

## LEARNING TO COMPETE SUCCESSFULLY

By Gary Anderson, Director of Civilian Marksmanship Emeritus

*Note: This article is one of a series of On the Mark articles on Teaching Rifle Marksmanship to Young Shooters. This article examines the lessons and methods that coaches should use to prepare new shooters for competitions and to help them respond positively to the unique challenges of competition shooting.*

Most youth shooting sports participants want to become successful competition shooters. They may start by wanting to learn gun safety or how to shoot a rifle, but when they find out that shooting is a sport that offers competitions involving travel to local, regional and even national events, high school and college rifle teams and even shooting in the Olympics, shooting in competitions becomes their primary objective and motivator.

Competitions are the ultimate challenge in sports and teach many valuable life lessons. Some argue that competitions among youth are negative and that they should not be exposed to the pressures of competition. Anyone who has spent much time around youth shooting has surely witnessed a young boy or girl who shot badly leaving the range in tears. The problem, however, is not that competition is bad, but that competition must be kept in perspective. We have also seen many more young people who leave competitions smiling and clearly enjoying experiences that were rewarding and fulfilling to them.



*Competitions are why most people practice sports, but for young shooters to learn positive life lessons from them, coaches must ensure that their competition experiences focus on athlete-centered values.*

**Coaches should introduce young shooters to competition, but coaches also have a high duty to ensure that those experiences focus on athlete-centered values where the emphasis is on personal development, skill development, positive performance in the competition environment and having fun.**

This article focuses on what coaches should teach young shooters about competitions.

### Why Attend Competitions

In shooting competitions, athletes shoot a complete course of fire according to competition rules, with all participants being ranked by their scores. There are several important reasons why young shooters should be given opportunities to compete:



*Meeting friends and experiencing a new competition environment are part of what makes competitions enjoyable.*

1. **Shooting is a Sport.** Competition is the heart and soul of sports; they are the ultimate test of an athlete's knowledge, training and skills. People learn sports skills so they can test those skills in competition.
2. **Life Lessons.** The life lessons that shooting teaches so well are best learned in competitions where striving to excel, hard work, focus, self-discipline and self-control are paramount.
3. **Competitions are Fun.** Traveling to a new range and city, meeting new friends and experiencing the 'high' that comes from being in a challenging competition can be tremendously enjoyable.
4. **Motivation.** Why continue to practice if you cannot test those skills in competition? Competitions provide a reason for working hard in practice.
5. **Striving to Excel.** The dream of becoming capable of performing well enough to win important competitions drives many athletes to embark on a process of extraordinary skill and personal development that is always rewarding and meaningful whether it brings competition victories or many great experiences.

## LEARNING TO COMPETE SUCCESSFULLY

### Making Competition Experiences Positive

Coaches must put a great deal of thought and effort into making sure the experiences the youth in their programs have in competitions are focused on their developmental needs and positive values.

#### 1. **Evaluate Performance, Not Winning or Losing.**

Young athletes must be taught to assess how well they do in competitions according to how well they perform the skills they have acquired, regardless of their final place finish. A shooter who equals or exceeds his/her practice average or who sets a new PR (personal record) has performed well regardless of where that score places.

2. **Preparation, Not Surprises.** A major cause of anxiety is not knowing what to expect. Before going to a competition, coaches should spend time explaining how the competition will be conducted and what the shooters can expect to see, hear and experience. Rehearsing the course of fire that will be fired in the match is a critical step in this preparation.

3. **Excitement, Not Fear and Anxiety.** Prepare young athletes for upcoming competitions by helping them understand how they can enjoy the excitement of competition and how pre-match jitters can make them more alert and ready to perform their best.

4. **Expect Effort, Not Winning.** Young shooters, parents and even coaches often go into competitions expecting winning or unrealistic results. It is important for the coach to change those expectations to simply expecting every team member to make their best efforts to

perform the skills they learn in practice. When shooters can say after the match that they worked hard on every shot, affirm that effort regardless of the outcome.

#### 5. **Bad Scores Are Opportunities, Not Failures.**

Every shooting champion can report having fired many bad shots and bad scores. The difference is when the coach and shooter treat bad scores as learning experiences to be corrected through training. Shooters should not be allowed to think they failed or "clutched," but rather that when things go wrong they can turn those mistakes and problems to their advantage by treating them as lessons learned.

6. **Acceptance Regardless of Results.** Fear that others will reject them if they shoot badly is a major cause of poor competition performances by young shooters. They need to know that they will continue to be accepted as persons of worth by their coaches and teammates and loved by their parents and siblings regardless of the outcome of any competition.

7. **Self-Control and Sportsmanship.** Teams that are disciplined to keep themselves under control at all times, even when things are going wrong, will handle adversity much better and will benefit far more from the competition experience. A team schooled in good sportsmanship will arrive expecting a good experience and most likely will have a great experience.

### Types Of Competitions -- How To Find Them

There are several different types and levels of competitions.

1. **Postal Matches.** Participating teams shoot on their home range and submit targets to a match organizer for scoring and ranking. The biggest postal competition that is open to all juniors is the American Legion Junior Shooting Sports Program Postal (<http://www.legion.org/shooting>). The annual JROTC postals sponsored by the CMP are the largest junior postals with over 7,000 JROTC cadets competing (<http://www.odcmp.com/3P/JROTC.htm>). Many other organizations organize postals that offer low-key competition opportunities, especially for teams in more isolated areas.

2. **Shoulder-to-Shoulder Matches.** All competitors in these competitions compete together on a single range on the same day or succession of days. In shoulder-to-shoulder matches it is common to divide competitors into multiple relays that shoot at different times during the competition.

3. **Sectional Matches.** This is a variation of shoulder-to-shoulder matches where different regional



*The coach plays a lead role in teaching young shooters that mistakes and problems in competitions can be excellent learning opportunities*

## LEARNING TO COMPETE SUCCESSFULLY



*Junior rifle teams now have a wide variety of competitions at local, regional and national levels where they can strive to reach their competitions goals and even win awards.*

competitions are conducted on different days in various locations throughout the country. Scores from those matches are compiled into a national results bulletin. The National Rifle Association (NRA) is a leading organizer of Sectional Matches. It offers several different annual Sectional Matches for juniors.

4. **Virtual Matches.** The universality of Internet communications and recent growth in the number of shooting teams and clubs that use Orion electronic target scoring systems is now creating a new kind of competition where teams or clubs can shoot in different locations at the same time on the same day and use their electronic scoring systems to score targets and upload scores into an online ranking system where all targets are scored by the same standard.

5. **Junior Olympic Championships.** USA Shooting (USAS), the Olympic shooting governing body in the U. S., sponsors a series of annual Junior Olympic State Championships that qualify shooters for National Junior Olympic Championships. USAS sanctions air rifle standing and smallbore Junior Olympic championships (<http://www.usashooting.org/7-events/njosc>). The CMP organizes three-position air rifle Junior Olympic championships for USA Shooting (<http://www.odcmp.com/3P/JO.htm>).

### Competition Rules

All competitions are governed by rules. The problem is not all junior rifle competitions are governed by the same rules. Fortunately, the rules governing junior rifle competitions in the USA have much in common. Basic rules that apply in most competitions were explained in

the article “Three-Position Shooting—The First Steps” in the Spring 2011 issue of *On The Mark*.

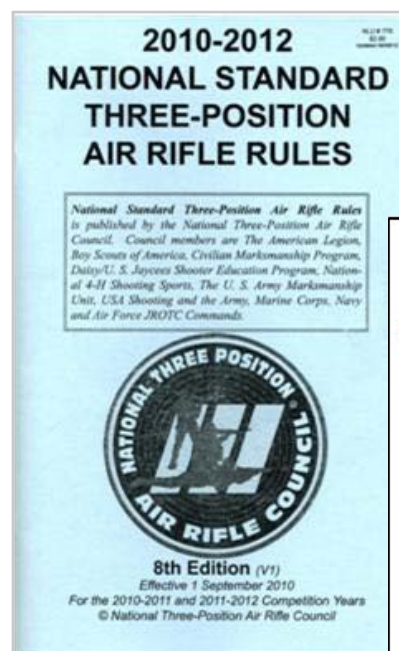
That article summarized competition rules for courses of fire, preparation periods, sighters and record shots, time limits, changeover periods, range procedures and finals. There are additional rules concerning competitor eligibility, equipment and clothing restrictions, coaching, malfunctions and scoring that coaches must know and should teach to their shooters as they gain experience in competitions.

In order to make sure you prepare for competitions with the correct rulebook, you need to know how to obtain the different rulebooks that may be used:

◎ **Three-Position Air Rifle.** The **National Standard Three-Position Air Rifle Rules** govern a big majority of these competitions. Download the 2010-2012 version of this rulebook from the CMP website at <http://www.odcmp.com/3P/Rulebook.htm>.

◎ **Standing Air Rifle and Smallbore Rifle.** Many junior competitions are governed by the **USA Shooting Official Rules**, which are derived from ISSF rules. Download these rules from the USAS website at <http://www.usashooting.org/7-events/usarules>.

◎ **Smallbore and Air Rifle.** Many junior rifle competitions also are governed by NRA rules. You can download **NRA Smallbore Rifle Rules**, **NRA BB Gun Rules** and other NRA rulebooks from <http://www.nrahq.org/compete/nra-rule-books.asp>.



## LEARNING TO COMPETE SUCCESSFULLY

### Competition Planning

Every junior program should have an annual competition plan that identifies the matches the team plans to enter. For most teams, the plan should begin with the start of the school year or when the team's competition season begins. Experienced coaches will already know about major open competitions in their area that are especially welcoming to new shooters. These matches need to be scheduled early because advance entry is usually required and some fill up quickly. For many teams, there is a major goal match near the end of the competition year.

### How Many Competitions?

Teams can shoot in too few or too many matches. Ideally, there should be about one competition per month. This gives teams adequate time between competitions to conduct several practices focused on skill development followed by one or two practices focused on preparing for the upcoming match. An exception to the one competition a month rule occurs when teams belong to a league that may have matches as frequently as one per week. Coaches with teams in areas where there are very few competitions may need to find postal or virtual matches to fill out the competition calendar.

### Upcoming Competition Listings

For teams and coaches that are new to competition shooting, it will be necessary to find matches in their area where they can compete. Fortunately for them, there are excellent sources for information about upcoming matches. Some matches may be open only to particular categories of teams so be sure to confirm that your team is eligible to compete in a match. Check these sources for upcoming matches that might be appropriate for your team.

1. **CMP.** The CMP provides a complete list of Junior Olympic Three-Position Air Rifle state championships and CMP Cup Matches where the top competitors can win credit points that count towards earning the Junior Distinguished Badge as well as other three-position air rifle events. Check the "Air Rifle" "Upcoming Events" list at <http://clubs.odcmp.com/cgi-bin/index.cgi>.
2. **USAS.** USAS sanctions Junior Olympic smallbore and air rifle standing state championships together with many open competitions where junior teams compete. Check the USAS "Find a Match" listing at <http://www.usashooting.org/7-events/interactivecalendar>.
3. **NRA.** The NRA sanctions smallbore and air rifle Sectional, junior and open competitions where many junior clubs participate. The NRA has a "Tournament



*Young shooters' goals for competitions should not be to win, but to perform well enough to win.*

Calendar" search feature on its website at <http://www.nra.org/nralocal.aspx>.

4. **Orion Results Center.** The Center now provides online match management software that allows Orion users to list upcoming matches, manage their competitions and upload results directly into a live online score display. Upcoming matches listed on the Results Center can be found at <http://www.orionresults.com/orion/orionteam.cgi>.

In working out the competition plan for your team, identify the matches you want to attend as far in advance as possible. Once the plan is prepared, communicate it to all team members and their parents so that they can get these dates on their calendars.

### Competition Preparation

One of the real keys to success in competitions is making sure your young shooters are well prepared for their competitions. There should be no surprises for them when they arrive at the competition. Preparation steps should include:

1. **Enter and Make Arrangements in Advance.** Obtain a copy of the competition program and complete and submit the entry forms early. If overnight travel is involved, make the necessary reservations.
2. **Know the Program and Rules.** The match program describes conditions of the competition. Study it to identify competition conditions your shooters should know and explain these to them. Make sure you have a copy of the

## LEARNING TO COMPETE SUCCESSFULLY



*Open, frequent communications between the coach and team members is a key to attaining good competition performances.*

rulebook that governs the competition. Review it to identify any specific rules your shooters need to know. It is a good idea to have rules sessions with your team before departing for a competition.

3. **Practice the Course of Fire.** Dedicate one or two practice sessions before departure to shooting the course of fire that will be used in the competition. Follow match procedures and time limits precisely. These practice matches should also be used to teach shooters how to deal with problems that can occur at competitions such as malfunctions, firing two shots on one bull, distractions or performance mistakes.

4. **Practice Good Performance.** Most practice sessions in the days before a competition must still be dedicated to perfecting shooter performances. This is not a time when position or technique changes should be tried. Shooters must practice the positions and shot plans they worked out earlier. Repetition, not change, is the rule for pre-match practices. Of special importance is rehearsing shooters' shot plans. They should repeat their shot plan many times in practice and then go to the match determined to follow the same shot plan.

5. **Establish Expectations.** The coach's communications with team members in the days before the match should establish both his/her expectations for them and their expectations for themselves. Team members should expect to shoot a score that is within the range of scores they shoot in practice. They should know their

coach will judge their performance efforts in trying to do this and not their final placings.

6. **Confirm Equipment Lists.** Team members should have lists of equipment they must have with them for a match. Just before departure, check their equipment lists and equipment to ensure that no team member arrives at the match missing a vital piece of equipment.

### Competition Performance

After the team arrives at the competition site, the coach's role switches from managing preparations to supporting the team's performance. Here are some guidelines for coaching during competitions.

1. **Arrive Early—Avoid the Rush.** As a rule, teams should arrive at the range at least an hour before the start time for their relay. This gives plenty of time to check in, obtain firing point assignments and move equipment into the staging or ready area. Arriving late and having to rush to get ready causes a lot of unnecessary anxiety.

2. **Do Not be Distracted by the Side Show.** When a team arrives at the match site, there can be lots of other activities going on to attract their attention. Keep the team focused on getting themselves and their equipment ready. Team members should recognize that after they finish shooting there will be plenty of time to watch other shooters, contact friends and check out points of interest in the area.



*A key to helping shooters deal with match pressure is to get them to focus on their shot plans and how they followed their plans in practice.*

3. **Nervousness is Real—Treat it as a Friend.** Coaches must expect that their team members will be nervous.

## LEARNING TO COMPETE SUCCESSFULLY

Accept their nervousness and anxiety as normal, but continually reassure them that if they focus their attention on just doing what they do in practice, this will help them control their nerves. Coaches should encourage shooters to understand that match pressure can make them more alert and focused if they do not fear it. The coach also must be an example for the team by remaining calm and under control. Coaches can aid their shooters in controlling their nervousness by being behind them when they are on the firing line. They must know that their coach is there for them.

**4. Effective Performance Coaching.** Coaches will have their best opportunities to speak with their shooters just before the preparation period and between positions. In shooting, where shooters must be calm and controlled, this is not a time for rousing pep talks. In most cases, the best coaching advice at these times is the least advice. New advice that was not previously practiced can be disastrous. Certainly reassure the shooter that he/she is well prepared and capable of performing like they are trained to perform.

**5. When Problems Occur.** Going to matches hoping problems will not occur is delusional. Go to matches prepared to deal with problems if and when they occur. If shooters are mentally prepared and know how to react, they can overcome most problems. If there are problems with target or range operations, call a Range Officer. If there are problems with a shooter's rifle or equipment, it may be necessary to check with a Range Officer and bring the shooter and his rifle off the line for repairs. If a shooter is having performance problems with his/her own shooting, the coach must look for opportunities to help the shooter refocus on his/her performance routine. Shooters should know that if they need to talk to their coach, they can check with a Range Officer and then go back to the coach. If a coach sees that a shooter is doing something seriously wrong, the coach can also check with a Range Officer and call the shooter off the line to discuss a correction.

**6. Sportsmanship.** Before and during competitions, issues with competition conditions can almost always be resolved through polite requests to match officials. In these cases, the coach must be a calm advocate for team members. When the match is over, the coach should have already established expectations for the team to be gracious in victory or defeat. After scores are posted, victories and high placings should be enjoyed, while scores below expectations must be trans-



*The joy and satisfaction of having competed well is one of the most important rewards for young people who compete successfully in shooting competitions.*

formed into opportunities for improvement. Practicing and benefitting from good sportsmanship is something that makes every competition experience that much better.

Competitions are the ultimate challenge in sports, but when evaluating team members' performances in competitions, it is essential to remember that the most important values coming from competitions are not winning, but what they experience in going through the process of trying to win or do well.

You and your young shooters must judge their efforts not by whether they won, but by how well they prepared.

### About the Author

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