

THE ROAD TO SHOOTING EXCELLENCE

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By Gary Anderson, DCM Emeritus



The top eight individual Precision Class winners in the 2023 CMP National Three-Position Air Championship are young athletes who are well advanced on “The Road to Shooting Excellence.” These winning athletes are (l. to r.) Griffin Lake, Hayley Singleton, Natalie Welter, Makenzie Larson (above, the National Champion), Claudia Muzik, Jack Ogoreuc, Ziva Swick and Camryn Camp.

Every sport has a few athletes who consistently win or rank very high in their most important competitions. They are the consistent winners or champions – lots of young athletes aspire to become winners like them. This ***On the Mark*** article is written especially for youths who are in the early stages of learning about rifle or pistol shooting and who might be dreaming about becoming winners or champions in Shooting. This article describes the “mileposts” on the *Road to Shooting Excellence* that aspiring champions need to pass by to navigate this road.

Shooting is a great sport for someone who wants to excel because the factors that determine winners are factors you can control through effort and intellect. There are few if any sports where results and rankings are more dependent on how hard one works than in Shooting. Physical attributes (i.e., height, weight, strength, speed, etc.) don’t play much of a role in determining who excels in rifle and pistol events. Shooting is a sport where access to this *Road to Excellence* is open to all athletes who have the will and motivation to follow it.

This *Road to Shooting Excellence* is marked with a series of mileposts that describe the stages of development rifle and pistol shooters typically go through when they progress towards a goal of becoming a Shooting champion. These mileposts are described in the general chronological order in which they occur.

MILEPOST 1 – TRY RIFLE OR PISTOL TARGET SHOOTING

If you are participating in a youth shooting activity, you’ve already reached the first milepost. To get started on the *Road to Shooting Excellence*, you need to have a connection with a youth shooting program that teaches rifle or pistol target shooting as a sport. That can be a junior shooting club or shooting club with a junior program, a JROTC unit, or 4-H Shooting Sports club. You might also be connected with a parent or neighbor who is mentoring you. To get you off to a great start, your youth shooting program will: 1) teach Shooting as a sport, 2) offer loaner equipment for new participants, 3) have a place to meet and shoot, 4) teach rifle or pistol marksmanship fundamentals and 5) offer the possibility of participating in competitions.

Your decision to try rifle or pistol shooting should involve regular participation where you learn real marksmanship skills that prepare you to shoot actual courses of fire. You should be practicing enough for your scores to improve. If possible, you should even have opportunities to participate in club-level competitions. These experiences will help you understand something about Shooting, what its challenges are and why so many people love this sport.

The decision you need to make at this milepost is whether you like this sport. Does firing a great shot give

MILEPOSTS ON THE ROAD TO SHOOTING EXCELLENCE

MILEPOST 1 – Try Rifle or Pistol Target Shooting

MILEPOST 2 – Learn About the Possibilities of High-Performance Shooting

MILEPOST 3 – Start a Regular Practice Program

MILEPOST 4 – Become an Active Competition Participant

MILEPOST 5 – Make a Dream—But Decide If Your Dream is Realistic

MILEPOST 6 – Get High-Performance Coaching

MILEPOST 7 – Master the Mental Game

MILEPOST 8 – Do High-Performance/High-Volume Training

you a feeling of pleasure? Do you like the satisfaction you get from shooting a good target? Does a bad score make you want to try again to get better? Do you enjoy being with other team members? Does the idea of becoming a champion in this sport excite you? If the answers to these questions are mostly “YES,” you are ready to travel further down this road.

MILEPOST 2 – LEARN ABOUT THE POSSIBILITIES OF HIGH-PERFORMANCE SHOOTING

If you’ve decided you really like to shoot, then, while you are continuing to practice and shoot in your first competitions, you need to learn where serious participation in rifle or pistol shooting could lead you. Here are some questions to ask as you travel to the next milestone:

a. Does your local shooting program have a rifle or pistol team? Do they travel to competitions? What are the competitions in which the team participates? What do you have to do to make the team?

b. Does this rifle or pistol team participate in matches involving travel to other sites? Does the team participate in postal or regional qualifying events where the highest-ranking teams are invited to compete in national championships? What are those championships?

c. Learn more about the Shooting disciplines available through your junior program. Does it promote Sporter or Precision Three-Position Air Rifle, Precision Air or 22 Rimfire Pistol events that lead to CMP or USA Shooting national competitions? Does it offer opportunities to shoot smallbore rifle three-position, or highpower rifle events, especially in the summer? The focus of your local

program will usually become the shooting discipline in which you specialize.

d. Do some research to learn about future championship opportunities that might become possible for you. Check the websites of the CMP, USA Shooting, American Legion (Junior 3PAR Tournament), Scopus/Orion/Athena (National Leagues), and the X-Count organization for information about the junior programs they support.

e. Learn about Shooting as an Olympic sport? Start with these two basic references: <https://thecmp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/History-of-Olympic-Shooting-Text.pdf> and <https://thecmp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-Olympic-Shooting-Events-Spring2021.pdf>. Also, try to find stories about some of the great Olympic champions and what they did to become champions.



The most popular way youths “try rifle shooting” is through programs that teach three-position air rifle shooting with sporter class air rifles.

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The Paralympic Games and para-shooting events have made the Road to Shooting Excellence accessible for athletes with disabilities.

CHAMPIONS CAN BE MODELS FOR ASPIRING CHAMPIONS!
Two of the greatest Pistol and Rifle champions of all time are 4-time Olympic pistol gold medalist Jin Jongoh of the Republic of Korea (above) and 3-time Olympic rifle gold medalist Nicco Campriani of Italy (below).

f. Athletes with disabilities or physical limitations also can follow this *Road to Excellence* by participating in the adaptive programs governed by World Shooting Para-Sport (<https://www.paralympic.org/shooting>) and promoted in this country by USA Shooting and the CMP.

g. If you are a rifle shooter, learn about the NCAA College Rifle program (<http://ncaarifle.org/Home/TeamResults>). There are several universities and colleges whose athletic departments support intercollegiate rifle teams, and some even provide scholarships (The Ohio State University even has a varsity pistol team.). The NCAA Rifle Championship is a major annual competition.

Learning more about what might be possible, or even be a dream accomplishment for you, will help you decide if this is a sport where you want to continue on this *Road to Excellence*.

MILEPOST 3 –START A REGULAR PRACTICE PROGRAM

If you've decided you like target shooting and are excited about where excelling in this sport could lead you, you need to be carrying out a regular practice program. Even at this stage, practice has got to be more than once a week. If your range is open more than once a week, become one of the team members who is on the range practicing whenever the range is open. Becoming a winner in Shooting will ultimately require five or six days a week of practice, so start thinking in those terms.

Your objectives during this part of the journey should be to learn and automate fundamental marksmanship skills and improve your full course scores. There are several considerations to guide you:

a. **Score Improvement.** A primary goal is to raise your scores, so you become competitive with the better shooters. Most rifle and pistol shooters see their biggest score improvements after they start practicing several times a week. If you are not doing so already, now is the time to start keeping a shooting journal. Athletes on teams with Scopos Results accounts (<https://www.scopos.tech/results>) can use that system for tracking and graphing scores and shot group analyses.

b. **Do You Enjoy Practicing?** A key question at this stage is whether you enjoy practicing. Undertaking a high-volume training program because you are pressured to do that by a parent or coach is not going to work. There needs to be an element of joy in each day of practice that comes from your efforts to shoot good shots and good scores.

c. **Acquire Your Own Equipment.** Most junior rifle or pistol shooters start with loaner equipment provided by the team, club, or range. When you reach the point where you realize how much you like shooting and enjoy practicing, it's time to think about acquiring your own equipment. Sporter class air rifle and most pistol equipment is affordable, but precision air rifle or smallbore rifle equipment requires significant investments. The catalogs and websites of shooting equipment suppliers are good places to start your research. Ideally, a coach or program leader can advise regarding the right equipment. Leading competitors at your matches may be able to help. Athletes who start with sporter class air rifles need to decide whether and when is the right time to convert to precision class equipment. That will be a key to advancing in the most important junior competitions and having the possibility of shooting in college.

d. **Home Training.** One of the primary reasons to acquire your own equipment is because that makes home training possible. Especially when your local range is not available every day of the week or during convenient hours, home training becomes the next best way to perform training repetitions through dry firing or air gun shooting. If your new equipment includes an air rifle or air pistol, doing air gun training at home can be just as effective as shooting on a range. Dry firing is a productive training method if you develop the ability to call dry fire shots accurately and honestly. Holding exercises (aiming repetitions without trigger release) can also be a viable form of home or range training.

MILEPOST 4 – BECOME AN ACTIVE COMPETITION PARTICIPANT

After you adopt a serious practice program and your scores are climbing, you need to be participating in a

regular schedule of competitions. If you are on a team, the team's competition plan will become your plan. If your local program does not participate in a lot of competitions, you need to look for matches where you can participate on your own. The most beneficial competition schedules are structured within a competition season that usually begins in the fall with local duals, postal qualifying for regional or national events, or virtual leagues (Scopos or CMP Aces). Bigger and more prestigious shoulder-to-shoulder competitions are offered in the winter and spring. Various national championships are scheduled in the spring and summer. They culminate in the CMP's National Matches and USA Shooting's Junior Olympic Nationals.

Participation in competitions needs to be planned and managed, especially where matches involve travel. Prepare an annual competition plan that identifies the matches you expect to attend. Ideally, your match program should include at least one match a month where you travel to another range site. There can also be such a thing as too many matches; it's absolutely essential that you have time to train and rest. List the most important championships at the end of the competition year and then structure your plan with an objective of being well prepared for those championships.

MILEPOST 5 – MAKE A DREAM, BUT DECIDE IF YOUR DREAM IS REALISTIC

The journeys of virtually every champion athlete have been inspired by dreams. In the sport of Shooting, you first need to decide what your definition of "excellence" is.



Score improvement in pistol shooting is especially dependent upon carrying out a regular practice program.

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Aspiring champions first need to learn how to win in local and regional competitions. The three medalists shown here were winners in a recent CMP Competition Center monthly match Sporter Class competition.

Is it a modest goal like earning a Distinguished Badge in one of Shooting's different disciplines? Do you want to be a consistent winner in your state or region? Do you aspire to win places on national championship podiums? Is earning a scholarship on a college rifle team a dream? Or do you have the highest dreams of all, to qualify for



The technical coaching athletes receive in a well-structured shooting camp can play a big role in their development. The coach in this photo is Ryan Hinson, Director of the CMP Junior Rifle Camps.

a USA Shooting National Team and even to go on to contend for World Championship and Olympic medals? The message, it's OK to dream because seeing yourself achieving great dreams will be a powerful motivator when you encounter rough stretches on your "Road to Excellence."


It is also important to understand that your sport dreams must have a companion—a comprehensive training and competition program that is just as big as your dream. As your dream emerges, you must decide how much training and how many competitions will be necessary to reach that goal. Then apply a reality test to that conclusion—do you have access to the equipment, facilities and funding that will let you fulfill that dream. And even if your answers to this last question are not all positive, remember that many sports champions applied their resourcefulness to finding ways to become winners. It's OK to dream, if you also resolve to do all that is necessary to prepare to win.

Pursuing the dream of becoming a champion in any sport demands dedicating huge amounts of time to training and competitions. Your dream must be a major priority in your life. That means you have to have a serious conversation with yourself about what your major priorities really are. Are there other important priorities in your life? Academic performance? Preparing for a career that requires specialized education and training? Achieving excellence in another sport or endeavor? It's at this stage that athletes with sports dreams must decide whether and how this dream fits in with their other life priorities.

MILEPOST 6 – GET HIGH-PERFORMANCE COACHING

Shooting is a highly complex sport with many different factors that impact high performance results. Acquiring high level technical knowledge is a significant contributor to winning results. There are several resources to help you do this:

a. **Your Team Coach.** Not every junior team is blessed with a coach who can teach advanced skills, but when you are fortunate enough to have one, learn as much as you can from them.



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ABOUT GARY ANDERSON

Gary Anderson, Director of Civilian Marksmanship-Emeritus, is a regular contributor to **On The Mark**.

He served as DCM for 10 years and remains an effective advocate for firearms safety training and rifle practice. Gary's primary role at CMP has been to develop and sustain successful youth shooting programs at both regional and national levels.



The author, Gary Anderson, has written many technical articles that are now available for downloading from this CMP webpage: https://thecmp.org/news-media/on-the-mark/gary_otm/. Over 60 articles are posted on this website and many of them are appropriate for athletes who seek to advance on the "Road to Shooting Excellence."

b. **Junior Rifle Camps.** There are quite a few camps and clinics that are now available to junior rifle and pistol athletes. The lead coaches in these camps are typically current or past champions who generously share their knowledge with young athletes. CMP Junior Rifle Camps have emerged as perhaps the best rifle camp program available today (<https://thecmp.org/youth/junior-air-rifle-camps-and-clinics/>). The curriculum for these camps has benefitted from substantial input by National Rifle Coaches; camp counselors are all current top athletes on college rifle teams.

c. **USAMU Clinics.** U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit International Rifle Team members teach clinics that are definitely worth attending. If you are at an event where USAMU athletes are conducting a clinic, plan to attend and learn from it.

d. **Books, Magazine Articles and Technical Videos.** Aspiring champions should accumulate a library of books and magazine articles with advanced technical information about their shooting discipline. I'll mention two readily available resources, but there are definitely other helpful

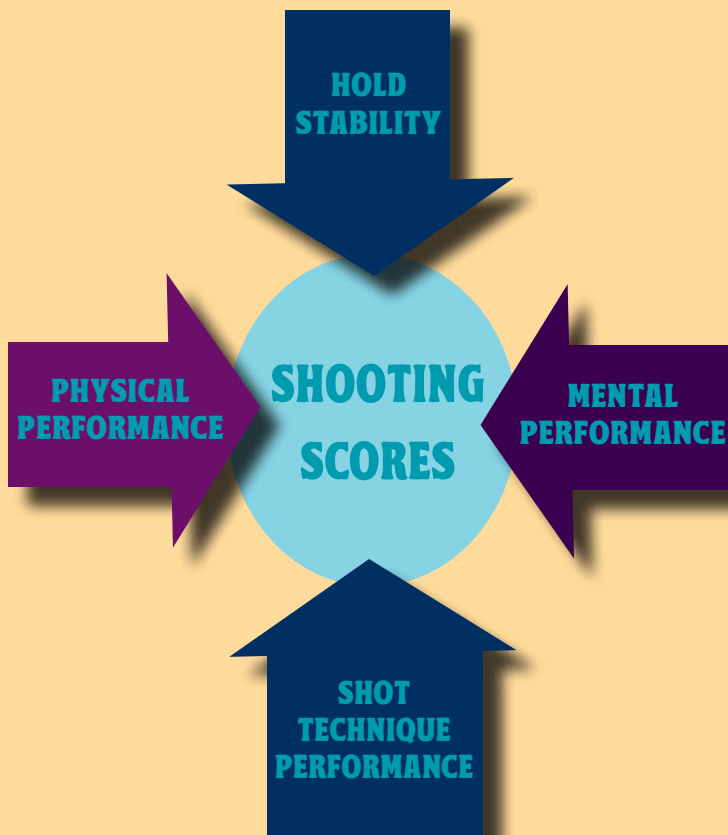
resources. The author has written many elementary and advanced technical articles, which can be downloaded from the CMP website (see above). There are numerous books on target shooting, but among the best are highly technical books published in German and English by Heinz Reinkemeier and Gaby Bühlmann. Their books are pricey but worth the investment. Reinkemeier's website (<https://www.heinzlive.com/>) provides access to their exhaustive collection of YouTube™ videos.

e. **Connect with Current Champions.** Some of the best sources of technical information are current champion athletes. Just watching them shoot can teach you a lot about their firing positions and shooting techniques. Get to know them and don't be afraid to ask questions. Virtually every shooting champion will be eager to answer your questions.

f. **ISSF Videos.** Watching top competitors in action, ideally in person at competitions, can teach you a lot, but a good alternative is the ISSF Championship videos that are streamed from the ISSF website (https://www.issf-sports.org/news_multimedia/video.ashx).

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TRAINING OBJECTIVES FOR SHOOTING



SHOOTING TRAINING MUST DEVELOP ALL FOUR OBJECTIVES TO IMPROVE SHOOTING SCORES.

High-performance training must be comprehensive; shooting scores improve the most when training objectives focus on 1) hold stability, 2) mental performance, 3) shot technique performance and 4) physical performance.

g. **U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit or USOTC Resident Athlete Program.** The ultimate in opportunities to receive expert coaching as well as advanced training and competition is enjoyed by athletes who are selected to participate in one of these elite training programs. Athletes in these programs engage in full-time training and competition.

Benefitting from High-Performance Coaching depends upon how you use the massive amount of technical information now available. Once an athlete masters the fundamentals and has established a performance routine with an effective shot plan, changes should be made slowly and only after careful study. Making multiple, frequent changes can have negative consequences for an advanced athlete.

MILEPOST 7 – MASTER THE MENTAL GAME

An athlete's mental game is an essential component of marksmanship success, so learn how to apply the elements of sport psychology in your training and competition performance. When Colonel Bill Pullum began coaching the Army International Rifle Team in the 1960s, he engineered a great advance in USA international championship successes by teaching that mental training was an indispensable part of winning marksmanship. His leadership helped USA teams dominate Olympic and World Championship competitions in the decades that followed. Colonel Pullum's books, *Position Rifle Shooting* and *New Position Rifle Shooting*, are out of print now, but if you find one in a used book market, they are worth studying. One of the leading practitioners of successful mental performance was 1976 Olympic gold medalist Lanny Bassham. His works on "mental management" are widely available (<https://mentalmanagement.com/>). Reinkemeier and Buhlmann have a useful book on *Sport Psychology and Competition* that is currently available in the USA. Some of sport psychology is as simple as learning to be positive and manage one's self-talk, but it can be more complex too. Sport psychology is a popular topic in virtually every Olympic sport today so lots of resources on this topic are readily available.

MILEPOST 8 – HIGH-PERFORMANCE, HIGH-VOLUME TRAINING

When our aspiring champions passed Milepost 3, they were expected to be engaging in regular practice, but now, by Milepost 7, practice must become high-performance/high-volume training. At this stage, training frequency and training volume (how many shots or hold repetitions are performed) are critical. The expectation is that athletes at this point are training five or six days a week while carrying out training regimens with two to four hours of daily range time, plus the time they devote to other aspects of a comprehensive training program.

In talking about the *Road to Excellence* we make a big deal out of how champions typically work harder than other athletes. However, it is also important to understand that high-performance training is more than just how deep the pile of empty brass is on your firing point. A two-part *On the Mark* article I wrote on "Training—the Way to Success in Shooting" (Part I: OTM Spring 2020; Part II: OTM Summer 2020) provides a primer on marksmanship training and how to plan and carry it out.

Training is not just about how many rounds you fire, but what you learn from each training session. Session scores should be subjected to shot group and bad shot analyses. Evaluation systems like the Scopos Results' score graphing can help athletes see whether they are progressing and whether technical experiments are productive. High-Performance training must be comprehensive; training must now include these essential components:

- **Physical Warm-Up.** The start of each training session should include light stretching and calisthenics to prepare the muscles and nervous system for optimum performance.

- **Technical Training.** Technical training with the rifle or pistol, whether on the range or at home, is the most important component of high-performance training. Live fire work on the range usually predominates, but productive technical training also includes dry firing and holding or aiming exercises.

- **Equipment Maintenance.** Precision rifle equipment and clothing require precise adjustments to support optimum performance. Barrel cleaning after each smallbore or highpower range session is critical to maintaining rifle accuracy. All target guns require regular cleaning and maintenance.

- **Mental Training (see Milepost 7).** Time spent analyzing performances, keeping a shooting journal, and visualizing good performances count as mental training.

- **Sport or Physical Training.** The overall health and physical condition of the athlete is also a difference maker.

- **Rest.** Good training programs also provide for rest and recovery times.

THE NEXT MILEPOSTS – CONTINUE ON TO VICTORY

In every sport, there are athletes who decide to stop being spectators or regular participants and pursue extraordinary steps to rise and become champions. This article has identified the early mileposts that young shooting athletes must advance past to follow the *Road to Shooting Excellence*. It is a difficult and challenging road to follow, but for those who choose to do so, the rewards are worthy of the effort required.



The Road to Shooting Excellence can lead to moments like this victory ceremony from 2016, when ISSF President Olegario Vázquez Raña congratulated Virginia Thrasher, USA, for winning the Women's Air Rifle Olympic gold medal.

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.

