

PARTICIPATING IN COMPETITIONS

PARTICIPATING IN COMPETITIONS: A How-To For Coaches and Junior Athletes

By Gary Anderson, DCM Emeritus



A pre-Covid junior competition taking place at the Gary Anderson CMP Competition Center at Camp Perry, Ohio. Experiencing the challenges, excitement and exhilaration of competitions is one of the main reasons youth participate in the sport of Shooting.

Most juniors who learn the skills of rifle and pistol target shooting want to be able to apply them in competitions. For some that means competing with friends in local club matches. It may mean becoming a member of a school or club rifle or pistol team. It could mean traveling to major championships or the National Matches. For a few who become models for many others, it means shooting on a college rifle team or even making a U. S. National Team and competing in World Cups, World Championships or even the Olympic Games. Competitions are the best way to test young athletes' skills and knowledge and make them a real part of one of the world's great sports.

This ***On the Mark*** article explores junior athletes participation in competitions. Its objective is to help them, and their coaches and parents, get the most out of their competition experiences.

TEAM OR PROGRAM COMPETITION OBJECTIVES

Every team or junior program needs to have goals or objectives that guide the role competitions play in their program:

The Role of Competitions. Every junior shooting program leader should have an understanding of the positive roles competitions can play in youth sports. They also need to understand how rifle and pistol target shooting is one of the world's most popular sports, and that it offers competition opportunities at all levels from recreational shooting to the Olympic Games.

Participants Should Have Opportunities to Compete. Junior shooting programs should give every youth participant an opportunity to experience competition

shooting. Whether they continue to participate in competitions should be their choice, but programs should make sure they have that opportunity.

Support Athletes Who Want to Compete.

Youth Shooting programs should provide coaching and practice possibilities for junior athletes who want to pursue competition goals so that those athletes can realize their potential.

Annual Competition Plans. Coaches, parents and advanced junior athletes should work together to prepare annual competition plans for their programs. Those plans should determine whether programs host matches themselves, which matches the team expects to attend and what their competition goals for that year are.

WHY ATTEND COMPETITIONS

The reasons juniors should participate in competitions start with why they wanted to learn how to shoot in the first place. Most juniors want to play the game; they want to find out how well they can do in Shooting competitions. The benefits of competition experiences include:

Life Lessons. Juniors should have opportunities to compete because life itself is a competition. Sport competitions are uniquely capable of teaching important life lessons that will enable young people to compete in life. Learning to handle stress, and to concentrate and perform your best in the midst of fears, anxiety and distractions are capabilities adults need in real life.

All Competitors in Shooting Can Be Winners. A third reason for encouraging juniors to compete in Shooting is that it is a sport where not everyone has to compete to win. Team sports must have winners and losers and many of those sports relegate most of their participants to being spectators who can only watch from the stands. In Shooting, everyone can get on the field and play the game. Some participants do indeed compete to win, but many others compete against themselves or only against close, friendly rivals.

Competitions are Fun and Rewarding. A fourth reason for encouraging juniors to compete is because competitions are enjoyable, rewarding experiences. Striving to excel while testing yourself against others is motivating. Reaching challenging competition goals is fulfilling. Plus, competitions offer opportunities to meet new friends, see different places and enjoy new experiences.



Competitions also offer unique experiences outside of the shooting ranges. These 2019 National Matches First Shot Ceremony attendees experienced this memorable presentation of the American flag.

KEEP COMPETITION EXPERIENCES POSITIVE

Coaches and adult leaders must do all that they can to keep young athletes' competition experiences positive. Letting a young person with a fragile ego think they let their team down by shooting a bad score can be devastating. Striving to excel is part of sports and can be positive but when too much emphasis is placed on winning, competition experiences become negative. There are several things coaches and parents can do to establish an environment that keeps young athletes' competition experiences positive:

Evaluate Performance, Not Winning or Losing. Athletes and their parents must learn to **evaluate match results according to how well athletes perform what they are trained to do, not by whether they win or lose.** The coach's responsibility is to teach skills and organize training sessions that establish athletes' performance capabilities. Each athlete's capability is reflected in a practice average. When an athlete enters a competition, whether they shoot their average depends upon how well they perform the skills they learned in practice. If they perform well in a competition and shoot their average, they had a good match. If they shoot better than their average, they had a great match.

When athletes learn to focus on developing their performance capability in practice and then to evaluate their competition performances by how well they perform

PARTICIPATING IN COMPETITIONS

those skills, winning and losing becomes secondary. If an athlete's match score was high enough to win or place high that is great, but athletes should nevertheless evaluate their match performances according to how well they perform the skills they develop in training. A key to this concept is recognizing that athletes can control their own performances, but they cannot control how other athletes perform, so they cannot control winning or losing.

Expect to Enjoy Competitions — Don't Fear Being Nervous. It's OK to talk about being nervous before a match but it's even more important to feel good about being nervous. Nervousness is a natural feeling that can create a state of heightened awareness that helps athletes focus on performance. In some sports, coaches use nervousness to "pump up" athletes. That doesn't work in Shooting, but nervousness should fill athletes with enthusiasm and eagerness to be on the firing line and perform what they are trained to do.

Reduce Anxiety by Being Prepared. An athlete who is well prepared for a competition will experience less anxiety. Proper preparation steps include:

- Shoot record matches in practice. Follow match conditions, with correct range commands and time limits, even with unexpected distractions.
- Brief athletes on what to expect at the competition site.
- Teach the competition rules that will be followed so there will be no surprises.
- Know and practice the course of fire that will be followed.
- Make sure all athletes have an equipment checklist to use in getting ready to travel.

Teach Resilience — Bad Scores are Opportunities to Learn. So much of benefitting from competition experiences is attitudinal. You certainly don't want athletes going to matches expecting bad things to happen, but how to respond if they do happen needs to be taught. Seeing bad shots or poor scores as personal failures or disruptive events as misfortunes will not make them better. Successful competition athletes develop "resilience," that is the ability to sustain misfortune and recover from it. They have the ability to learn from their mistakes. There will be bad shots and bad scores; there will be distractions and even occasionally a match official who makes a bad decision that affects an athlete. Vowing to remain calm and under control no matter what happens is an important attitude for athletes to develop. A proper response to bad shots or bad scores is to learn not to see them as failures, but as learning opportunities. Shooting diary notes after a match should record both the good things athletes did



Equipment inspections are part of the routine at many Shooting competitions. Athletes should be prepared for them.

as well as any bad shots or scores. The key in noting bad shots or scores is to also note what should have been done. That then becomes something specific to work on in practice before the next match.

Your Dog Won't Bite You When You Come Home After a Bad Match. One of the most effective ways to reduce an athlete's fear of failure and the negative effects this can have on match performances is to help team members understand their coach, teammates, friends and family will still love and care for them regardless of whether their score in a match is good or disappointing. The coach and team must establish a team environment where there is an expectation that every athlete will try to perform to the best of their ability, knowing that they are accepted as a good person regardless of the outcome of the match.

COMPETITION STRATEGY AND PERFORMANCE

The lifeblood of performing sports skills developed through training in competitions depends upon what athletes and coaches actually do during their competitions. Let's walk through those actions, starting on the day before the match.

The Day Before the Match. Many athletes have rituals they like to go through on the day before the match. Their rituals are done for both physical and psychological reasons. An athlete's practice on the day before a match should focus on confirming that everything is working well. It should not be a long practice; it's definitely too late to master a new technique and it's almost always a mistake to shoot the full course of fire on that day. Strenuous physical work should be avoided because of the risk of injury or straining critical muscles. An evening meal emphasizing carbohydrates is good; there is some evidence that this improves hold stability. Some athletes try to relax by watching a movie or spending the evening with friends. After that, a normal night's rest in order.

On the Morning Of. A key to an athlete's pre-match preparation is to have a preparation plan and timetable that allows enough time to get ready to compete without leaving extra time to sit around doing nothing or, conversely, having to rush to get ready. Most athletes want to get up at least three hours before the start time for a match. After a light breakfast they try to arrive at the range 60 to 90 minutes before match start time. Time must be allocated for checking in, going through equipment control, if there is one, and doing a warm-up routine. Warm-up routines have proved to be real difference makers in boosting rifle and pistol hold stability and readiness to perform correct shot technique. Many athletes devote time to doing aiming exercises or dry holding on a blank wall.

Before a competition, athletes must focus only on their preparation and performance. Coaches or adult leaders should handle logistical and administrative matters and anything else that might come up. Another precaution is that athletes should not be distracted by the side show. At most matches there will be lots of activities taking place, but athletes should remember they are there to compete. There will be plenty of time to talk to friends after the match.

Setting Up the Firing Point. An athlete's routine for setting up equipment on the firing point should have been worked out in practice long before the match.

SPORTSMANSHIP AND ETIQUETTE

The meaning, integrity and value of any youth sport requires its athletes to practice good sportsmanship and etiquette. In the sport of Shooting, all athletes must:

- **Know and follow the rules.**
- **Avoid taking any performance enhancing drug or substance.**
- **Keep their firing positions and equipment within their firing point areas.**
- **Not make actions that might disturb other athletes.**
- **Not act out or express anger or frustration after bad shots or scores.**
- **Cooperate with match officials.**
- **Do their part to make the competition a great experience for everyone — their teammates, other teams and match officials.**



Sportsmanship plays an undeniable role in junior shooting competitions. Here, two athletes wish each other good luck as they prepare to start a 3-position air rifle final.

PARTICIPATING IN COMPETITIONS



COMPETITIONS DURING COVID

With Covid-19 restrictions likely to continue well into 2021, the CMP is working to find solutions that will allow junior competitions to continue while doing as much as possible to ensure the health of competitors and match officials. Covid-era solutions include:

- **Virtual Matches.** When travel is risky, using software and the internet to compare the scores of athletes firing on their home ranges makes competitions possible.
- **Social Distancing.** The photo above shows one competitor on every fourth firing point.
- **Mask wearing.** Masks are required to enter a range and can only be taken off on the firing line.
- **Limiting Personnel on Ranges.** Entry to range is limited to competitors who are firing and essential Match Officials.

Focusing attention on each set-up step is a way to keep minds productively occupied. Getting into the first firing position and doing dry firing and aiming exercises vary according to discipline rules; this timing should also be worked out in practice.

Sighter Strategy. An athlete's sighter strategy varies according to how many sighters the rules allow. When athletes pay attention to determining and recording precise zeroes for their rifles and pistols, zeroing becomes a secondary priority for sighter firing. Where sighters are not allowed or limited, the final check on shot preparation and shot technique must be completed by dry firing during the preparation time. Where sighters are unlimited, a primary purpose for sighters is to establish an athlete's performance.

Firing Record Shots. A research project that compared the average values of all shots fired during a recent Olympic Games Shooting competition found that the first and last shots averaged lower than any other shots. Switching from sighters to record shots does cause additional anxiety, just as firing the last shot does when a good score is at stake. Athletes should establish a performance routine during the preparation time or sighters and then simply carry that routine forward into the first record shots. However, when making shots becomes difficult, for example on the first and last shots or when a good score is building, athletes must have a strategy for focusing on key performance factors (shot preparation and shot technique).

There are several caveats regarding the firing of record shots. Good advice is to learn to focus on the shot being fired (Stay in the now!). Thinking about a bad shot or score that has been fired or a great score that is building is a formula for disaster. A second item of advice is to plan to shoot record shots in the match just like you shoot them in practice. Trying something new on the day of the match is another formula for disaster.

When Bad Things Happen. Athletes should not go to matches expecting bad things to happen, but they should also not go to matches unprepared for bad things to happen. If bad shots start to occur, a rifle or pistol malfunctions or if there is a distraction or interruption, athletes should have a strategy:

- o When bad shots occur, the athlete must know their shot plan well enough to have a refocus plan. The first step in these cases is to recognize when performance is deteriorating. Then the athlete must quickly focus renewed attention on shot technique basics. This may mean paying more attention to shot preparation or being sure to get initial pressure on the trigger when starting a

shot, or to centering sight picture movements (hold control) or to making an absolutely smooth press on the trigger.

- o When an athlete's performance deteriorates it's important to know when to take a break. The cure for a poor hold in kneeling may be to get completely out of position and rebuild it. Sometimes the best strategy is to clear the gun, put it down, and let a Range Officer know you are going to take a break. Most competition rules allow for an athlete to go back to talk to their coach or for a coach to call an athlete off of the line, with the permission of a Range Officer. A short conversation between the athlete and coach is often a ticket to restoring good performance.

- o If the problem is an equipment malfunction that the athlete cannot fix by themselves, the Range Officer must be notified so that the rifle or pistol can be cleared and taken off the line to be fixed.

- o If the problem is a distraction or interruption, athletes should call a Range Officer and ask that the problem be fixed. Most rules allow for athletes to be given extra time when interruptions prevent them from shooting.

- o The important thing is that athletes and their coaches must have a plan for dealing with disruptions. The plan must provide for recognizing problems, how to respond to them and how to remain calm and stay focused on good performance, so that these disruptions do not take points off of athletes' scores.

SHOOTING IN FINALS

Finals where the top eight competitors in a match finish by shooting an additional ten shots, usually in front of an audience of competitors and coaches who are eager to applaud and cheer, are now a feature of junior championships conducted on ranges with electronic targets. A few junior competitions are even experimenting with ISSF start-from-zero finals where the final ranking of the top eight athletes depends solely on their scores in a 24 or 45 shot final. Since finals involve shooting single timed shots or 5-shot series in front of enthusiastic spectators, the strategies and techniques for shooting in finals have some unique aspects:

Know the Rules. Finals are conducted according to special rules, which are found in the appropriate rulebook. Any team with athletes who might have a chance to qualify for the top eight and shoot in a final at a competition should shoot practice finals before departure. This will ensure that they know finals rules and how to shoot good shots within short time limits.

Shooting in a Final. The most successful finals competitors are athletes who are especially skilled in shot preparation.

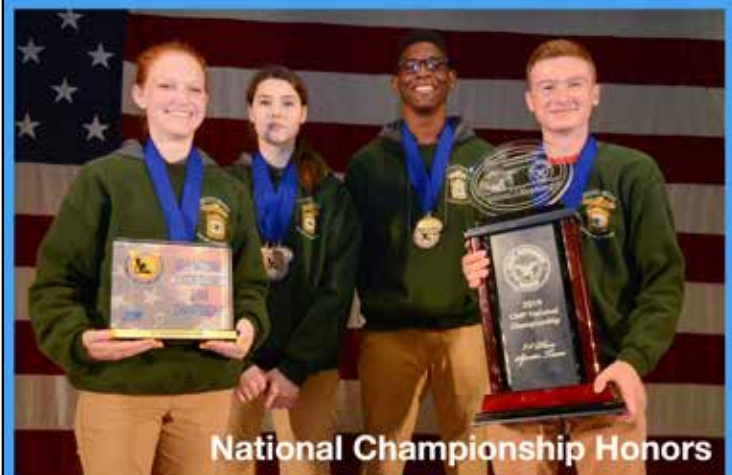
THE REWARDS OF COMPETITIONS



Achieving Personal Goals



Earning the Junior Distinguished Badge



National Championship Honors

Juniors who participate in competitions can strive to earn many rewards that vary from achieving personal goals (above) to earning the Junior Distinguished Badge to winning National Championships (below).

PARTICIPATING IN COMPETITIONS



When team members support each other, performing well in competitions becomes easier for all of them. These members of the India National Junior Team all show their joy in celebrating a Junior World Championship gold medal just won by one of their teammates.

Good shot preparation requires athletes to take several extra seconds before starting to aim to be sure their firing positions are relaxed, balanced and precisely oriented on their targets. Careful shot preparation significantly

increases the likelihood of a good hold and the athletes' ability to fire shots on their first holds within finals' short time limits. Good finals competitors are athletes who have worked out a shot plan and know where to focus their attention to get consistent good shots.



The Junior Pistol Final in the January 2020 Camp Perry Open competition. Special skills are required to achieve good performances in finals, but these capabilities can be developed through training.

Shooting When the Pressure Becomes Overwhelming. When athletes in a final fire their first record shots, hear spectators cheering or hear the Range Officer or Announcer describe how they are now in the lead, they may feel overwhelming pressure. The good news is that athletes who know how to carefully prepare their positions to achieve good holds and focus their attention on what they have to do to fire excellent shots are able to make those shots, even in high pressure situations. A special skill in these situations is being able to relax between shots. When the then 18-year-old Korean athlete Hanna Im was asked what she did to manage the pressure during her last few shots when she won the 2018 Women's 10m Air Rifle World Championship, she replied, *"I kept thinking about what I trained to do; I took deep breaths to relieve my body."* Sometimes just taking a couple of deep breaths is enough to take the edge off of overwhelming nervousness.

THE MATCH IS OVER

Athletes' successful participation in competitions doesn't end with their last record shots. There are a few other things to do to wrap up a good competition experience:

Make Sure Lessons Learned are Remembered. One of the first things athletes should do after finishing a competition is to get out their shooting diaries and record the competition's results and lessons. Recalling and recording things done right becomes praise to reinforce good performances. Lessons learned and problems encountered need to be documented too. A critique from the coach will be valued input. These observations combine to form a plan of action to prepare for the next competition.

Closing Out the Competition.

Rifles and pistol need to be taken off the line, cleaned and put away. Taking the initiative to say thanks to Match Officials is always appreciated. Offering congratulations to the athletes and teams that won is great sportsmanship, and for athletes or teams that won, graciously accepting congratulations from others is important.

Award Ceremony Protocol. Many competitions stage award ceremonies to conclude their events. It's common courtesy to stay for the award ceremony unless early departure is unavoidable. Wearing team uniforms at award ceremonies is great; clothing with political or other propaganda messages is unacceptable. Athletes who receive awards should not wear caps or hats on the podium. The most photographed scene at a competition is usually the awards stand and headgear just obscures winners' faces.

Competitions are part of sports and competitions are a part of the sport of Shooting. Youth in junior Shooting programs and teams should have opportunities to participate in competitions, but coaches and adult leaders must keep those experiences positive and focused on how athletes perform the skills they are trained to perform.



Victory Ceremonies and photographs of medalists with their medals conclude many junior competitions.

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.

