

Ten Lessons I Wish I Had Learned As A Young Shooter

By Gary Anderson, DCME

In my shooting career I was fortunate to win many championships and awards. I was also privileged to learn many lessons that helped me become a better shooter. The disconcerting thing about those lessons, however, was how long it took to learn them. Many lessons came late in my shooting career; many didn't come until after I retired from active competition. It is useless to ask how much better I could have been if I had learned them earlier, but it is essential to ask how coaches and parents can help today's new and young shooters by teaching these lessons to them.

I've often asked myself what are the most important lessons I wish I had learned earlier in my competition career. The result is what I called "ten lessons I wish I had learned as a young shooter." These are lessons I believe would have made the biggest difference for me and that could also make big differences for today's new and young shooters.

LESSON 1 – NATURAL ABILITY WILL NOT MAKE YOU A SHOOTING CHAMPION

When I started shooting I was in awe of other beginners who found it easy to shoot good scores. I thought they had natural ability and I didn't. In the years since, I have taught many groups of new shooters. There were one or two in every group who shot better than the others. It was only natural to expect that they were the ones destined to become champions.

In some sports it is possible to evaluate young athletes and decide if they have the physical qualities and talent to become great in that sport, but that is definitely not the case in shooting. It didn't take me long to pass those who started out shooting better scores than I did. In the many training groups I have worked with, I have never found any correlation between new shooters' scores and long-term results. I have also heard many anecdotes about shooting champions who began at the bottom of their instructional groups. The difference was that they liked shooting and decided to work harder than the others.

HARD WORK, TRAINING EFFORT AND PERSEVERANCE, NOT NATURAL ABILITY, MAKES YOU A SHOOTING CHAMPION.



The pathway to becoming a great shooter is paved with lessons that emphasize hard work, self-control, emotional control and a mindset that stresses consistent, controlled performance. Kim Rhode, who won five Olympic medals in five Olympic Games in Double Trap and Skeet, is known throughout the world as a great champion who personifies these attributes.

We underscore that reality in the JROTC Marksmanship Instruction Course (JMIC) by telling JROTC Instructors the best way to select promising rifle team members is not by holding score-based tryouts for new shooters, but by looking at their "interest and work ethic."

What I learned is that the real difference in shooting success is always hard work, training effort and perseverance. Indeed, one of the reasons shooting is such a great sport is because shooting champions are the ones who work the hardest, not the ones who have the most natural ability.

LESSON 2 – ANGER IS THE ENEMY OF GOOD SHOOTING

After I was assigned to the U. S. Army International Rifle Team at Fort Benning, Georgia, and began to train and compete with this group of top shooters, I remember many times when a more experienced team member would fire a bad shot and then react with a loud, angry and often profane outburst. Those of us who were new were led to believe that this was the thing to do. Go ahead, get mad, express your feelings and get it out of your system.

Only much later did I start to figure out that angry outbursts didn't help me shoot better. Instead they were usually the start of a downward spiral that ruined a day of practice or produced a really bad match.

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Junior shooters who attend CMP summer camps now learn how to make and use shot plans as one of their most important lessons.

After experiencing how anger did not solve problems or help me shoot better, I finally started to understand that angry outbursts after a bad shot come from a lack of self-control. Anger, whether manifested by verbal outbursts or physical actions like jerking the action open or slamming the rifle down, are harmful because they distract the shooter from focusing on good performance and leave the next shot to chance.

I also learned that when I heard other shooters on the firing line express anger that meant they were in trouble and it would be easier to beat them. I did not want to help them by giving any clues that I was in trouble. It was difficult to develop sufficient emotional control to stay calm and enough

self discipline to shift my thoughts to asking, "What did I do wrong? What do I have to do to fix that?"

The key to recovering from a bad shot or series of shots is to stay cool, no matter what happens. To conquer anger, the shooter must first envision himself/herself staying calm after a bad shot. Taking a couple of deep breaths to relax can often help. Then it is necessary to refocus on the shot plan. Bad shots usually happen because one or more steps in the shot plan were not performed correctly. Staying calm and refocusing on the shot plan is the best way to get back on track.

LESSON 3 – BAD SHOTS CAN TEACH YOU MORE THAN GOOD SHOTS

It is still standard coaching advice to tell shooters to forget their bad shots and scores. It is common practice to throw away bad practice targets thinking we should just forget them. In those early years I did not realize I was throwing away valuable information that could help me shoot better.

The turning point for me came some years later when LTC Bill Pullum became the coach of the Army International Rifle Team. He watched our shooting closely, but almost never gave any coaching advice until a teaching moment occurred. When I fired a bad shot he never told me what to do. He simply asked me to explain what happened. At first my answers weren't very good, but he insisted that I try to explain those shots.

When I could finally explain what I did wrong, he asked the follow up question, "What should you have done on that shot? Let's work on that."

Today error analysis is one of the most powerful tools for improving scores. But it only works if the reason for a bad shot is converted into what you must practice to produce good shots. The shooter who learns to treat bad scores as "lessons learned" has gained access to a treasure trove of clues for becoming a better shooter.

BAD SHOTS CAN MAKE US BETTER SHOOTERS IF WE TRY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT WE SHOULD HAVE DONE TO PREVENT THEM AND THEN PRACTICE THOSE SOLUTIONS.

LESSON 4 – NEVER GO WITHOUT A SHOT PLAN

This is one lesson I did not learn until after I finished competing. We had intuitive, primitive shot plans that were reinforced by practicing what worked best for us, but we never had precise, step-by-step plans that controlled how every shot was fired. Given what I know now about shot plans, I can only

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One of the most critical lessons for young shooters is to learn to judge their performances by how hard they tried to win and not by whether they won or lost. (Photo taken during the junior women's 10-meter air rifle final in the 2013 Bavarian International Air Gun Championship.)

look back and say, "wow, how did I ever get by without a shot plan!"

Today in the CMP Junior Rifle Camps, shot plans are a key instructional priority. Campers are taught how to prepare a detailed plan for each position and then practice the plan until they are able to use it in competitions. A shot plan is a detailed breakdown of each of the steps involved in firing a shot, starting with loading and shouldering the rifle. A good shot plan details each step and how it is performed. A well-practiced shot plan ensures consistency and is especially valuable in dealing with match pressure and preventing bad shots.

We were able to get by without shot plans when I was competing because no shooters knew about them, but for today's young shooters to be competitive, learning how to make, practice and use a shot plan is absolutely essential.

LEARNING HOW TO MAKE, PRACTICE AND USE A SHOT PLAN IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESS IN SHOOTING TODAY.

LESSON 5 – PRACTICE IN BAD CONDITIONS AS WELL AS GOOD CONDITIONS

When I was a young shooter I wanted to practice on a firing point on the side of the range where I was less likely to be disturbed. Many shooters and coaches still insist on keeping practice ranges quiet. I've had major military service rifle teams tell me they only practice in the morning because there is too much wind in the afternoons when they cannot shoot good scores.

The idea behind this is that shooters can only learn to shoot good scores by practicing in good conditions and that by practicing in windy conditions or on a range with lots of distractions you will only learn bad habits. This thinking is correct to a point, but it breaks down when you realize that most competitions are fired in windy conditions or where there are plenty of distractions.

LEARNING TO BE A GREAT COMPETITION SHOOTER REQUIRES PRACTICING IN BAD CONDITIONS AS WELL AS GOOD CONDITIONS.

I started to realize how harmful this thinking was when I became active in outdoor highpower rifle shooting where shooting in difficult wind conditions was normal. And I had a terrible time shooting standing in wind. I finally decided to try a new approach. What if I practiced in the afternoons when the wind was blowing the strongest?

That's when my outdoor shooting changed. I learned that when the wind is blowing on your body position strong enough to move it, I had to use muscle tension to fight against the wind. I also learned that my trigger control had to be much more aggressive and that I had to settle for good shots rather than great shots. But the final result was that I became a very good wind shooter and started winning National Highpower Rifle Championships. With that lesson in

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mind, I could look back at my early practice experiences and see how I should also have looked for ways to practice in bad conditions. I should have practiced in the middle of the range where distractions were the worst. I should have welcomed situations where loud discussions took place behind me. That would have done more to develop my ability to concentrate on performance and not be bothered by anything that was happening on the range.

The lesson for all of us is that practicing in good conditions will help us learn how to shoot good scores, but we also must practice in the worst conditions that we will face in competitions if we are going to be prepared for them.

LESSON 6 – CHAMPIONS ARE POSITIVE, OPTIMISTIC PEOPLE—NEGATIVE PEOPLE ARE LOSERS

I never had any problems being positive and optimistic, but I never understood the role this played in my career until I had a chance to study hundreds of other shooters and why some succeeded and others did not.

WINNERS ARE POSITIVE, OPTIMISTIC PEOPLE; THEY NEVER USE NEGATIVE WORDS AND THOUGHTS; THEY SPEAK AND THINK ABOUT THE POSSIBILITIES THAT COME FROM HARD WORK AND EFFORT.

The difference is as simple as this: One shooter says, "I am not a good kneeling shooter." Another shooter says, "I need to do lots of extra work to get my kneeling scores up." Or, one shooter says, "I'm never going to be as good as she is; she is shooting super scores." Another shooter says, "Wow, I'm going to have to practice extra hard to beat those scores."

In these cases, we see negative-thinking shooters who see no hope that they can overcome a performance deficit and we see positive, optimistic shooters who believe they can become winners if they keep working hard at becoming better. Negative shooters expect bad results; they do not believe that becoming a winner is a real possibility. Positive shooters see deficiencies in their shooting as special challenges to be addressed, usually with extra work and more focused training. Positive, optimistic shooters believe that becoming the best is possible, IF they continue to train hard.

In over simplified terms, negative shooters expect bad results; positive shooters expect to train hard to change bad results. In a very real sense, we are what we say or think we are. If we think winning or being the best is impossible, it will

not happen. If we think winning or being the best is possible if we work to make it happen, winning or being the best is possible.

LESSON 7 – IT'S NOT ABOUT WHETHER YOU WIN OR LOSE; IT'S ABOUT HOW HARD YOU TRY TO WIN

This is another lesson where I really had to struggle to avoid the pitfall of judging my match results and myself by whether I won or lost. Winning always felt good and losing felt bad.

Youth sports all too often are lured into placing too much emphasis on winning and not enough emphasis on how we play the game. When a junior baseball team plays their hearts out, but loses to another strong team, should they feel badly about losing or good about how they played their hearts out? When a youth soccer league goalie makes an all-out leap to stop a great shot on goal only to see it get past her, should she feel badly about letting her team down or good about how she made a superb attempt to stop a great shot? When a junior shooter goes to a competition where he is expected to win, but loses to another junior who shot her best score ever that day, should he feel badly about losing or good about performing well and beating his practice average?

The lesson for all of us is to learn to judge how well we do in competitions not by whether we win or lose, but by how hard we work to win. Did we practice well in the days before the competition? Did we prepare to win? Did we perform well during the competition? How well did we follow our shot plans during the competition? How well did we keep our emotions under control?

If we prepared to win by practicing hard, kept ourselves under control and focused on good performance on each shot, we should feel good about our competition result regardless of whether we won or lost.

We cannot control how well the other team plays, but we can control how hard we play. We cannot control how an opposing soccer team player makes a great shot on goal, but we can control the effort we make to see and reach that shot. We cannot control when another shooter shoots their best score ever, but we can control how well we prepare and perform during that same match.

WE MUST JUDGE OUR COMPETITION RESULTS, NOT BY WHETHER WE WON OR LOST, BUT BY WHAT WE CAN CONTROL, HOW HARD WE WORKED TO TRY TO WIN.

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No matter how high a score or how great a victory, champions are shooters who seek continual improvement and who believe they have never shot their best score.

LESSON 8 – YOUR DOG WON'T BITE YOU WHEN YOU COME HOME AFTER SHOOTING A BAD SCORE; HOPEFULLY YOUR COACH, PARENTS AND FRIENDS WON'T BITE YOU EITHER

It is natural for us to fear what our coach, family and friends will think about us if we shoot a bad score, especially in an important match. Worrying about their expectation can add a lot of pressure during a competition. We want our coach, family and friends to be proud of us and we are afraid that will only happen if we shoot well. This fear affected me and it took me a long time to learn that those who truly care about us and not themselves will not withhold their support, friendship or love because of how we shoot in a competition.

Your dog won't bite you when you come home after shooting a bad score because your dog's love for you is unconditional. Your dog accepts you because of your relationship with him; not because of what you do outside of that relationship.

Actually, this is a lesson for coaches, parents and friends to learn and practice. The coach or parent who becomes angry or upset because a young athlete did not shoot a good score needs to rethink their relationship. Coaches

and parents should be there to teach and encourage good performance; their concern should be for you as a person, not as someone who can win competitions and make them look good or fulfill their dreams. True friends stand by their friends regardless of the outcome of a sports competition.

There is a lesson to be learned from our dog's unconditional love. Knowing that those who mean the most to us are going to continue to support, love and be concerned about us as persons and not as winners or losers can make a huge difference in how we perform in competitions. Knowing they will continue to accept and support us regardless of the competition outcome makes it a whole lot easier to perform well.

LESSON 9 – YOUR PRESS CLIPPINGS CAN HURT YOU OR HELP YOU

One of the most dangerous minefields for young shooters comes when they start winning. They win a big competition and get their photo and story in the newspaper or on television. Everyone starts telling them how good they are. I had to learn how to handle these accolades and every young shooter who works hard and starts to enjoy some success will

YOUNG SHOOTERS MUST KNOW THAT THEIR COACHES, PARENTS AND FRIENDS WILL CONTINUE TO SUPPORT AND LOVE THEM REGARDLESS OF THE OUTCOMES OF THEIR COMPETITIONS.

have to learn this as well.

The first problem is that winning can go to our heads. We start thinking we are so good we don't have to work hard any more. As soon as we see another victory in the next match, we have been distracted from focusing on practicing and performing well. The fall from the victory stand can be quick and dramatic.

The second challenge is that publicity puts extra pressure on us. When we know people expect us to win, we start thinking about not disappointing them instead of about practicing and performing well in the next competition.

In my first competition years, I dealt with this by telling myself, "don't take your press clippings seriously." This worked to a point, because it helped to avoid the distractions that media attention can become. By remaining humble about these tributes, it was easier to remember that practicing hard and focusing on performance must continue.

There is also another way to look at press accolades. This is to recognize that good publicity confirms how you have reached a new level where you will have to work even harder to stay out in front. After a few years of being afraid of the

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consequences of media accolades, I slowly began to realize that I could transform this fear into a stronger will to become an even better shooter. If I wanted to be seen as someone who truly deserved my press clippings, I had to keep working on improving so my next scores would prove that the first score was not an accident.

The lesson for young shooters is that they must become aware of how media attention and publicity can help or hurt them. They must be encouraged to accept accolades with humility and to use them as a motivation to work even harder in preparing for the next competition.

LESSON 10—YOU NEVER SHOT YOUR BEST SCORE

This lesson has to do with a mindset that real sports champions all seem to develop. It has to do with whether a record score is a mountain peak or a stepping stone on the way up to a mountain peak that one never quite reaches. It encompasses the idea that no matter how good a winning score or new record was, there are still ways to make that score even better.

This was a lesson I unintentionally started to use early in my competition career. However, I didn't understand it until much later. From the very beginning, I kept careful records in my "shooting diary." As I recorded my scores I added pages in the back of the diary to list personal records in both practice and matches. This meant that every time I shot, I engaged in personal contests to improve those records.

Of course there were practice sessions where I shifted the emphasis to experiments or work on a particular aspect of my technique or positions, but almost every training day included a competition with my personal records. Later when I was shooting with the Army International Team, the same coach who insisted that I analyze my bad shots also began to insist that I find things I could do better even after I won a big match or shot a new record. Yes, even when there was a new world record, there had to be things I could do better.

The result of this succession of lessons for me was a record of consistent improvement over the years when I actively trained and competed in international competitions. I knew that no matter how high a record was, someone was going to come along and shoot an even better score. The only way to continue to win was to continually improve.

Of course it is important to celebrate a winning score or a new record, but part of the celebration should also be an

GOOD PUBLICITY CAN HELP OR HINDER YOUNG SHOOTERS; USE YOUR PRESS CLIPPINGS TO MOTIVATE YOU TO WORK TO BECOME EVEN BETTER.

analysis of where improvements are possible. I have always been impressed with shooters who finish a victory celebration by picking up their shooting journal to write notes about what they have just done. These are the shooters who have a mindset that says, "no matter how well I shoot today, I must look for ways to shoot better tomorrow."

There are shooters who shoot one great score to win a major competition and there are shooters who shoot great scores match after match and year after year. The difference is that real champions believe they never shot their best score. To them each new victory offers both joy and challenge. Victories are to be enjoyed and celebrated, but they also bring a new challenge to become even better in the next competition.

GREAT CHAMPIONS ARE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR WAYS TO IMPROVE, EVEN WHEN THEY WIN OR SET NEW RECORDS.

My "Ten Lessons I Wish I Had Learned As A Young Shooter" came from practical experiences that led to attitudinal, emotional and mental changes that made or could have made a big difference in my competition results. Our challenge now is to help today's new and young shooters learn these lessons even earlier.

About the Author

Gary Anderson, Director of Civilian Marksmanship Emeritus, retired as the full-time CMP Director at the close of 2009. He continues to work with CMP as the senior marksmanship instructor. He won two Olympic gold medals, seven World Championships and 16 National Championships during his competition career. He is a Vice President of the International Shooting Sports Federation, the President of USA Shooting, a former Nebraska State Senator and was one of the two Olympic Games Technical Delegates for Shooting during the 2012 Olympic Games in London. In June, 2012, the International Olympic Committee awarded Gary Anderson the IOC's highest honor, the Olympic Order "for outstanding services to the Olympic Movement."

Photo courtesy of the ISSF.

