

Marksmanship, as opposed to 'shooting'

.... and there is a world of difference between the two.

A marksman is one whose *deliberate intent* is to hit the target - and not only that, but to hit it right in the centre, and additionally - *every time*.

A shooter can be defined as one who enjoys shooting his guns *per se*. Hitting the target seems to be a secondary pleasure, and is apparently regarded as reserved for the 'serious' shooter.

To each his own, as they say. And every club has a mixture of both those 'types', and no club could exist without either of them. However, this is about *marksmanship* and is directed at everybody whose *wilful intention* is to hit those silhouettes right in the centre, every time. **(I don't know why I'm writing this, as I've never even come close to it. . . . my expertise originated in ISU pistol events and black powder handguns and rifles some years ago).**

This is going to be shorter than some may think, because there are only **7 basic fundamentals**, assuming that you already have suitably tuned rifles or handguns, good quality scopes, comfortable clothing, and sensible footwear with thick, firm, flat soles. Your shooting togs should be the same for every match (and training/practice). What follows assumes standard range procedures and shooting safety.

1. **A BURNING DESIRE** to hit the target every time. You must genuinely *want* to succeed at it, and be prepared to give it time, proper attention and dedication. Abandon everything you think you know, and start from the beginning, step by step. And if you follow these simple fundamentals (and here comes the catch) *for every single shot you fire*, you will become a champion.

2. **STANCE:** Level your rifle to your shoulder it as you like (or as described below is preferred) completely ignoring whether it points left or right. Having done this, and you are standing perfectly normally, and you're comfortable, look through your sights and adjust your position so that they line up on target, by *moving your feet*. Never in any circumstances, twist your hips, or swing your shoulders for any adjustment. This is because your spine and spinal musculature are a combination of compression and tension 'springs'. As you turn and twist, they counter each other so as to maintain stability in any given position or posture. But to retain such a position requires control, and there is a *tendency* to relax this control at the point of the shot release. What happens then, is for your muscles to slack off in an effort to return to the normal position. A poor shot is guaranteed.

3. **GRIP:** The .22 rifle should only be held and supported close to your body by the non-trigger hand. Your fingers and thumb should not apply pressure against the rifle, and should be relaxed. Regarding the position of your head, there are two schools of thought here: A) Place the rifle into the shoulder, and bring your head down to meet the sights, B) Stand normally and comfortably erect, then place the rifle anywhere on your shoulder, so that the sights are brought up to your eye level.

With a no-recoil rifle like the .22, I definitely prefer (B), for the following reasons: (i) I was born with a neck that is in the 'normal' vertical position, and having to bend it forward uses more muscles, which have to be controlled. (ii) When the head is tilted in any direction, the little tubes in your ears which provide balance control, 'tell' you that your head is not level. But this is in contradiction to what you see, with your head leaning over. The horizon is now

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at an angle, which is unnatural to us human beings. Therefore, subconsciously you are making additional adjustments to your balance all the time.

(iii) The reticle in your scope should be perfectly vertical and horizontal. (Take great pains about the adjustment). Assuming that it is, your eye looking through the scope sees the horizontal reticle, and has a hard time believing it, because at the head-leaning angle, your eye knows that what it sees is not a *level* horizon. These things are all going on in your brain all the time, but you need your brain for marksmanship. Standing as close to a 'normally' relaxed position as possible has great advantages - it uses far less muscle power, and requires much less control.

The trigger hand should not 'grip' the pistolgrip. It should rest against it gently and comfortably, and most importantly here, no part of the hand must touch the bolt *at all*.

4. BREATHING : When you are in your shooting position, take a deep breath and expel it all - forcefully and slowly. Take a reasonably deep breath, and while lining up your sights, hold about half of it until the shot breaks - on average about 7 seconds. This all takes about 25 seconds - no time for messing about. . . . reload, deep breath, expel all, another breath, expel half, hold the rest whilst sighting, apply trigger pressure slowly, shot breaks.

The reason for taking the initial deep breath and expelling *it all* slowly and forcefully, is to prepare your lungs for a full load of fresh, oxygenated air without it mixing with whatever may have been left in your lungs if you hadn't fully expelled the lot. This now means that you have a good supply of oxygen in your system for the next 25 seconds or so. This is good because (i) it lowers your pulse rate as there is no reason for your heart to race due to a lack of oxygen, and (ii) more oxygen reaches your eyes, which are the first to show signs of starvation by blurred vision, and that's all you need whilst aiming.

5. TRIGGER CONTROL: This is a controversial subject, but what works for me is this: *First and foremost*, get a professional trigger job done by Terry Harrison at City Guns. (Free advert!) That will be the best money you could ever spend on your rifle. There must be absolutely NO CREEP at all. Every shot must be a surprise to you, and you should have no idea as to when the shot will break. **Anticipation is the thief of accuracy.** If there is the slightest creep on your trigger, you will get used to it, and then you will have a clue as to how much more pressure you will need to make the shot break. And nine times out of ten, you will jerk the shot - with poor results.

While you are sighting on your target (moving around a bit) begin to apply continuous pressure on the trigger in a straight backwards direction, while your movement becomes less and less. Don't relax the pressure - the shot will break sometime during your reduced movement. Don't ever expect to hold the rifle rock-steady. That only happens in the movies. The very best anyone can expect, is to reduce the amount of movement to a minimum. But move, you will.

6. FOLLOW THROUGH: Something I seldom see, but is the single most important aspect of consistent marksmanship. Following through means maintaining your sight picture and position for only 1 or 2 seconds after the shot has broken, but it is a part of the whole process of delivering an accurate shot. The slightest movement at the point of discharge will result in a poor shot. This is due to 'barrel time', which means the length of time the bullet is in the barrel. You can calculate the time the bullet spends speeding down the barrel at about

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350 metres per second. For example, if your barrel is $\frac{1}{2}$ metre long, it would take about ,001 seconds to travel that length. If you have a camera with adjustable shutter speeds, set it to 1/1000 sec. and watch the shutter open and close with the back of the camera open. That way you will get some idea as to just how *long* the bullet is in the barrel - time enough to cause the bullet to stray off target if you should begin to lower the rifle simultaneously as the shot is released.

7. **APPLICATION:** and dedication - this is where everybody falls down from time to time. Even the best. It is amazing really, because all we have to do is follow the basics, and I'm sure that we all know them, but somehow or other we begin to take them all for granted. Just because we **know**, is no guarantee that we **will**. It must be a conscious awareness of what it is that produces consistently good performance, and that is going through *all* the basics with every single shot. **Self control.** At first, these are performed deliberately and consciously, and after the passage of time, some of you will be able to ingrain most of them into your *subconscious* minds. Unfortunately, this hasn't been the case with me. I've always endeavoured to consciously apply these fundamentals, with a few very satisfying results in all competition, right up to international level. Since 'score' *is the result* of 'performance', *think 'performance' rather than 'score'*. Stay focused, and ignore the rest of the world. Forget that bad shot - its history, and nothing can change it. Remember - the most important shot is the one in the breech.

In analysing performance, many shooters dwell upon their bad shots, and attempt to draw conclusions as to what caused them. This is a very negative view, and I totally disagree. On the contrary - take a positive stance in looking at your **good shots** and analysing *them*, you will find evidence that you followed the basic fundamentals, and therefore will automatically go a step further towards eliminating those bad shots.

Enjoy! Good shooting,

Michael Elson
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