

THREE-POSITION SHOOTING--TEACHING THE FIRST STEPS

By Gary Anderson, Director of Civilian Marksmanship-Emeritus

The accepted method for teaching young athletes how to play any sport begins by breaking the sport down into drills that teach the separate skills of the sport. After practicing a component skill until it is mastered, the athlete progresses to other skills and finally to putting all of those skills together to play a game or complete event in that sport. The same progression applies in shooting. New shooters begin by firing from a supported position where they learn basic shot technique. Then they progress through the firing positions, usually starting with standing, then prone and the use of a sling and finally kneeling. The learning process in rifle shooting also culminates in playing a full game, that is, by shooting a three-position course of fire.



After new shooters master the three firing positions, prone, standing and kneeling, they are ready to fire a complete three-position course of fire where all three positions are fired consecutively in one shooting event.

We will begin with a description of the three-position course of fire and the essential rules that govern it. The rifle three-position course of fire is the standard event for most junior air and smallbore rifle programs. There are three firing positions, prone, standing and kneeling, that must be fired in that order. The shortest and simplest course of fire is the 3x10 course where ten record shots are fired in each position. Larger junior competitions use a 3x20 course with 20 record shots in each position. When international (ISSF) events are fired with smallbore rifles at 50 meters or 50 feet (reduced targets), women shoot 3x20 shots and men shoot 3x40 shots. In NCAA collegiate shooting all athletes fire 3x20 shots in a 50-foot smallbore event.

THREE-POSITION RIFLE TIME LIMITS

Event	Stage	Time Limit
10m 3x10	10 Shots Prone	20 min.
	10 Shots Standing	20 min.
	10 Shots Kneeling	15 min.
10m 3x20	20 Shots Prone	30 min.
	20 Shots Standing	40 min.
	20 Shots Kneeling	30 min.

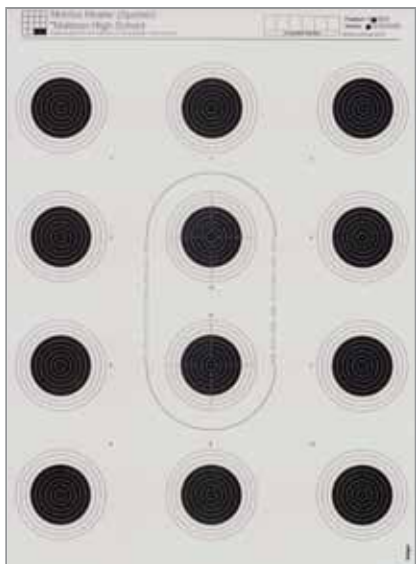
See the appropriate USA Shooting or NRA rulebook for smallbore rifle three-position time limits.

Each position in three-position shooting has a fixed time limit during which the shooter may fire an “unlimited” number of sighting shots and 10 or 20 shots for record. Time limits vary according to the position and the number of shots to be fired in the position (see the time limit table). During the time limit, shooters fire two different types of shots, sighters and record shots. Sighters are practice or warm-up shots that must be fired at a bulls-eye designated as a sighter bull. Record shots are actual competition shots that count towards the final score. A specified number of record shots are fired in each stage of fire. Sighting shots must be fired first followed by record shots. All sighting and record shots must be fired within the specified time limit.

Almost all junior shooting is done at either 10-meter or 50 foot distances on 10-bull paper targets. These targets have two sighter bulls surrounded by a guard ring in the middle of the target and ten record bulls around the outside of the target. The rules for three-position shooting allow shooters to begin each position by firing an unlimited number of sighter or practice shots. After firing sighter shots, the shooter must “go for record.” Record firing on this target requires the shooter to fire one shot at each of the ten record bulls. No additional sighting shots may be fired after the first record shot and all sighter and record shots must be fired within the prescribed time limit.

When a three-position course is fired in competition, it begins with a “preparation period” and has “change-over” periods between each position. The preparation period is normally ten minutes, while changeover periods are five minutes. During these periods, shooters may handle their

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10-bull competition targets have two sighter bulls in the middle and ten record bulls around the outside.

Firing Point Layout.

Everything needed to complete the course of fire should be laid out on the firing point as soon as the Range Officer calls shooters to the firing line. Everything, the shooting mat, spotting scope, shooting stand, ammunition holder, kneeling roll, glove, screwdriver and other necessary items, should have fixed places on the firing point. It is important to make sure the spotting scope is positioned so that the shooter's eye in each position will be as close as possible to it. Shooters should ground their rifles on their firing points until the preparation period begins. With all equipment laid out on the firing point, it's OK to go ahead and put on the shooting jacket, if one is worn, and the sling.

Preparation Period.

This is the warm-up time for shooters. Preparation periods are usually ten minutes in length. After the Range Officer announces that a prep period has begun, shooters may pick up their rifles, attach the sling and get into prone, the first firing position. Shooters should use this time to align the position's natural point of aim on the target and align the spotting scope with the non-aiming eye. Unless the shooter is using a CO₂ air rifle that cannot be dry fired, several dry fire repetitions should be made. Aiming exercises must suffice for air rifles that

rifles, that is, they may get into their firing positions, remove the CBIs or ECIs and dry fire in preparation for firing.

In order to prepare your shooters to fire the three-position course of fire, there are many critical details to teach. We'll describe them in the general order that they need to be applied while firing a 3x10 or 3x20 event.

cannot be dry fired. Smallbore and precision air rifle shooters generally need the full ten minutes for a good warm-up. Sporter air rifle shooters often need less time and should determine when they first get into position so that they don't end up just lying there waiting for the prep period to end.

Target Bull Firing Order.

When firing starts, each shooter should have a plan for the order in which the sighter and record bulls are fired. Each record bull is numbered from one to ten, but the bulls do not need to be fired in that order. Indeed, to shoot them in numerical order is one of the least efficient ways to do this. The firing order should be designed to minimize movements from one record bull to the next. The illustration (on right) shows one recommended firing order that begins with the lower sighter bull, continues to the upper sighter bull and then proceeds around the target in a counter-clockwise direction.



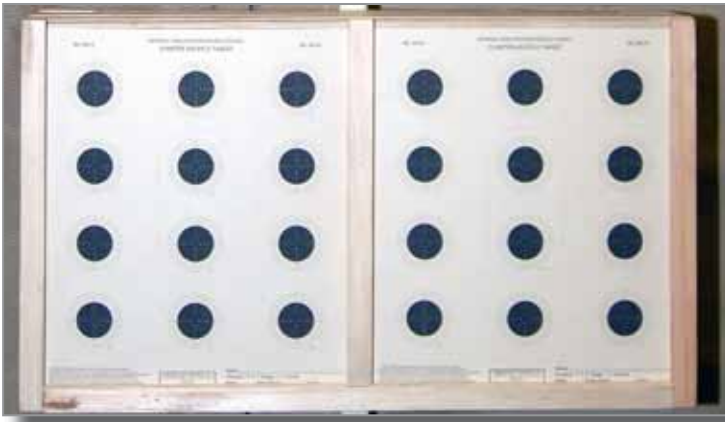
Numbers on this 10-bull target show one recommended target bull firing order that is used by many shooters.

Sighting Shots.

The purpose of sighting shots is to precisely zero the rifle and to practice the shot technique before starting record shots. Every sighting shot must be fired with the same technique that will be used for record shots. Fire three or four shots on the first sighter bull and use these shots to make any necessary sight adjustments. Shift the position to the second sighter bull and fire two or three more shots to set up a performance routine. Shooters should limit the number of sighters fired to what is needed to zero the rifle and be sure they are performing well. Spending too much time on sighters means less time will be available for record shots. Shooting too few shots may mean going for record with a rifle that is not zeroed.

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When firing 3x20 courses of fire, the standard practice is to hang two targets at one time. The wide distance from one side to the other side of the two targets makes it doubly necessary for shooters to learn to make bull-to-bull NPA shifts (see text).

NPA Shifting.

Shooting on 10-bull targets requires shooters to slightly shift their NPA (natural point of aim) each time they move from one target bull to the next. This process begins during the preparation period by dry firing and making sure the aligned sights point naturally at the first sighting bull. During prone position sighters, the body must be shifted rearward or forward slightly to move to the second sighter and to the first record bull. Horizontal moves to the second record bull require slight body moves that pivot over the left elbow (right handed shooter). Further slight body shifts must be made to move to each successive record bull. In standing, vertical shifts are made by slight forward or rearward movements of the left hand. Horizontal shifts in standing require rotating the foot position a few millimeters. In kneeling, vertical shifts are done with the left hand location on the forearm while horizontal shifts involve rotating the body over the right heel and kneeling roll.

Shooting Record Shots.

The key to firing good record shots is to focus attention only on the shot that is being fired. In other words, shoot ten or twenty “one-shot matches.” The key to shooting a series of one-shot matches is to have a shot plan, that is, a step-by-step list of actions to do to prepare for and fire a shot. Shooters should fire every shot the same way and when the time for the actual firing of the shot comes, full attention must be on the sight picture and a

smooth trigger release for that particular shot. Having a shot plan, repeating it in practice and paying attention to following it in competitions will ensure that this happens. Several studies have shown that, on average, the most difficult shots are the first and last shots for record. To ensure good first and last shots, the shooter must have a shot plan, repeat it during sighters and then focus on following the shot plan the same way this was done during sighters.

Pace and Rhythm.

Shooters must learn to take enough time in preparing for and firing each shot to be sure they make the best shots they can. Conversely, they must not take so long that they run out of time and have to rush the last shots. This means shooters should have a regular shot routine. This allows the shooter to have a pace and rhythm that helps to achieve good performances on each shot. Proper pacing ensures that the firing of the sighters and all record shots is completed with a safety margin of time remaining. If an accurate range clock is not visible to shooters on the range, it is a good idea for them to keep a watch or stopwatch on the firing point so they can quickly determine if they are on pace to finish on time, are shooting too quickly or too slowly. Since the penalty for not finishing on time is severe, that is, all unfired shots count as misses; there should be no excuse for running out of time.

When Trouble Occurs.

During the firing of any course of fire there will be times when things just are not going well. The trouble may be a bad shot or series of bad shots or there might be a problem with the rifle. The answer to trouble should not be to give up by quickly firing the remaining shots. Shooters must learn to stay cool and try to fix their problems. A bad shot must be forgotten and a renewed effort must be made to concentrate solely on firing the next shot. A series of bad shots may mean the firing position is wrong and should be corrected. Sometimes the best thing to do is to take a break and even go back to talk to the coach. To do that, the rifle must be cleared (with CBI or ECI) and grounded and permission sought from the Range Officer. In most cases, the best cure for trouble is to have a shot plan and to refocus attention on following the plan for each remaining shot.

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Finals for the top eight shooters are often used to conclude three-position competition events. Successful firing in a final requires shooters to have good, well-practiced shot plans and the discipline to follow them.

When Shooting Goes Great.

Another challenge occurs when a shooter is doing exceptionally well. When a shooter starts to think about setting a new record or standing on the awards podium to receive a prize, disaster is not far away. The formula of shooting one-shot matches by just continuing to think only about the next shot and following the shot plan for that shot is the best way to sustain and finish a great performance.

Changeover Periods.

When changing from one position to the next, there is normally a changeover period of five minutes. This period begins after target changing is complete. Shooters are not permitted to handle or adjust their rifles while anyone is downrange changing targets, but as soon as the Range Officer announces that the changeover period has begun, preparation for the next position must begin. Each shooter should have a routine for doing this that is similar to the routine followed during the initial preparation period. Precision air rifle and smallbore shooters may be challenged to complete all their changes within the changeover time, but the key to doing this is to be organized and prepared for making the change. Before the changeover period is over, the shooter must be in position and dry firing to get ready for the next stage of fire.

Finals.

Finals are often included in three-position courses of fire to conclude the competition and determine the ranking of the best shooters. Finals are for the top eight shooters in the three-position course of fire. In a final, ten additional shots are fired in the standing position with separate commands and 75 second time limits being given for each shot. There can be a lot of pressure associated with the final since this is where medal winners are decided. Finals can also be a lot of fun because they highlight the best shooters and challenge them to demonstrate their skills in front of an audience. The key to good finals shooting is no different from the key to shooting good shots during a regular competition. Shooters in finals must have a shot plan and fire each final round shot one-at-a-time by following that plan.

As soon as shooters in a junior program have progressed to the point where they have sound prone, standing and kneeling positions and have developed and practiced a shot plan for those positions, they are ready to be introduced to the three-position course of fire and to playing the game of position rifle shooting. Teaching the fundamental techniques and tactics described in this article will give these shooters a solid foundation for successfully participating in three-position air or smallbore rifle competitions.

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

