

LESSONS, VALUES AND EXPERIENCES

THE LESSONS, VALUES AND EXPERIENCES JUNIOR SHOOTING PROGRAMS SHOULD PROVIDE

By Gary Anderson, DCM Emeritus



Junior Shooting programs must be athlete centered. The highest values in every junior program should focus on the young athletes who participate. The eight athletes in this photo are being introduced as finalists in a 2022 National Three-Position Air Rifle Championship.

Successful junior shooting programs must have committed adult leadership, an effective organizational structure as a shooting team or club, and a range facility where program participants can learn and practice. After those prerequisites are established, the program leaders and coaches must develop and implement answers to these two important questions:

- **“What are the lessons and values that our junior shooting program teaches?”**
- **What are the experiences our program gives its athletes?”**

This **On the Mark** article seeks to provide answers to those questions that junior shooting leaders can use to guide the preparation of their team or club programs. This guidance embraces eight different topical areas.

¹ An excellent resource for new junior programs to use in developing their gun safety training is the CMP's *Junior Shooter's Guide to Air Rifle Safety*. This publication may be downloaded and viewed at <https://thecmp.org/youth/air/>.

² *Coaching Young Rifle Shooters*, 2nd Edition, by Gary Anderson, was published by the CMP. Copies can be purchased from the CMP at <https://thecmp.org/publications/>.

1. Gun Safety Training

Every junior shooting program participant must receive instruction in safe gun handling and established range procedures. There is general agreement among shooting sports leaders that if youth shooting participants learn nothing more than how to handle guns safely, their participation will have been worthwhile. The goal of safety training is to achieve a perfect safety record with zero injury-causing safety incidents involving program participants. Safety training must cover:¹

Safe Gun Handling Rules. The first lessons in a shooting sports program must be learning how to safely handle, clear, load, and unload the guns that are used in the program.

Safe Shooting Range Procedures. All participants must learn how to act on ranges in order to protect the safety of everyone present on that range. Target shooting events are conducted according to strict range procedures that all participants must learn and follow.

Personal Responsibility. The gun safety training every youth receives should give them the knowledge of how to be safe with guns and a lifelong sense of personal responsibility for handling guns safely.

2. Basic Marksmanship Training (Rifle or Pistol)

Every new participant should be offered a basic marksmanship course that teaches skills needed to complete a standard course of fire. New shooter instruction should teach the fundamental sport skills required to fire a competition course of fire. This instruction can be given for small classes or even one junior at a time. In air rifle or smallbore rifle programs, those who receive instruction should be able to complete a 3x10 or 3x20 three-position event. In pistol that means being able to fire a 30-shot National Match Course or a 30- or 40-shot air pistol event. Youths in BB gun programs learn to shoot 4x10 four-position events.

Basic Rifle Marksmanship Instruction. Basic marksmanship courses typically last ten to twenty sessions. Coaches should have lesson plans for each session that identify what will be taught and the shooting exercises used to practice those instructions. As an example, my book *Coaching Young Rifle Shooters*² provides a 20-session “Basic Rifle Marksmanship Course Syllabus” which starts with gun and range safety instruction, then, in succession,



Basic marksmanship course instruction should be carefully structured; live fire sessions require close supervision to ensure safety and mastery of essential techniques.

teaches: 1) shot technique, 2) the supported firing position, 3) zeroing and scoring, 4) the standing position, 5) use of the sling and the prone position, 6) the kneeling position and 7) three-position shooting.

Basic Course Guidelines. Initial instruction should have beginners do their first firing in supported firing positions on targets with big scoring rings.³ Targets should be big enough that all well-aimed shots, even from new shooters, hit scoring rings. This ensures that their first live firing at targets will give positive feedback. Three additional guidelines are: 1) introduce new shooters to dry firing as a preferred method of achieving more repetitions, 2) start actual range firing early-- ideally in the second or third instructional session, and 3) teach standing as the first regular firing position—if big targets are used. New shooters can learn the prone and kneeling positions after achieving a basic mastery of standing. Sitting position instruction is taught only if the juniors are shooting Rimfire Sporter, Highpower Rifle, or BB Gun events.

Basic Pistol Marksmanship Instruction. Pistol instruction for juniors follows a similar progression. New pistol participants' first shooting is usually done by shooting off of a rest while sitting. Initial shooting in the standing stance may be done with two hands or with one hand supported by a rest or sling. Young pistol athletes must begin strength training for the arm and shoulder as

³ BMC Targets, which can be purchased from the CMP, are designed for this purpose.

⁴ The CMP Guide to Junior Pistol Shooting, 2nd edition, is published by the CMP and is available in a printed version or it can be downloaded from the CMP web-site at <https://thecmp.org/publications/>. See pages 7-8 for a description of the Progressive Position Pistol Program.

LESSONS, VALUES AND EXPERIENCES

soon as possible. This is necessary so they can advance to shooting in the classic one-handed pistol stance. This instructional sequence for new pistol athletes is described in the *CMP Guide to Junior Pistol Shooting*⁴.

Coaching and Instructional Resources. There are also several national youth-serving organizations that offer marksmanship instructor or coach training for adult leaders and that provide instructional resources and lesson plans for basic marksmanship courses:

- **JROTC Marksmanship Instructor Course.** <https://thecmp.org/jmic/>. This program was designed and managed by the CMP for the nation's JROTC commands. All JROTC instructors who teach rifle marksmanship must be certified through this program, which is now offered online.

- **4-H Shooting Sports.** <https://4-hshootingsports.org/>. Volunteer 4-H marksmanship instructors must be trained by state certified instructors in state or regional workshops.

- **NRA Coach Education Program.** <https://coach.nra.org/>. The NRA Shooting Sports Coach Development program offers training in multiple shooting sports disciplines.

- **Daisy's Shooting Education Ten Lesson Curriculum.** <https://www.daisy.com/nationals/>. This program is widely used by youth BB Gun programs.

3. Competition Opportunities

Every junior should have an opportunity to experience target shooting competition. The key word here is "opportunity." That does not mean every junior should be required to participate in competitions, it means every junior should have that opportunity. Some youths and their parents may be satisfied with learning gun safety and "how to shoot." However, almost all youths who join junior shooting programs, if given a choice, will decide that they want to try competition.

Introduction to Competition. Experiencing competitions should start with shooting competition courses of fire in practice. Many programs conduct record matches during regular practice sessions where rules, with Range Officer commands and time limits, are enforced. A team record match objective should be to teach competition rules. Many programs now use Orion Scoring Systems software to conduct virtual matches with other teams where each team fires on their home range and uses Orion software to rank their scores.⁵ The CMP Aces Postals (<https://thecmp.org/youth/aces-postal/>) can be used as a competition introduction. **SCOPOS** sponsors Monthly Virtual Matches (<https://www.scopos.tech/monthly-virtual-matches>) and major national virtual leagues in the fall for advanced teams and in the spring for new shooters and pistol teams (<https://www.national-leagues.com/>).

How much traveling a team does for off-site matches depends upon their location. If there are other teams or match sponsors nearby, shoulder-to-shoulder matches or leagues involving minimal travel should be arranged. Teams in more remote locations may only be able to travel to three or four off-site matches each year.

Performance-Based Evaluation. Healthy youth programs prepare their juniors for competitions by

THE COMPETITION PYRAMID

- Team Record (Practice) Matches
- Postal Matches
- Virtual Matches (with Internet connections)
- Regional Shoulder-to-Shoulder Matches/Leagues
- State and Regional Championships
- National Championship Qualifying
- National Championships
- International Championships for USA Shooting National Team

This "Competition Pyramid" identifies the progressive competition experiences available to junior shooting athletes, in the order they are typically encountered.

⁵ **SCOPOS** (<https://www.scopos.tech/>) provides **Orion Scoring and Match Management Systems** as well as **Athena electronic targets and Results (Result Center) products**. Disclosure: The owner and developer of **SCOPOS** products is the author's son, Dr. Erik Anderson.

first establishing their performance capability in practice sessions and then encouraging them to strive to shoot their practice averages in competitions. If an athlete shoots their average in a competition, they had a good match performance, regardless of where that score placed. Healthy youth programs avoid evaluating competition results based on whether someone won or attained certain placings. If an athlete or team wants to place higher in competition, they do this by working to improve their performance capability in practice and then striving to shoot those new, higher scores in competition. In performance-based systems, tracking training and competition results, as well as athletes' personal bests (PRs) is essential.⁶

Opportunities to Travel and Have New Experiences. One of a program's competition goals should be to give program participants annual opportunities to travel to off-site matches where they see new parts of the country and meet new friends. Many advanced programs try to send teams to national championship competitions like the National Matches that have open participation, or to National Championships sponsored by the CMP, USA Shooting and American Legion. The latter championships require teams and individuals to qualify in preliminary competitions.

Organizing Competitions. Some advanced junior programs foster athlete development by sponsoring their own competitions. This requires establishing a cadre of adult volunteers within the club or team structure who know how to do match administrative functions such as registering competitors, operating safe ranges, scoring targets, and producing results lists.

4. The Shooting Range

Junior shooters should have a safe, healthy, sports-friendly shooting range available for learning and practicing. Junior programs need a shooting range where they can conduct their instructional and team practice sessions. Team or club ranges may be 10m air gun ranges, indoor 50-foot rifle or pistol ranges or, less



Competition experiences for Juniors can vary from club record matches on four- or five-point local team ranges to National Championship participation. This is the individual final in the 2023 National Three-Position Air Rifle Precision Championship where athletes competed on a range fully equipped with electronic targets in front of an enthusiastic audience of several hundred spectators.

commonly, outdoor 50-foot or even 50-meter ranges. Start by making sure the range is safe and clean. Ideal ranges have five components: 1) firing points with a target system and safe backstop, 2) an assembly area where athletes can prepare for firing (*having nearby secure storage for club equipment is desirable*), 3) a classroom or meeting area, 4) an administrative and results center (*office*) and 5) bathrooms. Ranges must have backstops that safety capture fired projectiles, present targets according to applicable rules, and provide indoor lighting that meets rulebook standards. Trained Range Officers must be available to ensure that all range operations are conducted safely and according to the rules.

Range Enhancements. Ranges with modern enhancements can make Shooting more attractive to youth, parents, and spectators. Range walls tell a lot about the program being conducted there. Do the colors, art, posters, and signage portray an Olympic sport and its heroes? The widespread use of Orion Scoring and Match Management Systems among junior shooting programs has sped up scoring, reduced volunteer requirements and facilitated results displays. Electronic targets can make

⁶ Programs that use **Orion** scoring can now use **SCOPOS' Results Score History** feature to track all of their athletes' practice and competition scores.

LESSONS, VALUES AND EXPERIENCES



Junior programs with motivated athletes should expose them to advanced coaching and shooting camps or clinics.

Shooting a modern spectator sport, both at the range and via the Internet. The recent availability of lower cost electronic targets means many junior clubs and teams now have target systems that give them the possibility of leaderboards and dynamic displays of competition results.

Personal Health and Safety. Range operations must provide for the mitigation of health risks that come from lead exposure (*indoor rimfire pistol and rifle shooting*), and lead dust (*air gun shooting*). Indoor smallbore ranges need effective air handling systems; air gun ranges must have a plan for lead removal and cleaning. Depending upon the type of shooting being done, participants may be required to wear eye and hearing protection during range firing.

5. Team Equipment

Youth shooting programs need to have loaner rifles or pistols and basic equipment available for use by new participants. A key to providing loaner equipment

for new participants is making sure it is size-appropriate. A 12-year-old struggling with a full-sized M40X or M52 target rifle will not learn good marksmanship skills. Junior shooting programs typically go through a years-long process of acquiring appropriate loaner rifles and equipment needed to support their instructional programs.

Recommended Starter Equipment. If a junior rifle program is just getting started, it is recommended that they focus on sporter class three-position air rifle. Competition grade sporter class rifles must by rule be available to youth programs at a maximum of \$650 each. Necessary equipment for sporter class shooting is pretty much limited to slings, kneeling rolls, pellet stands and shooting mats. Expensive rifle clothing and after-market rifle accessories are not permitted. Programs that shoot on paper targets will need spotting scopes and stands at some point or they may decide to invest in electronic targets. Smallbore position programs need to obtain junior grade smallbore target rifles like the Savage Mark I-FVT, which can be

⁷ Check the CMP Sales website at <https://thecmp.org/22commercial/>.

⁸ *CMP Guide to Junior Pistol Shooting*, pp. 13-14.

purchased through the CMP for less than \$400 each.⁷ Smallbore rifle and precision air rifle programs also need to have a selection of shooting jackets and trousers if they want their new juniors to be competitive in today's matches. Junior pistol programs need to decide whether to start their juniors with air pistols or .22 rimfire pistols. The **CMP Guide to Junior Pistol Shooting**⁸ provides guidance regarding starter pistol choices.

Equipment Adjustments, Care and Cleaning. Precision air and smallbore rifle shooting, in particular, involves a lot of technical equipment. Coaches need to understand the intricacies of adjusting this equipment so that they can assist juniors in adjusting their equipment. Periodic barrel cleaning is critical for maintaining rifle accuracy. Team training plans should include occasional gun cleaning and equipment maintenance sessions.

Acquiring Personal Equipment. As junior athletes become more active, programs should encourage them to obtain their own equipment. Acquiring personal equipment is important for advancing athletes because it will be better than the team's training grade equipment, it will facilitate making more precise equipment adjustments and it makes dry fire and air gun training at home possible. Coaches need to be able to advise athletes and their parents regarding what equipment to acquire. One of the best ways to learn about available equipment choices is to go to major competitions to see what the top athletes use. Commercial shooting sports suppliers frequently display product selections at these matches.

6. Advanced Training and Skill Development

Youth shooting programs should foster athlete development by providing opportunities to train and learn advanced marksmanship skills. Completing a basic marksmanship course should only be the beginning of several years of marksmanship participation that is distinguished by progressive improvement. Junior programs can foster athlete progress by offering:

Opportunities to Train. The first step in skill development is practice. To facilitate practice, team ranges



In Shooting there is joy in learning new skills, making great shots, shooting good scores and being supportive teammates.

must be available for training sessions more than once a week. Programs that encourage their youths to strive for excellence may have their ranges available for training five or six times a week.

Advanced Instruction and Coaching. Basic marksmanship courses only cover the essential skills needed to fire a competition course of fire. When an athlete starts to train to improve competition results, they will need higher level coaching. Programs with knowledgeable, experienced coaches who can offer advanced training to their athletes are fortunate. For programs that don't have advanced coaches, there are alternatives:

- **Shooting Camps.** For rifle athletes, one of the best ways to gain advanced instruction is to attend a CMP Junior Rifle Camp or Clinic (<https://thecmp.org/youth/camps/>). Every summer the CMP offers a full schedule of multi-day camps in various locations around the country. Camp instruction was developed by USA National Team coaches. CMP camps are staffed by top intercollegiate rifle athletes.

- **USA Shooting Certified Training Centers.** USAS' Certified Training Centers program recognizes about 15 centers of excellence that are qualified to offer advanced training to athletes in ISSF-type events. <https://usashooting.org/get-involved/clubs-shooting-centers/>

LESSONS, VALUES AND EXPERIENCES

Marksmanship Training Resources. Today there is a tremendous selection of excellent training resources that junior program leaders can use to fill their knowledge gaps and guide their athletes' efforts to improve. Available resources include:

- **USAMU Training Guides.** U. S. Army Marksmanship Unit Guides that present the technical knowledge of the U.S. Army's elite shooters are published by the CMP and may be purchased through the CMP E-Store (<https://thecmp.org/publications/>).

- **CMP Coaching Resources.** The CMP "**Coaching Resources**" website lists a variety of relevant instructional resources. <https://thecmp.org/coaching-resources/>

- **On the Mark Articles by Gary Anderson.** Reprints of more than 60 technical articles written by the author and published in **On the Mark** can be downloaded for use in coach development and for distribution to athletes and parents. Check the list at https://thecmp.org/gary_otm/.

- **USA Shooting Resource Center.** The Center offers a comprehensive list of books and resources linked to

high performance sport and shooting training. <https://usashooting.org/resource-center/#category-shooting-instruction>

Fitness and Healthy Lifestyles. A component of achieving excellence in any sport is encouraging athletes to be physically fit and live healthy lifestyles. Coaches may find that learning how to teach physical fitness and promote healthy lifestyles (*eating, sleeping, mental training*) can be beneficial for their junior athletes.

7. Program Values

Youth, program leaders and parents should have a shared set of values that give positive guidance and purpose to their program. A program's shared values determine its priorities and how it will achieve them. Recommended junior program values include:

Athletes First! The program is dedicated to teaching marksmanship as a sport to young athletes while protecting their safety, giving them quality instruction, and fostering their personal development.

GOALS FOR JUNIOR SHOOTING SPORTS PROGRAMS

1. Every junior shooting program participant must receive instruction in safe gun handling and established range procedures.
2. Every new participant should be offered a basic marksmanship course that teaches skills needed to complete a standard course of fire.
3. Every junior participant should have an opportunity to experience target shooting competition.
4. Junior shooters should have a safe, healthy, sports-friendly shooting range available for learning and practicing.
5. Youth shooting programs need to have loaner rifles or pistols and basic equipment available for use by new participants.
6. Youth shooting programs should foster athlete development by providing opportunities to train and learn advanced marksmanship skills.
7. Youth, program leaders and parents should have a shared set of values that give positive guidance and purpose to their program.
8. Junior shooting clubs and teams need to secure the future of their programs and the sport of shooting by developing new leaders and encouraging lifetime involvement in the shooting sports.

Participant Responsibility. Athletes, coaches, and parents are committed to learning how to be safe with guns, master the skills and traditions of the sport of Shooting and achieve results solely through personal effort.

Joy. Youth and program leaders should enjoy their Shooting sports experiences. There is joy in learning new skills, making great shots, shooting good scores, and being supportive teammates.

Motivation to Train and Excel. Athletes in this program are encouraged to strive for excellence—to try to be the best they can be.

Ethics and Fair Play. Athletes, coaches, and leaders are committed to the principles of sportsmanship and fair play and to following competition rules. Any form of cheating, using drugs or other means to gain unfair advantages over other competitors is rejected.

The Olympic Connection and Shooting History. Shooting's status as an Olympic Sport gives youth participants opportunities to live the Olympic dream. Three-thousand years of target shooting history adds special meaning to marksmanship endeavors.

8. Leadership Development/The Future of Shooting

Junior shooting clubs and teams need to secure the future of their programs and the sport of shooting by developing new leaders and encouraging lifetime involvement in the shooting sports. Too many junior programs are dependent upon one or two active leaders. When those leaders finally step down, the program fails because it had no succession plan. There are several actions programs can pursue to prepare for an enduring future:

Participant Promotion. The first step in building a strong future is keeping a steady flow of new participants coming through the program. Junior programs need to keep their communities informed about the training and growth experiences they offer so that as older juniors age out and move away new participants take their places.

Parent Education and Volunteer Training. Junior programs should have an ongoing parent education program that informs and involves them regarding team activities. Some parents and interested members of the community should be invited to learn how to supervise safe firing activities, administer team records, or become assistant coaches. They will become the coaches and leaders of the future.

Fund-Raising. Keeping junior programs active requires fund raising to buy equipment and pay the costs of travel, lodging, meals, and entry fees for competitions.

Some programs find local or regional sponsors. Many youth shooting programs link their fund-raising efforts to the Midway Foundation (<https://www.midwayusafoundation.org/>) which provides advice, matching funds, and cash grants.

Shooting as a Lifetime Sport. One of the great challenges in American youth shooting is keeping participants active in target shooting after they age out of junior programs. BB Gun competitors are too old to continue at age 16. School-age three-position air rifle athletes age out at age 18 or 19. Athletes on college teams finish at age 21 or 22. A small percentage of those athletes will continue their training and competition careers at USA Shooting's Olympic Training Center or in the U. S. Army Marksmanship Unit. Despite this shrinking pyramid of shooting sports opportunities, there are successful options for retaining junior participants. Encourage them to become future junior coaches. Introduce them to lifetime shooting disciplines like Highpower Rifle, Vintage Military Rifle, Rimfire Sporter or Bullseye Pistol where they can continue to compete. It is vitally important to encourage junior athletes to stay involved in Shooting because they will become the future leaders of the shooting sports.

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.

