

How to Practice

By Gary Anderson, DCME

The difference between ordinary shooters and great shooters is how much and how well they practice. Indeed, one of the best things about shooting is that it is a skill sport where practice or training is the most important factor in determining how well shooters do. This means that every coach of junior shooters has a special responsibility to make sure all young people in the team have the benefit of good practice opportunities. Junior shooting coaches must be able to plan and organize practices that produce real skill and score improvement and to establish training practices that are a foundation for each shooter's continued improvement and growth.

This article examines the concepts and principles of sports practice or training that junior shooting coaches must understand and apply while conducting practices for their teams.

POSITIVE REPETITIONS—THE TRAINING EFFECT.

The foundation principle of all sports training is that the correct repetition of sports skills causes changes in the body that yield gradual improvement in how well those skills are performed. Performing target shooting skills correctly and repeatedly causes the body to develop new motor connections that respond to visual signals by controlling muscles that must act or refrain from acting to stabilize the position and fire the shot.

It is important to understand, however, that the changes caused by practice repetitions occur slowly and subtly. It often takes hundreds and even thousands of shots over a period of weeks or even months before change and improvement can be seen. Coaches must strive to help their shooters understand how this principle works:

1. Correctly repeating the skills you teach them is the most important means of shooting score improvement.
2. The number of correct repetitions determines how much and how fast improvement occurs.
3. Change and improvement in performing these skills comes slowly and gradually—shooters must patient and not expect improvement to be dramatic or fast.
4. Change and improvement may be gradual or it may take place in steps—shooters whose scores do not improve for a long time must be patient and wait for a breakthrough to a higher score level.



Improvement and progress during target shooting practices comes from positive repetitions--the repeated correct performance of shot technique in sound firing positions. More correct repetitions leads to more improvement.



The coach must work with each shooter to help them understand how important it is to concentrate or focus attention on the sight picture and minimizing sight picture movements during every practice shot.

OVERLOAD AND ADAPTATION. The overload principle that underlies sports training also applies in target shooting, but in a somewhat different way. A runner overloads during training by running faster or longer than before. After training for some time with this increased demand, the body adapts and the runner's speed and endurance increases. The demand is increased again in subsequent training until new adaptation occurs. In shooting, demand is increased when aiming (sight picture) is combined with a mental demand for the sight picture movements (hold) to become smaller and slower. Adaptation occurs when motor nerve connections are developed that direct different muscle fibers to relax, remain steady or contract as needed to achieve a steadier hold and better coordinated trigger release. The details of this process can be very complicated, but new shooters should understand that:

1. Focusing attention (concentration) on the sight picture and trying to see sight picture movements become smaller and slower creates a demand on the brain, nervous system and muscles to hold the rifle steadier.
2. The more often this demand is repeated (frequency), the more a shooter will improve.
3. Keeping as much attention (visual and mental focus) as possible (intensity) on the sight picture and sight picture movements creates greater demand and more improvement.

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PROGRESSION IN POSITION AND TECHNIQUE

SKILLS. The repetition and creation of a demand for shooting skills to improve is not, however, a general process where shooters simply fire as many shots as possible. Practice, instead, must be done in a planned progression where the shooting positions and performance skills are taught and mastered in succession. Brand new shooters must first master basic shot technique; this is most effectively done in the supported position. Then rifle shooters must progress to the standing, prone and kneeling positions, usually in that order. After rifle shooters progress to where they can shoot all three positions, their practice sessions in each position need to focus on a progression through the detailed features of each position. Working through position checkpoints, one checkpoint at a time, while continuing to perform repetitions where focus and concentration is maintained is the best method of achieving stable firing positions. Keys to effectively applying this principle are:

1. Break the shooting positions and individual position features down into a practice progression for shooters to follow.
2. Practice progressions must be individually tailored to each shooter.
3. Each part of this practice progression should become a practice goal for individual shooters. For example, the goal of a practice session might be to determine how much sling tension (sling adjustment) is needed in prone to produce the steadiest hold.



This shooting coach is working with a group of new shooters as they practice the first step in an instructional progression for position rifle shooting—mastering good shot technique while firing from the supported position.



Practice sessions should begin with a review of the plan for that session. Brief periods of instruction should also be part of good practice plans.

COMPONENTS OF PRACTICE. Practices should be a lot more than just having shooters set up their gear and start shooting. Each practice session should consist of a combination of practice components that include:

1. Welcome and review of the practice plan (5 min.)
2. Warm-up (usually light stretching, 5-10 min.)
3. Practice previously taught skills (from last practice, 20-40 min.)
4. Conduct instructional session (teach new skills, may not be the same for all shooters, 5-10 min.)
5. Practice new skills (20-40 min.)
6. Fire record course (practice under competition conditions with time limits)
7. Update Shooters Journals and coach comments

PRACTICE PLANS. Practice sessions will produce better results if they are planned in advance. There are two types of practice plans:

1. **Team Practice Plan.** Before a practice takes place the coach should to jot down a plan for the upcoming session. This plan should identify which of the components of practice are to be included and how much time will be dedicated to each. Decide which topics will be covered in instructional periods and prepare notes on specific items to cover. If your shooters are at different levels of development, you will need to individualize the instructional topics and practice tasks.

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2. **Individual Practice Plan.** Each shooter on the team must also be taught how to plan their individual practices. Even junior shooters should begin each practice session with a plan—what they will work on and what their goals are for the practice. Setting practice goals may be determined by an instructional topic that the coach covers or it may be a follow-up to shooter's journal entries made after the previous practice. Individual practice goals should be discussed with the coach.

PRACTICE VOLUME. The issue of “practice volume” must answer questions concerning how much practice is needed and how much practice is too much.

1. **Long Term Goals.** Answers to this question should be based on the long-term goals of the team and individuals on the team. A team or individual that is shooting for fun may get along fine with a limited season and one practice session per week. A team or individual that is striving to win national championship honors will find it necessary to train at least four or five times a week with most of those practices lasting two or three hours or longer.
2. **Over Training.** A second issue concerning practice volume is over training. The amount of shooting done in any one practice session must be limited to how much shooting each individual can do while maintaining a high level of concentration. If a shooter reaches the point where they no longer concentrate or try to make the best shots they can, it is time to stop or change to another practice task.
3. **Rest.** Rest is also part of sports training. There are times when, after a long series of hard practices, the best thing to do is to stop practicing for a period of time to allow the shooters time to rest and regain their motivation.

WAYS TO MAKE PRACTICES MORE EFFECTIVE.

There are many things to incorporate into your team's practices that can help produce better results.

1. **Make Timely Corrections.** Practicing with a position that is incorrect or while using improper shot technique will limit or negate any progress that the shooter might make. The coach has the primary responsibility for ensuring that each shooter's firing positions and shot techniques are correct. Observe them carefully while they are firing. Discuss their targets with them; be especially alert for sub-normal scores that may be an indication of errors that must be analyzed and corrected.
2. **Dry Firing and Aiming Exercises.** Both of these drills are great ways to increase practice effectiveness and gain additional repetitions. Have shooters precede firing in a position by spending 5 or 10 minutes where they aim at the target while trying to hold the front sight as still as

possible. Then have them dry fire several shots where they pay special attention to good shot technique before they start live firing.

3. **Position Priority.** When practice time is limited, it is usually a mistake to spend a lot of time practicing prone. Instead, practice the most difficult positions or stages. Make the standing and kneeling positions priorities and dedicate more practice time to them. This will add more points to shooters' total scores than time spent practicing a position where scores may already be very high.
4. **Time Management.** With team practice times almost always limited, a difference soon emerges between shooters who arrive at practice, quickly set up their equipment and spend as much of the practice time as possible on the firing line while other shooters spend much of this time talking to their friends and wasting time. Good time management in shooting practice means spending as much time as possible focused on shooting.



Practice repetitions are only effective when they are done correctly. The coach must work closely with each shooter to identify and correct any errors in position structure or shot technique.

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In guts matches, every shooter fires one shot. The shooter(s) with the lowest score must drop out. These one-shot contests continue until there are only two shooters remaining. Team members who have dropped out are allowed to cheer or heckle the remaining shooters as long as they do not contact the shooter or step in front of the firing line. Guts matches can enliven a practice session, teach concentration and give team members a chance to just have some fun.

5. **Practice at Home.** One of the great steps forward for many shooters is when they acquire their own equipment and begin to practice at home by dry firing or shooting on an air gun range. Encourage your shooters who are showing a real interest in competition shooting to talk to their parents about obtaining their own equipment. A junior who is able to practice one or two times a week with their club or team can easily double or triple the amount of training they do if they have their own equipment.
6. **Fun and Social Activities.** No one is going to keep on doing a lot of hard practice unless they enjoy shooting and the challenges it brings. Coaches must look for ways to keep practices fun. Praise for firing a good practice scores helps. Add variety and fun shooting activities like one-shot matches or guts matches to some practice sessions. Going to competitions is almost always fun if winning and losing is kept in proper perspective. Social activities like pizza parties, group outings, recognizing birthdays or celebrating new personal records add enjoyable dimensions to the practice experience.

Junior shooting coaches who master the concepts and principles of sports training and who apply them in organizing their team practices are fulfilling the responsibility they have to ensure that the young people in their clubs and teams have real opportunities to improve and grow so that they may reach their personal goals as shooting sports participants.

About the Author

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 at CMP has been to develop and sustain successful youth shooting programs at both regional and national levels.

