

RIFLE MARKSMANSHIP TRAINING FOR NOVICE HUNTERS

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Proc. Ann. Conf. S.E. Assoc. Fish & Wildl. Agencies 33: 780-781

One aspect of hunter education that has frequently received little attention is rifle marksmanship. In the past, most people who were interested in hunting had received some instruction in the use of the rifle, either from a friend or relative or through service in the armed forces. The resident of rural America could shoot anytime the spirit moved him, often in his own back yard. Now, however, as the country becomes increasingly urbanized and the population shifts to the cities, any hunter, especially the novice, has a bad problem not only in learning to shoot, but in maintaining proficiency.

This is happening at a time when anti-hunting pressure is at an all-time high, and some of the more vocal of the opponents to consumptive use of wildlife claim that after every deer season the woods are working alive with wounded animals, doomed to a slow, agonizing death because these hunters can't hit what they attempt to shoot. This is an argument that much of the general public accepts. Surveys reveal that this is a significant factor in anti-hunting feelings, not only among the hard core fanatics but among the rank and file population as well.

I suggest that the day will come when we—the wildlife educators—will become involved in comprehensive marksmanship training in the course of our hunter education efforts.

Any person of normal intelligence and physical ability can be made into a competent rifleman. The old adage that good shooters are born, not made, may be true up to a point, but remember that we are not interested in producing Olympic gold medal winners—just hunters who can get clean kills.

Unfortunately, traditional marksmanship training methods require a great deal of time and practice. Here are some suggestions for an approach to marksmanship training for novice hunters, primarily deer hunters, that will, I believe, put across the maximum amount of proficiency with the least amount of instructor time.

A PLACE TO SHOOT

Before going into details about training methods, I'd like to discuss a problem that is the bane of almost every firearms instructor who works in an urban setting—finding a place to shoot.

The best solution, if funds are available, is the construction of our own facilities designed specifically for instruction. Unfortunately, the funds for this are frequently not available, so we are left to our talents for borrowing facilities. In my own experience the best approach to this problem is to go to private rifle and pistol clubs. Their ranges are usually well suited for instructional purposes, and such clubs almost invariably give their enthusiastic support to any hunter education activity.

Another possibility is the use of police ranges. The problem here is that such ranges are usually designed for pistol shooting, and either are too short or pose safety hazards when shooting a centerfire rifle.

Military ranges are another possibility, if a post with facilities is available. Most ranges available at local national guard facilities are indoor, and cannot be used with centerfire rifles.

In contacting either military or police organizations for the use of their range facilities, I find that the best way to make the arrangements is through the public relations or community service personnel of the organization.

Nothing elaborate is required for range facilities. The minimum requirement is for a place where a centerfire rifle can be fired safely and legally at 100 yards. Concrete firing lines, covered firing lines, and the like are nice but not necessary. Permanent bench rests are extremely useful, but if there are none on the range portable ones can be used. Bench rests are necessary for the program I suggest, but this is no problem. Any competent carpenter can build a light, easily assembled, low cost rest in a short time.

STUDENT PREPARATION

A course of this type is obviously most effective if the student uses the rifle with which he will hunt. The student, or shooter, must be thoroughly familiar with the functioning of his rifle before going to the range. The instructor should go over this in detail with the shooter, including sighting adjustments.

In the interest of expediting matters, the instructor may zero the rifle before actual shooting by the student begins. It is certainly true that every shooter should zero his own rifle, but a great deal of time will be saved if the shooter goes to the range with a rifle that is hitting somewhere on the target paper.

Above all, the shooter must be made to understand range safety and range procedures, and it should be understood that the shooter will be required to leave the range if he does not give his full cooperation on any safety matter.

The actual shooting will be done in 3 phases, with instructor and student together on the range. The student should be encouraged to practice whenever he has a chance.

Before each shooting phase, the student should be given detailed instruction in that phase only. There is no point in giving the student information that he will not need at that point—it will only confuse him.

SHOOTING PHASE ONE—BENCH REST

Initial shooting should be done from the bench rest. This has several advantages. First, with the rifle resting on sandbags the shooter doesn't have to worry about holding errors. He is concerned with 2 things only—sight alignment and trigger squeeze. Hitting the target is far easier from a bench rest than from any other position. This will build up the student's confidence, both in himself and in his rifle. Another advantage of the bench rest is the fact that the student is much less likely to wave the rifle around or point it in an unsafe direction, since it will be fired from the sandbags. In this phase, the shooter should not load his rifle. That should be done by the instructor. Occasionally the instructor should close the action on an empty chamber without telling the student. This will reveal any tendency to flinch on the part of the student, and will convince him that he is actually flinching. There are few lessons harder to get across to a beginning shooter than the fact that he is flinching.

SHOOTING PHASE TWO—POSITIONS

The second phase of shooting involves the traditional shooting positions—beginning with prone, then sitting, then kneeling, and finally standing. It is true that the hunter doesn't have a referee watching his position in the field to make sure that he does not break some rule, but it is also true that the traditional shooting positions make a good foundation for impromptu positions adopted under field conditions. The fundamentals are the same, whether the target is a whitetailed deer or a V ring.

SHOOTING PHASE THREE—IMPROVISATIONS

Phase three deals with shooting under simulated field conditions. The shooter should be shown how to shoot using such improvised rests as tree trunks, logs, and improvised field positions. He should, in this phase, be taught to make use of any terrain feature that will enable him to improve his chances of making a successful shot.

After the firing phases are completed, the student should be given basic instruction in ballistics, including the use of a range table.

Marksmanship is an integral part of hunting. Without a reasonable degree of proficiency, clean kills are impossible. This proficiency can be taught. As we become more urbanized, it will have to be.