

Burlington Rifle & Pistol Club Junior Competition Team

Colchester, Vermont USA

What Competitive Shooters Learn

by

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Guns. An emotionally charged word with connotations that vary from Norman Rockwell-like images of a man and his hunting hound to gang clad teenagers and drive-by shootings. As political candidates and the media focus on firearms issues and school shootings capture the national headlines, gun-control is often called upon to supplant self-control in the public agenda.

And yet, my own view of firearms is, perhaps, very different from the norm. As a professional educator and a volunteer rifle coach for the past 16 years, I am frequently asked to, at best explain, at worst, defend, my involvement with guns and youth shooting.

Often, when speaking with the media about the accomplishments of my athletes, I am confronted with politically based questions pertaining to legislation rather than sport. Unfortunately, it is no longer possible to separate the two. So, I would like to share a few of the many lessons that the shooting sports, particularly competitive shooting, impart.

Perseverance. Unlike many sports which are more dependent on physical stature or beauty, shooting is something anyone who is committed to improvement can excel at. Shooting athletes learn to continue trying even when faced with difficult challenges.

Part of learning perseverance, shooting athletes learn Patience.

With the tremendous effect the wind has on a .22 bullet at 100 yards, or even 50 meters, competitive marksmen learn to anticipate and correct for the wind's effect, and, when necessary, to wait for the return of their condition. Even when not compensating for the movement of the bullet due to wind, the competitive shooter must discipline herself to execute the shot only when her hold and sight picture are nearly perfect. Sometimes this requires taking several "holds", thus, the shooter learns not only patience, but Self Discipline.

Like any worthwhile goal, shooting, sometimes can take on the aspect of work. Practicing for hours each week with sore wrists and aching backs can wear on even the most enthusiastic competitor when the results seem slow in coming. Once again, shooting teaches the lesson that hard work, over time, will be rewarded. Those with the self-discipline to stick it out will prevail.

Problem Solving is a critical part of growing up and becoming more self-sufficient. Because of its individual nature, even beginning shooters learn to make decisions based on their performance and match conditions.

The way we view setbacks is important. Optimists attribute failure to something they can change rather than to something beyond their control. Shooting teaches Optimism. The competitive shooter searches for answers instead of dwelling on problems.

Junior shooters, then, feel more in control of their lives. They are better equipped to handle obstacles and, quite possibly, may be more successful in their future endeavors.

A large part of Optimism is to be positive in one's approach to the individual performance. As a coach, I have learned that the most successful athletes will focus on performance over score. While those who focus on score can be easily rattled by loss of points and are more subject to losing additional points, those who effectively concentrate on body control will not be flustered by an errant shot, but, instead, will analyze and correct for it.

I remember my coach telling me, "don't worry about the score, it will take care of itself. Concentrate on performance." Now that has become my mantra with my own pupils.

Even more important, perhaps, has been the effect that that simple idea has had on the various aspects of my life. As a teacher, I use the idea every day.

Rather than concentrating solely on outcome, I have learned to recognize the effort and adherence to prescribed procedures when facing a difficult task. On the range I have learned to "let the bad shot go." Yes, I analyze what went wrong. Yes, I develop a plan to prevent it from happening again. But, I have learned to accept my errors, do my best to correct them, and not let them dictate my future.

Competitive shooters learn that once the shot is down range, there is nothing you can do to change it. No amount of self-reproach will bring that "7" back, however, analysis and self-discipline will prevent it from happening again.

Concentration, one's ability to focus, and attention span, the length of time that one can devote attention exclusively to one subject, are both learned skills. Very few activities force one to unite mind and body in such an exacting way as shooting.

When parents of young children (ten or eleven years old) ask me what can be gained from participation in the shooting sports, I frequently ask them, "how would you like to see your child hold still for two hours?"

Of course, competitive shooting is about far more than merely holding still, but the point is, the ability to concentrate and focus generally has the effect of improving school grades as well. It is a learned skill.

Confidence, like concentration, is learned. Success builds upon success.

For the competitive marksman, the feeling gained by mastering oneself and "beating that target" is a stepping stone to a confidence that "I can succeed in other areas as well." After shooting offhand, algebra and term papers are not so scary. Like success in shooting, they must be approached with a positive attitude. And, also like shooting, they both have a basic structure that need be adhered to, though, there is some room for adjusting to fit the individual.

My shooters learn Responsibility as well. Certainly they gain this from a Safety standpoint, but they also gain this from a demand for Personal Accountability. When they shoot a personal best, they shot it. I may have been there to cheer them and put them in solid positions. I may have planned their training schedules and seen to it that they had the best equipment that they, or the club could afford. But, ultimately, they pulled the trigger.

Conversely, when they have a poor performance, I am not the culprit. They shot the match. Maybe they went to a party the night before and didn't get adequate sleep. Maybe they tried making position changes in the middle of the competition. Maybe they just had a bad day. But, ultimately, they pulled the trigger. Shooters are held responsible for every shot they fire.

There are, of course, more lessons one learns from shooting. I honestly believe that my own involvement in the sport has helped me to become much more focused. I have born witness to the maturation of numerous youngsters through their involvement in the sport. I'm proud to say that I have had some hand in coaching a number of collegiate All Americans, some of whom, were it not for the scholarships they received, would never have attended college.

When some of my teaching colleagues invariably ask, "why do you promote shooting?" and "as a mother, how can you support guns?" My response is quite simple, "how can I not?"

As a mother, how wonderful that I have a sport that both of my children (a boy and a girl) can compete in equally. How unusual to find a sport that we can share as a family on a local, regional and national level. How fortunate I am to have a tool for teaching them perseverance, patience, self-discipline, problem solving, optimism, concentration, confidence, responsibility, and personal accountability.

As an educator, I have the opportunity, every day, to see how many of these life's lessons are sadly lacking in our youth. While it is unfortunate that the issues of gun control have caused the tools of my sport to be at the center of a maelstrom of controversy, the rifles used by myself and my athletes are no different to us than a bat to a baseball player, a racket to a tennis player, or a javelin to a track and field athlete.

The focus of shooting is the ultimate control of mind over body, and, as such, it is one of the least violent of any sports. You don't tackle, check, punch or grab your opponent. Because it is a non-contact sport, it has an unequaled safety record. There are no injuries.

In this time when so much attention is being focused on respecting and recognizing differences, when politicians and school boards call for us all to find beauty in diversity, I find it disheartening and, even hypocritical, that such a cry does not extend to sport. I celebrate the differences that hold my sport separate from the rest. Shooting is the most egalitarian of all sports, men and women compete on equal terms. Our National Shooting Champions have ranged in age from 15 to their 70's. It is both a summer and winter sport in the Olympic Games. And, uniquely, it affords both individual and team events.

The main reason I coach and continue to compete, however, is that shooting, as both a mental and physical discipline, fosters those attributes that I want my children to share and that I continue nurturing in myself.

About the author:

A member of the National Rifle Association's National Coach Development Staff since its inception in 1994, Michèle Makucevich is currently the Civilian Marksmanship Program's Rhode Island State Junior Director. Makucevich is a national record holder in both smallbore and long range rifle, a past Collegiate National Champion in air rifle, and the head coach for the Newport Rifle Club. She has been competing and coaching since 1985 and has represented the US in international competition as a member of the US Randle Team. She was recognized by the National Shooting Sports Foundation as the 1998 USA Shooting National Coach of the Year.