

COMPETITION RULES

A Primer on Competition Rules and How to Follow Them

By Gary Anderson, DCM Emeritus



A CMP Range Officer oversees competitors in a National Matches Junior pistol event. Knowing the detailed rules for their competition events is essential for both Match Officials and athletes.

Competition rules in the sport of shooting are like the laws that govern so many aspects of our lives and determine how we must act to follow them. In shooting, competition rules define the events or courses of fire, how those events are conducted, the equipment and firing positions that can be used, and how Match Officials must resolve irregular occurrences. Rules standardize sports events so participants in one location can play by the same rules as competitors in other parts of the country. Rules also protect the integrity of a sport by ensuring that all participants in that sport perform its skills according to its traditions and objectives. Sports rules also guard against any competitor trying to cheat or gain an unfair advantage over other competitors.

The objective of this article is to give coaches and junior program leaders who are new to the sport of shooting a framework for understanding shooting competition rules and for teaching them to youth who are preparing for competitions. This article can also be a resource for training volunteers who want to assist in conducting competitions.

An article like this cannot possibly cover the detailed rules for each shooting discipline that junior programs pursue, but it can give shooting participants, whether they are junior program leaders, athletes, parents, or volunteers, a starting point for learning about shooting competition rules.

SHOOTING RULES HISTORY

Sports competitions cannot be conducted without rules. From the time when even the first target competitions were conducted, contest organizers have had to define what projectile arms could be used, what the targets would be and how they were scored.

Homer's Ancient Greek classic, *The Iliad* (see inset) was written 2,700 years ago (ca. 700 BCE). Its description of the funeral games Achilles staged to honor the fallen hero Patroclus included an archery competition. The rules for that contest may have been the marksmanship world's first competition rules. They defined 1) the sport (*archery*), 2) the target and the event procedure (*shooting arrows at*

From THE ILIAD, by Homer*

Archery came next, and for this Achilles offered prizes of violet-colored iron in the form of ten double-headed and ten single-headed axes. He set up the mast of a blue-prowed ship a long way off on the sands; and for a target he had a fluttering pigeon tied to it by the foot with a light cord. "The man who hits the pigeon," said Achilles, "can take the whole set of double-headed axes home with him. If anyone hits the string and not the bird, he won't have done so well, but he can have the single axes."

*Homer, THE ILIAD; trans. by E.V.Rieu; Penguin Classics, 1950, p. 435 (underlining added)



This 1551 poster provided an invitation and rules for a shooting festival prize shoot. Participants could use crossbows or muskets. The bar on the bottom was a unit of measurement for determining the firing distance.

a pigeon tied to the top of a ship's mast), 3) the method of scoring (*The man who hits...*), and 4) the awards (*sets of axes*).

Some of the earliest target competitions were shooting festivals organized during the Middle Ages in central European countries like Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. In those contests, participants shot crossbows or muskets at circular wooden targets. Prize winners were determined by whose shot was closest to a defined point on the target. There were no governing bodies to determine common rules for these popular prize shoots. Each festival created its own rules and produced printed posters to advertise those rules (*see illustration*).

The rules for the first shooting contests on the American frontier were simple and probably never published. Someone placed a mark on a wooden slab that was placed 30 or 40 paces away. Whoever shot the closest to the center of the mark won the prize. Published rules governing military rifle shooting became necessary in the last part of the 19th century after the U.S. Armed Services and newly formed National Rifle Association began to organize formal competitions. The NRA's first rules were published in its journal, *The Rifle*. However, the need to standardize rules for all similar matches eventually led to the production of rulebooks that governed all competitions in specific disciplines.

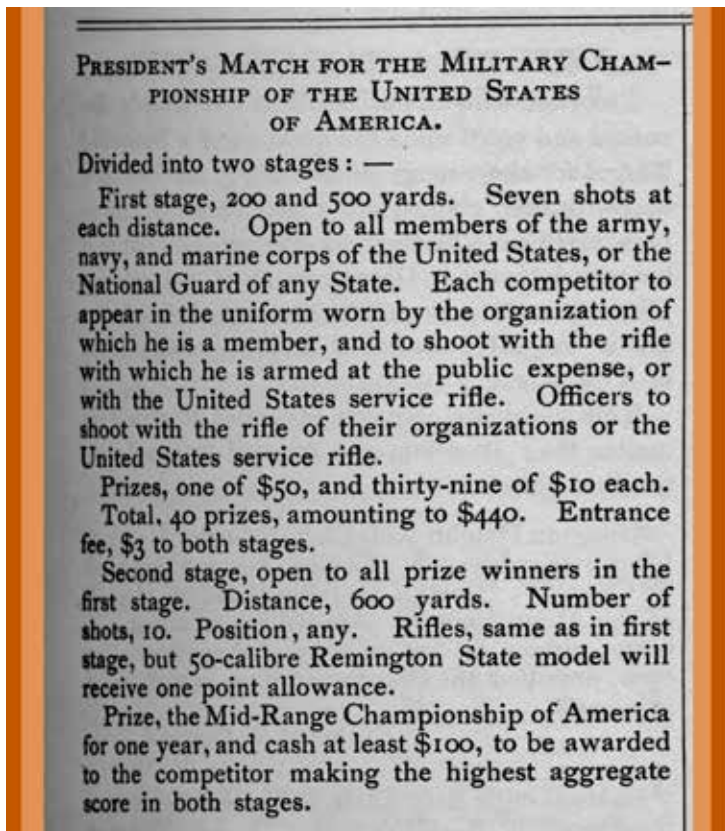
Today, every shooting sports governing body has rulebooks for the disciplines that it governs. The obvious first step in mastering shooting rules is to determine which rulebook to use. For U.S. Junior programs, those rulebooks typically include: 1) The **National Standard Three Position Air Rifle Rules**, 2) **CMP Air Rifle and Air Pistol Rules**, 3) **CMP Smallbore Rifle Rules**, 4) **CMP Highpower Rifle Rules**, 5) **CMP Pistol Rules**, 6) **USA Shooting General Technical, Rifle and Pistol Rules**, or 7) one of several **NRA rulebooks**. All of these rulebooks can be downloaded from governing body websites. There are a lot of rulebooks, so start by obtaining the right rulebook.

Every Match Official and coach should have a copy of the correct rulebook with them when they work on a range or instruct. The easiest way to do that is to download a copy of the rulebook into a cell phone or tablet. That's more convenient than carrying printed rulebooks, plus, the PDF search feature (ctrl + F) is usually quicker and easier to use than an index.

RULEBOOK TERMINOLOGY

Understanding competition rules starts with having a common understanding of key rulebook terms. The CMP rule-making process strives to standardize how these key rulebook terms are defined and used:

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The rules for the 1885 President's Rifle Match, were published in the NRA magazine, *The Rifle*.

• **Sport**—a distinct grouping of competitive sports events with common elements and skill tests. Archery, baseball, rowing, volleyball, and shooting are sports. Shooting is a “sport” where athletes fire rifles, pistols or shotguns at distant, difficult targets and are ranked according to scores determined by where on the targets their shots hit.

• **Discipline** — a sub-group of events within a sport that have common characteristics. Disciplines within the sport of shooting include 3-position air rifle, air rifle standing, air pistol, smallbore rifle, highpower rifle, and bulls-eye pistol.

RULEBOOK TERMINOLOGY

Within the **SPORT** of SHOOTING
Smallbore Rifle is a **DISCIPLINE**
3-Position Rifle 3x20 is an **EVENT**
20-shots Kneeling is a **STAGE**
10 shots kneeling is a **SERIES**



These are rulebooks issued by the CMP for shooting disciplines that it governs. A first step in mastering rulebooks is obtaining a copy of the correct rulebook.

• **Event** — a unique shooting contest with a specific course of fire and rules of conduct.

• **Stage** — a phase or part of an event. A 3-position rifle event has three stages, one for each position. A Highpower Rifle National Match Course has four stages, 200 yards standing, 200 yards rapid-fire sitting, 300 yards prone rapid-fire and 600 yards prone.

• **Series** — a sequence of shots fired within a stage or course of fire. Most shooting events have 10-shot series; 25m Pistol events have 5-shot series.

• **Competition/Match** — an organized contest in a sport with a program that includes one or more events for a discipline in that sport. The terms **competition*** and **match** are often used interchangeably.

RULEBOOK PLAYERS

A next step in understanding competition rules is knowing who the players are. In shooting competitions, the players or participants are:

• **Athletes/Competitors**. These are the contestants in competitions. They may be called **athletes** or **competitors**. We avoid using the term shooter because of its negative

*Technical rulebook terms that are defined and used in rulebooks and mentioned in this article will be shown in bold italics (i.e., ***slow-fire***, ***malfunction***).

connotations in public media. The rules define who is **eligible** to compete as well as the **categories** in which competitors may be divided (*i.e., age groups, male/female, civilian/service, etc.*) or their **classifications** (*dividing competitors into groups according to their skill levels*).

- **Governing Body.** The governing body is the organization that controls a shooting sports discipline, establishes the rules for that discipline, and sanctions or manages its competitions. The CMP and USA Shooting are two of the most active governing bodies that promote junior shooting competitions in the USA.

- **Match Sponsor.** This is the entity or group that organizes a competition. Match sponsors are typically shooting clubs, schools, or community organizations.

- **Match Officials.** These are persons who hold positions of responsibility and authority in the conduct of a competition. **Match Officials** are responsible for conducting competitions according to procedures defined by the rules. Match Officials usually include a **Match Director, Range Officers**, who supervise range

firing, **Statistical Officers**, who supervise scoring and results operations, and 4) **Technical Officers**, who operate electronic targets or technology systems. Larger competitions include other **Competition Staff**, who serve as **scorers**, range assistants or staff who fulfill specific functions.

- **Coaches.** In some shooting disciplines, coaches who supervise and train the athletes play key roles in the conduct of competitions. Rules will say whether and under what circumstances coaches may interact directly with athletes during competitions.

- **Spectators.** Spectators are persons who come to watch a competition. They may be parents, friends, or fans. Shooting has a vital interest in making sure spectators are welcome and can actively observe the athletes and their scores.

- **Media.** Not many shooting competitions are blessed with media, but when media representatives come, rules will provide for them to be accommodated and facilitated in doing their work.



Today's competition rules recognize that **participants** in shooting competitions include athletes or competitors, Range Officers and Match Officials, coaches, and spectators. Rules are concerned that all participants must be valued and treated with respect.

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GUIDING PRINCIPLES IN SHOOTING RULES

For rules to effectively govern sports, participants in the sport must buy into guiding principles that the sport's leaders identify. Guiding principles for shooting's rules are:

1. *Participants must FOLLOW THE RULES for their discipline, AS THEY ARE WRITTEN.*

2. *A fundamental purpose of competition rules is EDUCATION – the rules teach participants how to compete correctly and legally.*

3. *SPORTSMANSHIP AND FAIR PLAY are fundamental – a competitor's ranking must be decided by the competitor's sports performance and never by cheating or attempts to gain or give an unfair advantage.*

4. *No Match Sponsor, Match Official or Jury may make ANY DECISION, RULING OR REQUIREMENT THAT IS CONTRARY TO ESTABLISHED RULES.*

5. *NON-DISCRIMINATION and RESPECT FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS: No decision or action may be taken that discriminates against a participant because of their race, sex, age, sexual orientation, or disability.*

When we apply these rules in shooting, they compel competitors and officials to treat each other with respect, follow strict codes of ethics and refrain from any practices where competitors seek to gain an unfair advantage over other competitors. Disavowed practices include falsifying scores, manipulating targets, making multiple scoring



Shooting rules now make safety flags mandatory. This athlete is inserting a CBI that all air gun athletes are required to use.

challenges in attempts to “buy points,” attempting to use **artificial support** in shooting positions, evading rules that control trigger pull weights, shooting clothing stiffness, etc.

It's also important to understand how the rules in some disciplines are intended to support specific program objectives:

- *Three-Position Air Rifle rules keep its Sporter Class affordable and accessible by limiting rifle costs and prohibiting special clothing, equipment, and after-market products.*

- *To foster the development of local or state organization teams, several rulebooks have rules to prevent the formation of all-star teams that “cherry-pick” the best competitors from other clubs or teams.*

- *Rimfire Sporter rules are designed to keep rifles and equipment accessible and affordable and keep this discipline from experiencing equipment races where more and more expensive guns and accessories drive many competitors away.*

SAFETY AND SAFE RANGE PROCEDURE RULES

A fundamental purpose of the rules is to ensure the safety of everyone present at a competition. In shooting, there is no tolerance for any gun handling incidents that may cause injury or damage. The goal of shooting safety rules is zero injury-causing incidents involving the misuse of guns. Safety rules in shooting emphasize these requirements:

- **Safety Flags.** Safety flags, which may be called ECIs (empty chamber indicators), or CBIs (clear barrel indicators for air guns), demonstrate that rifles and pistols are unloaded. Safety flags are mandatory in virtually all rifle and pistol rulebooks. Safety flags must be brightly colored and configured so that they insert a probe in empty gun chambers or breeches to prove that guns are unloaded. Easily visible safety flags have made Range Officer work infinitely easier in determining when guns in their sectors are unloaded and clear.

- **Cleared Guns.** The concept of **cleared** guns is central to safety rules. A gun in a safe, cleared condition is: 1) unloaded, 2) magazine (if any) is removed, 3) action is open and 4) a safety flag is inserted.

- **Gun Handling Rules.** Safety rule training must make sure that a discipline's gun handling rules are understood and followed. These rules will define how a gun can be brought to a range (*cased, cleared with safety flag, etc.*), how it may be **carried** or **handled** and what is considered a safe muzzle orientation (usually up or downrange).

GUNS AND EQUIPMENT RULES

Every shooting discipline has detailed rules describing the rifles or pistols, shooting clothing and accessories that may be used. Competitors need to be familiar with these rules to ensure that any equipment they acquire is legal. In some disciplines, pre- or post-competition **equipment inspections** are standard. **Trigger pull** weights are commonly tested. In international (ISSF) rifle competitions, the thickness and stiffness of shooting jackets and trousers are checked with precise instruments to ensure that no athlete gains an unfair advantage by using extra stiff rifle clothing.

FIRING POSITIONS AND MODE OF FIRING

Every rulebook defines legal **firing position(s)**. An important step for new competitors to prepare for their entry in competitions is to make sure their firing positions are legal and will not attract Range Officer scrutiny.

Rules also define the modes of firing that are done in each discipline. Much competition shooting is **slow-fire**, typically with time limits that allow one minute for each shot in a series (*i.e.*, 10 shots in 10 minutes). Some disciplines have **rapid-fire** stages where a series of five or 10 shots must be fired within a short time limit. In Highpower Rifle, competitors must fire 10-shot rapid-fire series with one reload in 60, 70 or 80 seconds.

RANGE PROCEDURES AND RANGE COMMANDS

An important rulebook function is to define exactly how a sport's competition events must be conducted. The rules specify event **courses of fire**, as well as specific **range procedures** and **range commands** for conducting each event. Coaches need to know these details in order to teach them to their athletes to prepare them for competitions. Teams should practice those events in club record matches before they go to competitions. Details covered in this training should include the specific range commands and conditions that will be used to 1) call competitors to the line, 2) authorize **preparation periods**, 3) allow **sighting shots**, if any, and 4) conduct **record fire** stages.



Competition rules define whether athletes' guns, clothing and firing positions are legal. Yes, this position is legal. It is a kneeling position variation where the athlete sits on the side of their foot, not on a kneeling roll.

COMMANDS FOR CONDUCTING 20-SHOT SMALLBORE RIFLE STAGES ON PAPER TARGETS	
COMMANDS	INSTRUCTIONS
Before the competition:	Before a competition, the Range Officer must prepare the range for firing. Competitors may not move their equipment to the firing line until the Range Officer calls them to the firing line.
10:00 minutes before Start Time (when firing starts)	
WELCOME TO THE (Competition Name)	The Range Officer begins each relay by calling competitors to the firing line and welcoming them to the competition.
RELAY NUMBER (Relay Number) YOU MAY MOVE YOUR RIFLES AND EQUIPMENT TO THE FIRING LINE...GROUND YOUR RIFLES	When competitors go downrange to hang their targets, all rifles must be grounded with actions open and safety flags inserted.
IS THE LINE CLEAR?	Range Officers must signal YES or NO to indicate that all rifles are grounded with safety flags inserted.
THE LINE IS CLEAR...GO FORWARD AND HANG YOUR TARGETS	Competitors may go downrange to hang targets. No one may handle rifles while personnel are downrange.
After all targets are hung and all personnel are back from downrange:	
ALL PERSONNEL ARE BACK FROM DOWNRANGE...YOU MAY HANDLE YOUR RIFLES	This initiates the competitors' Pre-Preparation Time. After being authorized to handle their rifles, competitors may set up their

A sample page from a Smallbore Rifle Range Officer Script. Scripts for conducting all CMP recognized events are published in CMP rulebooks.

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Anyone who will serve as a Range Officer must know and comprehend the firing conditions, specific range commands and timing for each stage in a course of fire. To assist Range Officers in doing this, and to standardize how shooting events are conducted, all CMP rulebooks now include detailed **Range Procedures and Range Officer Commands** for each type of event governed by that rulebook. Anyone who will serve as a Range Officer who conducts range firing should print out a copy of the appropriate Range Officer Script and place it in a looseleaf notebook to keep with them on their Range Officer stand.

HANDLING COMPETITION IRREGULARITIES

Another key function of competition rules is to provide specific procedures for dealing with things that go wrong during competitions. Competition irregularities include **irregular shots** (**crossfire shots**, *too many or too few shots*, *early or late shots*, etc.), **interruptions** and gun or equipment **malfunctions**. Irregular shots are scoring issues where Statistical Officers must know how to score each type of shot or shots that don't comply with the rules. Range Officers need to know how to evaluate interruptions and give competitors who were disadvantaged by them fair opportunities to complete their events. Malfunction rules depend upon the discipline. Competitors need to know that when a malfunction occurs, whether the rules give them the right to claim a **refire** or if their only option is trying to clear the malfunction and continue firing.

RULE VIOLATIONS AND ENFORCEMENT

Most rule violations during competitions occur because competitors don't know the rules and not because they are trying to cheat. A key rules enforcement function is to determine when education is appropriate and when punishment is mandated. In principle, when violations are inadvertent, rules provide for **warnings** that give competitors opportunities to correct their faults. There are other cases where rule violations are clear and must be penalized. For example, a late shot fired after firing time expires must be scored as a miss. For the rare cases where competitors actually cheat or try to gain an unfair advantage, **disqualification** and removal from the



Range Officers are urged to follow the Range Officer Scripts that are published in CMP rulebooks when conducting competition firing.

competition is usually prescribed. In order to prevent one person from exercising arbitrary authority to disqualify someone, CMP rules require all disqualification decisions to be made by at least two Match Officials.

RULE ADJUDICATION/DECIDING DIFFICULT CASES

Match Officials will occasionally encounter situations where it is not clear how to interpret or apply a rule. Sometimes a coach or competitor raises an issue or protest where there is no easy answer. An initial guideline is to ALWAYS FOLLOW THE RULE AS IT IS WRITTEN, but what do you do when the rule is not clear? A first step is to make sure you APPLY THE CORRECT RULE. The next step is to READ THE RULE CAREFULLY; sometimes the answer is in the rule but it's being overlooked. A third step is to try to understand the intent or objective of the rule; if its intent is clear, USE THE RULE'S INTENT TO DECIDE. A fourth step is to DECIDE BASED ON WHAT IS FAIR not just for the athletes who are directly concerned but for all athletes in the competition. A final step is to REPORT DOUBTFUL CASES TO THE GOVERNING BODY for that discipline. Governing bodies use these cases to clarify and improve their rules.



A key concept in progressive rulebooks is making competitions “athlete-centered” where the rules focus on giving all competitors, regardless of their ability and prior experience, fair, enjoyable competitions where they are treated with respect.

RULES TRAINING AND EDUCATION

People who function in positions of authority in competitions need to know the rules for their discipline exceptionally well. Gaining an advanced knowledge of the rules can be done by working a lot of matches and studying the rules as each new question or issue comes up. A more efficient way to gain an advanced knowledge of the rules is to attend a **CMP Range Officer Training Course** (<https://thecmp.org/training-tech/range-officer-training-course/>). Courses are now offered in Highpower Rifle, Bullseye Pistol, Rimfire Sporter Rifle, and Three-Position Air Rifle.

RULE CHANGE PROCESS

Many competition participants have valid experiences with rules that most governing bodies are eager to consider in developing future rules. For sure, if you don't like a rule or think a different rule is better, **DO NOT MAKE UP YOUR OWN RULE!** Apply the rule as it is written (*Rules Guideline No. 1*), but also **TRY TO CHANGE THE RULE**. Document your concerns or recommendations and submit them to the governing body. Most rulebooks list a contact email address or phone number where rules comments are welcomed. In the CMP rule-making process, a remarkable number of these comments end up becoming rule changes in future editions of the rulebooks.

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.

