting program must provide: 1) required safety instruction, 2) posted safety rules, 3) the mandatory use of safety flags, 4) the regular use of safety briefings and 5) Range Officers trained in safe range operations.<sup>6</sup>

• **Participant Health.** Primary health concerns in youth shooting involve the use of lead pellets in air gun events, exposure to loud sounds in firearm events and exposure to airborne lead in unventilated firearm ranges.

- Everyone who shoots air guns must be required to wash their hands after each range session.
- Indoor air gun and smallbore rifle and pistol shooting produces lead deposits in the range that must be controlled with a lead management and cleaning program.<sup>7</sup>
- Participants must always be required to wear hearing protection during smallbore and highpower rifle firing activities.



*Joy is also an important value to encourage in youth shooting. Here two junior competitors embrace each other to express their joy after finishing a 50m 3-position final in first and second places.*

- Participants must always be required to wear eye protection during highpower rifle firing.
- Indoor ranges where firearms are fired must have ventilation systems that prevent firers from breathing air that might have airborne lead.<sup>8</sup>
- **Commitment to Safe Sport.** “Safe Sport” is a national program where adult leaders are trained to prevent the emotional, physical or sexual abuse of youth and to facilitate the reporting of any abuses. U. S. Olympic sports governing bodies are being urged to offer Safe Sport training for their youth sport leaders.<sup>9</sup>
- **Worth of All Participants.** Junior programs must regard all youth who participate as persons of worth who are capable of learning to shoot. During initial instruction, there are some young athletes who struggle to even hit the target. This value holds that every youth is capable of learning to shoot and that it is the program’s responsibility to give instruction that will help them do that.

<sup>6</sup>Completing a CMP Range Officer Training Course is a good way to fulfill this requirement. Detailed information is available on the CMP website at <http://thecmp.org/competitions/cmp-range-officer-program/>.

<sup>7</sup>The CMP/USA Shooting “Guide to Lead Management for Air Gun Shooting” prescribes a lead management program for air guns. It can be downloaded at <http://thecmp.org/wp-content/uploads/LeadMgtGuide.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup>Air gun firing does not generate airborne lead, so this ventilation requirement does not apply to indoor air gun ranges.

<sup>9</sup>Information on the Safe Sport program is available on the USA Shooting website at <https://www.usashooting.org/11-resources/safesport>.

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*Youth also come to shooting ranges to have fun. The German Shooting Youth organization adopted a mascot named Shooty who attends shooting events and serves to remind youth it is OK for them to have fun in shooting.*

- **Ethics and Sportsmanship.** A duty of every junior shooting program is to instill the standards of ethics, fair play and sportsmanship in its participants as well as to reflect those values in the efforts of its adult leaders.<sup>10</sup>

- **Opportunity for All.** Healthy youth shooting programs teach how developing marksmanship skills has little to do with talent and almost everything to do with each athlete's work ethic, that is, how well and how much they practice. They also understand that shooting is a sport where boys and girls can compete on an equal basis and how size and strength are mostly irrelevant.

- **Marksmanship is a Skill.** Strong youth shooting programs reflect a sincere view that marksmanship is about learning shooting techniques and doing the necessary practice to master the skills required to repeatedly hit target centers. To them, marksmanship is more than safely launching bullets, it is also not about "firepower" or how loud the bang is. In this context, these programs understand how hitting target centers with air rifles or pistols requires just as much skill as it does to do this with smallbore or highpower rifles or pistols.

- **Teaching & Learning Life Skills.** One of the benefits of athlete-centered youth sports is that they are one of the most effective ways for youth to learn life skills that will benefit them in school and later in their family lives and careers. Youth shooting coaches must be alert for opportunities to instill in their juniors life skills such as concentration and attention skills, self-control, self-discipline, emotional control, goal setting, fair play, sportsmanship and the rewards of hard work.

### The First Range Firing Activities

A final set of checkpoints for introducing young boys and girls to the sport of shooting concerns how their first range firing activities are presented. There are several guideposts to observe:

- **Start Soon.** This article describes a long list of preliminary instructions that responsible programs must cover, but the good thing is that well prepared instructors can cover those topics in about an hour. Depending upon how long program sessions last, initial range firing should be done during a young athlete's first or second session. They joined your program to shoot, not to sit in classrooms.

- **Eye Dominance Checks.** Before going to the range for the first time, take a few minutes to do eye dominance checks. Make sure that any rifle athlete who identifies as cross dominant has a blinder on his/her rear sight or in a hat band.

- **Initial Shot Technique Instruction.** It will be necessary to explain shot technique basics like aligning the sights, acquiring the sight picture and exhaling and stopping breathing while applying smooth pressure on the trigger to fire a shot. That's as much as a new athlete can master; more complex instruction can come when they are ready for it.

- **Size Appropriate Rifles or Pistols.** Expecting an undersized youngster to struggle to hold up an adult sized rifle is an inducement for that youngster to want to find another sport. Successful junior shooting programs make special efforts to acquire size-appropriate rifles or pistols

<sup>10</sup>The author published a comprehensive article on "Ethics, Fair Play and Sportsmanship" in the Winter 2019 *On the Mark* that can serve as a guide for doing this. Copies can be downloaded at <http://thecmp.org/wp-content/uploads/Ethics-Fair-Play-and-Sportsmanship-in-Youth-Shooting.pdf>.

for new participants to use while they are learning and deciding whether they want to continue shooting.

• **Start in Supported Positions.** Young rifle athletes first range firing should be done in supported prone positions. Starting positions for young pistol athletes should also be supported positions. After young athletes become comfortable with firing shots correctly and are producing acceptable shot groups, they can and must advance to learning regular firing positions.

• **Instructional Progression.** Even when youth are doing their first range firing, adult leaders should be projecting what lies ahead, namely, that young rifle and pistol athletes are expected to progress from firing in supported positions, to learning regular firing positions and shot techniques that are used in sports competition events to participating in actual competitions. Then, if your program presented the sport of shooting to young athletes in a setting where their participation and joy was valued, their safety and health was protected and their target shooting skills were properly instructed, it will have fulfilled its responsibility as a youth sports program.

## Supported Rifle Prone and Pistol Firing Positions



**Young athletes' first range firing should be done from supported positions like these.**



*The flags of the 97 nations that qualified athletes to participate in the sport of shooting flew over the Olympic Shooting Center venue in Rio de Janeiro during the 2016 Olympic Games. Only three other sports had more participating nations.*

### About the Author

Gary Anderson, Director of Civilian Marksmanship Emeritus, retired as the full-time CMP Director at the end of 2009. He continues to work with the CMP as the senior marksmanship instructor. During his remarkable career, he won two Olympic gold medals, seven World Championships and 16 National Championships. He served as a Vice President of the International Shooting Sports Federation (ISSF) from 1990 through 2018. He is a former Nebraska State Senator and Past President of USA Shooting. He served as a Technical Delegate for Shooting during the 2012 and 2016 Olympic Games as well as for the 2014 and 2018 World Shooting Championships.

In 2012, the International Olympic Committee awarded Gary Anderson with the Olympic Order, its highest honor "for outstanding services to the Olympic Movement."

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

