

Ten Tips for Benchrest Shooters

by Brendan Atkinson

These are ten tips for shooting benchrest, based upon my experience over the past 30 plus years in the sport. In compiling the following article, I have concentrated more on what it takes to win at the national level and international level when I have represented Australia. That is not to say that these pointers cannot be used at all matches. However, never lose sight of the fact that many people are in the sport just for the enjoyment, and do not aspire to compete at the highest levels. No matter what skill level we attain, we are always learning – and the perfect group has still to be shot.

As a matter of fact, some of the suggestions below can be used in a lot of everyday life situations too. Remember that perfection is a destination, not a journey.

1 Preparation - the 5 P's

Proper preparation prevents poor performance. Have a checklist of all the things that must be taken to the match. Experience will cause this list to grow in time.

During the weeks or months leading up to a major competition, the rifle should be tuned to perfection. It pays to tune your rifle with a couple of powders of different burning rates, one fast and one slow, as temperature on the day does make a difference. Rifles tuned up in Adelaide may not perform as well in the humidity of Brisbane. I went up two clicks on my Benchmark One load when shooting on a cold and wet day in New Zealand.

Carry enough spares to cover all possible breakages. A spare trigger and scope, at least 50% more bullets, primers and powder than you think you might use, and plenty of cotton pre cut patches and solvent.

Prepare thirty match cases, in two lots of fifteen and use one set until worn out or stretched. How long cases last is directly proportional to how 'hot' they are loaded.

2 Know the rules

Serious shooters have spent thousands on equipment.....a rule book costs a few dollars. Buy one and read it – it may save a lot of arguments and grief later.

It never ceases to amaze me how at nearly every major shoot somebody spoils their day by not knowing the rules of the game. How many know the correct procedure to be followed if a shot from another competitor lands on your target? What happens if you put a shot outside the border on the business target? What do you do if your trigger breaks mid group?

Don't count on the range officer (who may be a volunteer) knowing every rule covering your shooting discipline.

3 Set goals

Goals must be achievable and measurable. Don't fall into the trap of going to a shoot just to beat a certain competitor. You might succeed, but that other competitor may have had a bad day, so you haven't really achieved anything as far as improving your own performance. The correct goal is to beat your best ever score, either group or aggregate. It's important that you should keep records and note improvements as they happen.

How much improvement and by when? If your best ever group has yet to break .100, don't set a goal of a .050 group – that can come later. Aim to reduce your aggregates by 5% each time you go out. This may not sound much, but it will pay off when it matters.

When you do reach a goal, you should have already set another one. This may help to prevent 'comfort zones'. When the day comes that you achieve that first sub two aggregate – enjoy the moment, but it's time to attack the new benchmark.

4

Develop a plan

If it is to be, it is up to thee. No one plans to fail, but many fail to plan. A good example is how do we handle a particular range and its odd conditions? All ranges have little tricks and abnormalities. Walk the range (if permitted) before the shoot starts and note where wind can come in from the sides – hence, which wind indicators are the most important. Most ranges are fairly closed in, either by bush or other structures – all of which have an effect on the wind flow through the range.

Try to determine if there is a predominant wind condition. Use a stop watch to time how long some conditions last, and stop and start it at the times when you feel that you would be comfortable shooting a group. There may be one that is around for more than 50% of the seven minutes – this is rare, but it does happen.

Plan whether you want to shoot on the left or the right condition – sometimes you may not get a choice – but some people have a preference for one or the other.

Decide whether the conditions are suitable for ‘picking’ or ‘running’ your groups. The picker finds a condition and takes most of the seven minutes to fire five business shots. The runner identifies a condition, verifies it on the sighter, and has his group up in a very short time. There is a place for both, depending entirely upon conditions offering. Those who ‘machine gun’ in shifting conditions soon find this out.

Always note who is shooting either side of you – that way you won’t miss a relay, and you will know that you are setting up on the right bench. This applies mainly to big shoots, with multiple relays.

Most rifles on the firing line are capable of winning the shoot – however, 95% of winning is done by only 5% of competitors. You can read the results or be the results – it’s all up to you, so plan to be the latter.

5

Remember why you are there

You are there to do your very best for yourself, and your team if applicable. In practicing shooting, you should also be able to practice shutting out everything else. There is a maximum of 76 minutes during the day when your whole focus needs to be on the job in hand. That leaves plenty of time for talking, comparing and just enjoying the social side of the sport.

Stay out of the politics. Leave that to those who enjoy it. Some good shooters over the years have lessened their performance by giving too much attention to trivial things “off the field”. There is plenty of time for that stuff later.

When you are on the line and the clock is ticking, if the mind starts to wander, just ask yourself, “Why am I here?”

6

There are no excuses

Give me a reason, not an excuse. Winners do not have to make excuses – excuses are made by losers and everything happens for a reason. It wasn’t the wind’s fault that a shot left the group – you did not pick the change - the wind was the reason, not the excuse.

Leave the word ‘luck’ out of your conversation. Luck is what might be left after you have given 100%. On days when conditions were really bad, I have heard shooters in exasperation state, “I can’t shoot in these #*\$&*& conditions” – you can...you just have to change your game plan. Forget the excuses, just get on with it. There is usually someone who is handling the situation OK, so what are they doing that you are not? If they are on a different relay, go out and watch them shoot. They have probably picked up on something that others have missed.

7

Analyse your results

Is everything going to plan? Am I improving, or is there a pattern to what is holding me back. If you are consistently losing shots in a particular direction, then you must change your game plan and watch a different set of indicators – perhaps the ones closer in or further out - anything but what you are doing now. Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting a different result. If you have time, go out and watch others shoot – particularly those who are doing well. Are they shooting the same condition as you?

8

Avoid the 'Comfort Zone'

If things are to change, you must change. It is easy to develop a comfort zone, but what happens on the day when everything is going far better than usual?

If your heartbeat goes off the scale when you have four shots into a sub zero group and you blow the fifth, then you need to work on it. You are not alone in this area. If you are on a .1500 aggregate after four groups, you must treat the fifth group as just another one. You should have practiced this scenario in your mind many times before the shoot. I once knew of a well known top shooter who sometimes practiced at fifty yards, just to get used to seeing a tiny group form. It worked for him, and he rarely lost a fifth shot.

9

Avoid negativity

Negative people usually produce negative results. Avoid those who see everything with a negative perspective – they are usually losers. If one expects bad luck, they will usually get it and misery loves company.

Never approach the firing line with a 'Hope I don't blow it' thought – rather, take the attitude that this will be the best group of the yardage – then go out and do it.

You will also notice that some of the most successful shooters seem to 'hang around' together – you will only receive positive vibes from them. Why not join them?

10

Never, ever, give up

You are only as good as your last group/aggregate. In 1980, I once started a 100 yard aggregate with a 1.026 group and then went on to win the overall match. I took the attitude that now that the A target was out of the way I was going to shoot nine very small groups. It was a very rough day, and took a lot of concentration to put shots together. In looking back, it was one of my most enjoyable wins. One should never give up – even if a disastrous group does happen.

Every shoot should teach you something – even when you lose, don't lose the lesson.

Once a shot is fired on the business target, it is up there forever. There is nothing you can do about it, except get on with it. Do your very best, and curse about the lost shot later, in private.

Summary

I trust that the above may be an insight into some of the mental aspects that I use to help my benchrest shooting. Some may feel that this is taking it too seriously, but you can still derive a great deal of enjoyment from a sport even when you are trying your very best to win.