

## CHAPTER 18

### TRAINING

No athlete would be able to compete at the top of his sport without training, but there's more to practising and training than meets the eye, so first of all you need a plan.

If you were a marathon runner all you'd need to do would be to keep running, and that's the attitude a lot of shooters have - they think that all they have to do is keep shooting and it *must* get better; that even works in some cases!

But, the more technical the sport the more things there are to go wrong and, therefore, the more things you have to get right.

Long races ultimately depend on endurance, and the technicalities of a good start are less important, whereas short races are more technical because fractions of a second count, so a 100-metre sprinter will spend a lot of time on his technique.

Imagine a highly technical sport like the shot putt or the discus; you could be the strongest and throw further than any one else in the world, but if you fall forwards out of the circle then your throw won't count and you won't be World Champion.

It's the same with shooting; you might shoot a perfect score but if you take longer than the time allotted for the competition, it doesn't count.

Nowadays sport is very professional and the way to win medals is by technique, and training with the right equipment.

Top athletes spend months on specific aspects of their sport and when each bit is perfect they put the lot together and then go back over the weakest bits.

When you watch the sport on television you're just seeing the tip of the iceberg. When you marvel at how they manage to throw, jump, and run so far, so fast and so high, just think about the hours, weeks, months and years that went into training for that event.

For those of you wondering what all this has to do with you and your shooting, cast your mind over your own training schedule. Do you train six nights a week and compete once a month or is it the other way round; or do you shoot once a week and never train at all?

Do you want to shoot better than you do at the moment?

If the answer to that is “yes” then you must decide how much effort you’re prepared to put in; if the answer to that is “a lot” *where* are you going to put all that effort?

The answer to that has to be “in training”.

Unfortunately most people think that ‘training’ means ‘shooting’, and that’s where so many of you are going wrong; there’s more to shooting than just shooting.

There’s the mechanical side: you have to understand what happens when you pull the trigger.

There’s diet: how many of those athletes at the Olympic Games have a big fry up for breakfast before going out to try to win a medal? OK *you* wouldn’t either, but just remember that anything you eat or drink within two hours of starting to shoot could have an effect on you scores. Wouldn’t you like to know what that effect is?

There’s speed: most people think that shooting is fairly laid back and relaxed but you need fast reactions and efficiency; you have to be alert and able to react to the changes in wind and light, and economy of effort comes from efficiency.

There’s concentration: you must learn to concentrate, and the only way you’re going to learn is by practising. (One of the beauties of television is that you get close-up shots of top sports people, which clearly show the intense level of concentration on their faces when they’re competing).

Then there’s position: you have to train your body to get into the right position every time.

Finally (but by no means least) there's technique: that's all about how you open the breech, how you reload, how you scope your shots, and numerous other things which will all have an influence on your scores. All these things need to be practised individually.

There's no point saying "I don't have time." Of course you do. You have as much time as you want to make.

There are 168 hours in every week; you spend a third of those working and travelling to work, and a third you spend sleeping. That gives you 56 hours a week during which time you have to eat, socialise and generally enjoy life. If you devoted 90% of that time to the pleasures of life, you'd still be left with nearly 6 hours a week for your shooting. Don't waste them!

If shooting is a hobby for you and just provides a pleasant way of spending some of your spare time, this book isn't intended to discourage you from that.

The shooting world is full of extremely nice people who are very pleasant company and the sport is just the catalyst that brings them all together. There's nothing wrong with that, in fact it's something to be positively encouraged as they are the backbone of our sport.

However, this book *is* aimed at those of you who want to improve your scores and who think of shooting as a very competitive sport.

Even if you have no desire to go to the Olympics you could go part way along the trail, just until your scores have reached the level where you're happy with your shooting, so there might just be something here which could add a point to your score. (Even half a point would be useful sometimes.)

The first thing you're going to have to accept is that your shooting is not going to get better on its own - you're going to have to *do* something to bring about an improvement.

You *could* just sit back in your armchair and hope, but do you really think that would work? It might win you the lottery but you aren't going to get any medals that way.

It's all very well droning on about training and practising but what exactly are you going to do?

This is where this book comes in; you can think of it as your own personal trainer. It will help you plan a schedule to get the best out of you, and will guide you through all the things you have to learn.

So the first thing to do is to go out and buy a lined exercise book of A4 size. (You may have one lying around somewhere, of course, but the very act of going out and buying one psychologically gives you a fresh start - this is going to be the new, positive you!) This is going to be a record, a programme and a notebook; you could call it your shooting diary, or your training programme, or anything you wish.

It can be loose-leafed or ring bound or stapled; how thick it is will depend on how long you keep it up, but you can always go out and buy another one if you fill the first one.

You've heard the saying "the pen is mightier than the sword" but there's something much mightier than either - knowledge. You're going to fill your book with as much as you can learn about this sport, then you're going to devise your own personal training schedule and keep a record of your progress.

You'll also keep a record of your scores, so you can enjoy seeing your scores rocket upwards.

Your new book is going to be your 'bible' (so guard it with your life as it will be very difficult to replace), and it will be a great ally in the clubroom as you swap facts and knowledge with other club members.

Notice the word 'swap'. If you ask a colleague a question and you get an answer, it would only be fair to give them, in exchange, some little titbit of information that they may not know.

Now you have your book and presumably something to write with, you can start thinking about what you're going to put in it.

Divide the book up into sections; suitable headings might be (in no particular order):

- Knowledge
- Training/Practice
- Shooting Record
- Miscellaneous

These are fairly broad headings and could quite easily be broken down further. For example, *knowledge* could be divided into history, rifle, ammunition etc.; *training* could be shooting and fitness; *shooting record* would be more useful if you separated your competition shooting from practice, and *miscellaneous* could be anything else you think it worth keeping a note of, such as diet, medical facts, drugs etc.

If any of you are wondering how all this writing is going to help your shooting, read on.

It is important to know as much as you can about what it is that you're trying to do, hence the emphasis on knowledge. The more you know about the subject the more you'll know about how to improve your scores.

This may all sound a little bit like going back to school, which may put some of you off the idea, but you could find that what you learn is very interesting.

If that turns out to be the case, you'll be able to have interesting conversations with all sorts of people, and if some of those people are at present non-shooters, who knows - you may convert somebody!

There is a general lack of knowledge about smallbore target rifle shooting amongst the public, and one of the reasons for that is our reluctance to talk about it, so by knowing a few interesting facts you could stimulate some debates amongst your friends and workmates.

Now let's get to work.

Let's start with a series of tasks, which we'll make as interesting as possible, and which you can adapt to suit your own way of working.

If you can find six hours a week for training, this journal can go towards those six hours (so you *could* be working on your shooting without leaving the comfort of your armchair).

Task No. 1 is to find out as much as you can about your sport and enter it in your journal under the heading of *knowledge*.

So the first heading might be 'history'. How much do you know about the history of smallbore target rifle shooting?

When did it start? Who was responsible for the formation of the rifle clubs you all belong to? What was the N.S.R.A. called before it was the N.S.R.A.? How long has smallbore rifle shooting been an Olympic sport? How many rifle clubs are there in this country? How many were there in the 'Fifties?

Imagine for a moment that you're a television reporter who has to interview a rifle shooter; what questions would you ask that would interest your viewers?

If you're reading this in the clubroom ask your fellow club members a question and see what they know, (but be warned - they may ask you something back!)

Some of the questions should be difficult- there's no point in asking something that everybody knows the answer to - but there's no time limit and there are lots of sources of information.

You could try asking some of your older members what they remember of shooting in the early days; you could try your local library or look up 'shooting' on the Internet.

Try the N.S.R.A., they're *your* Association and they have a great and long history, and don't walk past a secondhand bookshop without going in - they may have some of the older books on this sport, which have long been out of print.

Nothing has to be done in any particular order and if something you discover takes you off on a different track which you find interesting, then go with it, just as long as you're increasing your overall knowledge of your sport.

You probably know that the British Long Range Championship is decided during the 'Roberts' final of Bisley Week, but who was Earl Roberts and what did he do for shooting? (You probably wouldn't have found history so boring at school if it had been about rifle shooting.)

The next heading under *knowledge* is 'rifle', which covers a broad list of things, but basically you should try to know everything there is to know about your rifle.

You could argue that you don't need to know how to change a spark plug in order to drive a car and that's obviously true, but if you *did* know, having to change a plug when something goes wrong wouldn't cause you any major difficulties.

The same applies to your rifle; while they don't tend to break down on motorways, they do have a tendency only to go wrong when you least expect it *and* during a big match! Being able to strip the bolt or action apart because you've done it before, will help when you're away at a match and don't have anybody to do it for you.

There's no suggestion that you need to obtain a degree in Mechanical Engineering, but some basic fundamental knowledge of how the whole kit and caboodle works is essential.

You could start off with some fairly easy questions like:

- how much does your rifle weigh?
- how long is the barrel and what is its diameter?
- how many grooves and lands are there?
- how many times does the rifling turn in the length of your barrel?
- what is its proof pressure?

You owe it to the sport to know every thing there is to know about the piece of equipment that you're using; it's not just a lump of inanimate wood and metal, it's the thing which is going to earn you your gold medal.

Imagine yourself on the television, answering questions on your sport - would you know all the answers to the above?

How much do you know about the ammunition that you use?

How much do your bullets weigh? (the little grey lump of lead, not the whole cartridge) - you probably all know that it's 40grains, but what are you going to say to that Television Person when they ask how much that is in ounces?

If you start thinking about what you *don't* know about your sport, you'll be amazed at how little the average shooter knows about how all their kit works. If you don't believe it, just hold a quiz night down at your club one night and see how much (or little) you *all* know.

If you've never seen how your ammunition is made, contact your local ammunition factory and see if they'll take a group of you round their works. You're quite likely to get a sympathetic response because they'd like you to see the trouble that they go to, to get you the best ammo that they can.

Does your rifle prefer fast or slow ammo? If you don't know that, you'll have to do an awful lot more testing to find out what suits it. What is *fast* and what is *slow* anyway? Is 1060 fps fast or slow?

It would be easy to go on and on asking questions, but it would be impossible to list every question (you'd probably get bored reading them anyway) and the idea is get *you* to ask the questions. It's *you* who'll benefit from knowing the answers.

You don't have to do it alone - there are going to be other people in the club who are interested in the answers; in fact exchanging information can be part of the fun.

You'll never find all the answers because some questions don't actually have an answer but some questions will open up a whole world of opportunity for debate in the clubroom on these long cold winter evenings.

For example you could discuss whether faster or slower ammunition is affected more or less by the wind, but remember - before you come to a conclusion you'll need to produce some evidence to support your theory.

The whole sport is about questions and answers and the person with the most answers is the winner, even if they didn't know they knew the answer.

In the meantime here's some to be going on with:

Why are our bullets covered in some form of grease or lubricant?

Does it matter if the soft lead nose of your bullet is damaged?

How much does a standard subsonic .22 target bullet drop over 100yds?

Why do we call a ten a bull?

How many shots are fired during an Olympic Final?

When?

What?

Why?

Training and practice are two words that strike fear and trembling into the heart of the average rifleman, particularly the first word, but before you go off with your head in your hands, groaning that it's all too hard, here's some words of encouragement:

Training is a very personal thing; what suits one person doesn't suit another, so your training should be exactly tailored to match your attitude and life style.

There are some books which expound the theory that you must be superbly fit to succeed at *anything*; obviously anybody entering the London Marathon without some form of previous fitness training is asking for trouble, but shooting is different.

The fitter you are the easier shooting becomes, but there's 'fitness' and there's 'fitness'.

Some people are naturally fit, principally because they have the sort of body that makes keeping fit easier, i.e. they're not overweight, they don't eat too much and they only drink in moderation. Unfortunately shooting tends to attract the *other* sort of body: overweight, eats too much and drinks more than moderately!

But all is not lost - don't give up hope - however unfit you think you are, things *can* improve, with very little effort.

For those of you who think that even the minimum of effort is far too much these words are aimed at you - you don't know how easy it is to get a little fitter and thus improve your shooting.

There's absolutely nothing wrong at all in being a 'couch potato' but if you *want* to improve your shooting, you're going to have to get up off your backside - at least figuratively, if not actually.

This book cannot lead you by the hand and drag you out on a cold wet night to go jogging and that's not the intention. The object of these pages is to give you the guidance to help yourself, and to make you *want* to get fitter.

It doesn't have to be hard or painful - shooters do not cross pain barriers, it's not in their nature.

Let's consider the top of the tree for the moment and assume that you would like to go to the Olympics in six years' time. You may already be very fit - either naturally or because you also take part in some other sport - but that may not be the sort of fitness you need for shooting.

So, it's important to sort out what type of fitness you *are* going to need, before you don your designer tracksuit and jog off round the local park.

Hopefully you will have noticed that rifle shooting involves carrying a lot of kit around, which can get pretty heavy at times. This means strength is a major advantage - you don't have to be a champion weight lifter, but overall body strength is useful.

Also shooters tend to fire more than just the odd shot every so often, so 100% effort has to be maintained over the whole course of fire, therefore stamina is vitally important.

Your pulse beat is directly transferred to the rifle through four contact points, which means you can't hold a rifle *totally* still, but reducing this pulse beat reduces that movement, and getting fitter could reduce your pulse beat.

One measure of fitness is how quickly your heart rate returns to normal after exertion. In shooting it would be an advantage for your heart *not* to take half an hour to return to normal after you've just carried all your kit from the car park to the firing point!

In general terms, being fit stops you getting tired so quickly, and tiredness affects your eyesight; it also affects your ability to concentrate, so the fitter you are the longer you'll be able to maintain that concentration.

If you're on your way to the next (or next-but-one) Olympics, you're going to have to start training now, and there are hundreds of people out there all willing, and able, to help you.

The first thing you need to do is find an expert in fitness and training. They are plentiful and most towns have a Gymnasium (they're probably all called 'fitness centres' now) which you can join.

Joining a fitness club is probably going to cost you money, but the range of facilities available is usually very good, (nobody said it *wasn't* going to cost you anything!) A club will have experts on hand who can tailor a training program to suit you exactly so it will be money well spent.

These clubs are equipped with an amazing range of machines, all designed to increase your fitness in a comfortable way, and with the minimum amount of effort on your part.

The main emphasis should be on aerobic fitness, because you need a large heart and lung capacity for shooting, but discuss your requirements with the experts and they will know how to get the best out of you. Six months of regular attendance at such a club can have a magical affect on your overall fitness.

For those of you at the other end of the scale who lead a very sedentary life and have absolutely no intention of doing any work towards improving your shooting, here's some good news.

You don't even have to get up out of your armchair to add points to your score. In fact just the opposite - you don't have to lift a finger. You can train by doing absolutely nothing. (Shooters all over the country are now saying: "that's more like it".)

What you have to remember is that your body has a capacity to do a certain amount of work before it needs rest and refreshment.

Think of your body as a car for a moment - it will run for so long on the fuel that you've given it, and then for a bit longer on the reserve tank of fat you keep stored on your person.

That fuel is turned into energy to move muscles, which in turn allow you to go shooting.

If you normally get home from work, have some tea and then collapse in the chair for the rest of the evening, on the night when you go shooting, you're asking more of your body than it's used to providing.

Therefore, on that particular evening you need extra reserves of energy, or you need to reduce what you normally do during the day to compensate.

Most people have bosses who would find it very amusing if you were to ask to forego offloading a forty ton lorry that's just arrived, because you're going shooting that evening, but those of you who *are* able to arrange your workload might like to try arranging things so that you have a relatively easy time during the day.

That can be impossible sometimes and *Sod's Law* dictates that your club night will always be on your busiest day, but if you give it some thought there may be something you can do to help yourself. Therefore, if you have a job that allows you a bit of flexibility, try to have a relaxed day without too much running around before you go shooting.

The worst scenario would be rushing around all day, leaving work late, thrashing through the evening rush hour traffic, beating your head on the steering wheel in frustration, bolting down a heavy meal and then dashing over the club to take part in a team shoot. (It's quite exhausting just reading that).

So if that's the *worst* scenario, imagine how you could improve on it, and then arrange your day as best as you can to avoid the problems.

(For those of you trying to work out what all this has to do with your training, then bear with me for a bit longer, this *is* relevant.)

It's your *mental* attitude which accounts for so much in your shooting, and by taking notice of what you do off the range you can help yourself on the range.

Your training program doesn't have to mean going out every evening and pounding round the streets in the cold and rain in a desperate attempt to get fit; it can be as simple as just slightly rearranging your life to make things easier for yourself.

Getting your kit ready the night before so that you don't have to rush around on your shooting evening can mean the difference between a 'nine' and a 'bull' on that all-important card.

You don't need me to tell you how to make your shooting life more relaxed and comfortable, but if you put a bit of thought into it along the lines suggested, you'll see the results on the cards and you'll have hardly lifted a finger to do it.

For those of you actually prepared to put some physical effort into improving your shooting, this is where you need your shooting journal.

You need to draw up a training program, so writing it down in your journal gives you goals you can see, and enables you to keep a record of your progress at the same time.

You may not feel ready for the Olympics just yet, but a fitness club can still help you, by providing:

- (a) the discipline of going to the club,
- (b) the competition of keeping those weights moving when somebody else is watching, and
- (c) the camaraderie of belonging to another organisation

In those circumstances your shooting journal is kept for you, because your club records will show your progress - all *you* need to do is keep a note of your resting heart rate at regular intervals.

An hour in the gym twice a week will reduce your resting heart rate by 10% in six months, if you specify that's what you want to do when you join, and that level of reduction will have a noticeable effect on your shooting - so what are you waiting for?

Modern lifestyles encourage people to be unfit and overweight: transport is so easy these days that you don't have to expend any energy getting to work or going shopping; even entertainment is brought directly into your home - you don't even have to walk down to the cinema to see a film.

This all means that you have more energy for work, so you can produce more and therefore earn more; then, however, you're too tired to go out and don't have the energy to enjoy your leisure time.

But if you eat and sleep to provide you with just enough energy to go to work, *where* are you going to get the extra energy from to go shooting?

How many times on a cold winter's evening, with the rain lashing at the windows, have you found an excuse not to go to the club after a hard day's work? It can be all too easy to find an excuse *not* to do something, when it requires effort on your part.

Getting fitter will give you spare energy for the leisure times in your life, and being fitter would improve your scores, so what have you got to lose?

On the other hand, lots of you would point to a top shooter who was apparently very unfit and say if he/she can shoot that well then *I* don't need to be fit.

There are two comments to make in response to that: firstly, exactly *how* unfit is that top shooter? They may not appear fit but they may have hidden resources of stamina that you don't know about.

Their job for example may be physically demanding, or they may take part in other sports (or perhaps they used to) or their body size may make them more naturally fit.

If you were to ask, most people would emphasise how unfit they are because they relate fitness to athletes, but you don't *have* to be at that sort of level.

The second comment is that if the shooter concerned really was that unfit, perhaps they would shoot even better if they were fitter.

There are exceptions to these rules, of course; there will always be a short overweight shooter with a very sedentary occupation who will outshoot the rest, but exceptions prove the rule (whatever that means).

It would be nice to be able to tell you that increasing your personal fitness by 10% will increase your scores by an equal amount, but you'd know that wasn't true, because life isn't that simple.

There will definitely be an improvement, but exactly how much will vary from person to person, and obviously the more unfit you are the more benefit you will get from any improvement.

It's possible to get fitter without any major changes in your lifestyle, so let's look at a few suggestions see if you can find one that would fit into your lifestyle with the minimum of change.

The human body is designed for walking - it's a natural thing to do and most people don't do enough - but how many of you get the car out to go to the newsagent for a paper? The car is so easy and convenient, but it doesn't help keep you fit.

Try walking instead.

Buy a dog that needs plenty of exercise and take it for good long walks; some of the fittest people around walk the legs off their dogs twice a day.

Try leaving for work half an hour earlier and parking further away and walking the rest of the way; parking in the firm's car park is terribly convenient but does nothing for your health and fitness.

Even gentle strolling is good for you but obviously the harder you walk the more benefit you will get.

How far and how hard you walk is down to you; if you're not used to walking then take it easy at first, but after a while, if you're walking every day, you'll be surprised at how quickly you can speed up without getting breathless.

Breathlessness is a measure of how you're progressing: if you walk at a pace where you can just manage to talk out loud but are too out of breath to be able to sing, then that's about the right level to do you the most good.

It won't be long before you find that, instead of arriving at work out of breath, you arrive feeling invigorated and ready for whatever the day has to throw at you.

Even after a hard day's work, the walk to your car can make you more alert and will clear your mind of all those distracting work problems (a side effect to that is it could also make you a safer driver).

If you work in a large office block try taking the stairs instead of the lift; *then* try running up those stairs. Colleagues may think you're crazy but stair climbing is a great way of getting your heart and lungs working, and that's definitely going to be good for you.

Try going for a brisk walk in your lunch hour - you can walk quite a long way in an hour.

Even people forced to sit in front of a VDU all day can do things to help themselves. There are statutory guidelines about giving your eyes a break at regular intervals, so use those breaks to do some stretching exercises and go for a brisk walk somewhere.

If your profession forces a sluggish lifestyle on you, you're going to *have* to make space in your spare time for some sort of activity if you want to improve.

You don't have to join an expensive health club in order to get fitter; just running up and down your stairs at home will raise your heart rate in the short-term, but lower it in the long-term, and if done regularly it will soon increase your fitness.

A word of warning at this stage: if you're over fifty or have any long-term medical condition, please consult your doctor before undertaking anything strenuous. If it takes you longer than half an hour to recover from your exercise then you may be doing too much.

Just slow it down for a while. If anything causes you any sort of pain which doesn't go away the minute you stop, then consult your doctor. You're trying to get fit, not kill yourself.

The whole point of exercising to get fit is to keep pushing yourself that little bit further every so often, and then you'll find that you can go further for longer. Just keep pushing your limit a bit further away but do it gradually over a comfortable period of time.

If, for example, you find that it takes you exactly half an hour to walk from where you park the car, you should find that after a week or so you'll be able to manage that distance in twenty-five minutes without straining. In a few more weeks you'll be able to knock another five minutes off, *then* you'll start to notice the benefit.

Buy a bicycle. If you don't want to spend hundreds of pounds on one of these fancy mountain bikes, get a secondhand one out of the local paper. Then use it.

You'll be surprised how much exercise you can get on a bike, particularly if you live in a hilly area; cycling is an all-round exercise, but it's particularly good for the heart and lungs, which is what you want.

Swimming is even better exercise, because pushing against the water provides shock-free resistance.

Within six weeks of taking up one of these options you'll almost certainly see a difference. The most noticeable will probably be a reduction in your resting heart rate, so get used to taking your pulse. Exercise will raise your pulse rate at the time, so only take it when it's settled down and you're resting.

You should also start to get a general feeling of well-being; you'll feel less tired and have more spare energy for doing those things you've always said you'd do, if only you had the energy.

Feeling less tired when you get to the range will help you concentrate more on your shooting, which in turn will help your scores.

Many years ago there was a programme on the television where athletes from all different sports competed against each other at a series of energetic games.

Most people were amazed at the fitness of Jackie Stewart, the racing driver, who regularly beat people whom you would assume were much fitter, because of the particular sport they did.

Jackie explained after one of these programmes that, while he spent all his time sitting in the cockpit of a *Formula One* racing car, he needed to be very fit in order to maintain the extremely high level of concentration needed during a two hour race.

That's why shooters need to be fit - shooting is all about concentration. If you get tired half way through a match, your concentration will lapse and your scores will suffer.

Another thing essential to shooters is suppleness. As you get older so you lose some of your natural mobility and flexibility, and you need to do a bit of stretching to get it back.

A few simple exercises will help; they don't have to be much - just a few neck rolls, a bit of back stretching from side to side and waving your arms about a bit just to keep those shoulders loose. Tension very often shows up in the shoulders and will affect your group size, so by keeping them loose and supple you'll help reduce that risk.

This book isn't designed to be a fitness manual - there are plenty of those available in your local bookshop. Browse the bookshelves and see what catches your eye and appeals to the level of fitness *you* want to achieve. Lots of books will turn you into an Olympic athlete in a matter of hours (or so they claim) but that's not what you want.

You want a book about gentle aerobics to improve your metabolism; two which seem to be readable and informative are:

*"Fit for life"* by Ranulph Fiennes.

*"Fitness for Dummies"* (1999 - Transworld Publishers).

The first book is written by an incredibly fit individual who dragged a 500lb sled several hundred miles across Antarctica at 52 years of age; the second is written seriously, but in a light-hearted easy-to-read fashion.

Happy exercising - but don't overdo it.

## RIFLE TRAINING

After extolling the virtues of training in the *physical* sense, now is the time you should be thinking in terms of training with your rifle. In other words actually doing some shooting which is not competitive.

For those of you who find that they only have just enough time to do their league cards, let alone any others, I have every sympathy, but this book is about helping you to shoot better and that *will* involve a certain amount of training.

You could argue that you could use some of your competition cards as practice. Some top shooters do use their league cards to practice for bigger competitions, but you need to get away from that idea, because it's not fair on those team members who put 110% effort into their league cards.

Training should encompass *everything* you do to improve your shooting, and one of the reasons for having a shooting journal is to keep a record of your training schedule.

It's the aim of every sports person to have their own coach (in modern parlance they're probably called 'personal training supervisors') who will look after them, train them, keep them to their schedule and tell them how wonderful they are. However, in the shooting world personal coaches are somewhat few and far between, so you're going to have to be your own coach.

Try thinking of yourself as a shooting machine. Imagine yourself to be a robot whose sole purpose is to lay there, holding a rifle, and to release the trigger at exactly the right moment.

Then imagine yourself to be in charge of that machine, controlling it and guiding it as it shoots.

Now you can be your own trainer. You can map out a training schedule and make your machine go training even when it doesn't want to. You can make it practise the things it's not good at until it gets them right.

At this juncture it's important to realise that coaches don't possess some magic formula that they pass on to top shooters to make them Olympic champions. Top shooters become champions by hard work, all the coaches do is keep them pointing in the right direction.

One of our Olympic shooters was ostracised by his own club because, when they asked him for his formula for shooting so well, he told them it was all just hard work and practice. They didn't believe him and were convinced that he was privy to some secret knowledge disclosed only to top shooters.

On another occasion an Olympic coach visited a club to help them with some individual coaching. One of the members complained afterwards that 'he didn't change anything', as though the coach was going to rebuild his position into a medal-winning one and he would be a champion immediately.

It has also been known for people to turn up to a National Squad training session, expecting to be magically turned into this country's greatest shooter overnight.

There is no intention to decry the work done by our coaches in the UK - they work very hard for little reward, and there are too few of them; the point is that there *is* no magic formula and, therefore, there's nothing to prevent you from becoming your own coach.

*You* could make yourself shoot better. You *can* train yourself.

However, don't be tempted to go on one of those excellent courses run by the N.S.R.A. to train coaches, with the intention of helping yourself; that's not their purpose.

If you do go on a course to learn how to be a coach - which after all is all about communication - then you should be helping other people, not just looking for tips on better shooting.

Just imagine for a moment that you *were* training somebody else. How would you go about it?

How would you get them to shoot better than they do? It would be very easy to say that you haven't got a clue, but just think about it for a moment. Does that person do enough training? Do they practise enough? What are their weak points? Do they have the right motivation? Do they want to win?

Now apply those questions to yourself.

It would be very easy at this stage to give up and say that all you want to do is shoot better than you do at the moment, so "who needs all this motivation stuff?", and "what's on the television?"

You don't have to decide to go the whole hog straight away, you could just try it for a while and see how it goes, and if a little bit of work produces a result then you might get tempted to go a bit further.

It's *got* to be worth trying one or two things in case you hit upon something that works for you which suddenly puts a few points on your score. Unfortunately there's not one particular thing that can guarantee putting points on your score, it could be a combination of things.

This is another reason for the shooting journal you're keeping - it will help you highlight those things that appear to improve your shooting.

However - back to the shooting robot mentioned earlier. One easy way of improving its shooting is to identify which things it's not very good at, and work on those. You have to be careful here to make sure that you don't practise just one thing to the exclusion of all the others - just increase the amount of shooting you do, which concentrates on your weak points.

Suppose your robot is not very good at shooting in the wind. The coward's way out is to only shoot on calm days, and if you're shooting in a team, then that's obviously going to be best for your team.

However, what would be even better for the team is if you learnt to shoot in the wind and then, when you didn't have any choice about when you shot, you'd still put up a reasonable score, even in a gale.

Now you're in charge of your 'other' self you can *insist* on more visits to the range to practice shooting in the wind.

Watch the weather forecast (and remember that the middle of the day is usually the windiest), then compile a course of fire for your robot to shoot.

You'll still have to take yourself up the range and get all your kit out for yourself, but once on the firing point you become the coach, watching the wind and telling this machine of yours when to pull the trigger and when not to.

When you've finished a target, discuss it with your 'pupil' and analyse their shooting. Question yourself about why that shot went out in the 'eight' ring and why that one went in the 'bull', and make your pupil write down the results of the shoot in their journal.

If you had a personal coach standing over you while you shot, he would probably be asking you questions about what you felt, what you were thinking, and why you did what you did.

*He* would be trying to get you to think about what you were doing and why you were doing it. *You* would probably make up a few lame excuses about why you thought that shot went in the 'eight' ring, but if you didn't also know why the shot went in the bull then they *are* just excuses and your coach would know this.

You *must* be critical of your shooting self. It's a lot easier now because you have a pupil whom you've created, and you can be a lot harder on him than you would on yourself.

This technique can be applied to all the other things that your robot isn't very good at, like 'aiming off', or shooting too slowly.

When somebody was asked once (when they had run out of time on a windy detail) why they hadn't aimed off and they said they couldn't do it. When asked why not, they said because they'd never done it.

If your robot can't aim off, get it up the range, wind its sights off by twenty clicks and make it shoot a card. Just doing it isn't going to make you an instant expert, but the more you do it the more you learn about doing it, and the easier it becomes.

If you were actually coaching somebody else it's quite likely that, when you told them to do something they would ask *you* how to do it, so you'd have to learn all about it before you could teach somebody else.

That's how it's got to be for you; if you're coaching yourself, you must investigate the things you don't know anything about. Talk to other shooters, listen to how they aim off, and listen to how they shoot in a wind. Which flag do they use, and why? What size foresight do they use?

It was said earlier that coaching is all about communicating, i.e. the coach talking to the shooter, but there's more to it than that; you also have to be able to communicate with other people so you can learn things you can pass on to your pupil.

If you don't know something, you should ask someone, and if the person you ask doesn't know either, then there are two of you who need to find out!

## PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT (SOMETIMES)

Nobody goes smallbore target rifle shooting in this country because they have to. Of course, club captains can get pretty persistent at times and you may sometimes feel pressured into doing cards, but that's part of the sport.

Imagine the agony of being a marathon runner in the middle of January, knowing you *have* to run so many miles every week. Having to shoot an extra card for your club pales into insignificance compared with what you might have to do in another sport.

The whole reason you're a shooter is because you enjoy it, despite what you might think sometimes. Coming off the firing point after a bad shoot is probably the time you feel you're enjoying it the least, but then you have a good shoot, or do a couple of cards above your average, and you think maybe it's not so bad after all.

Just remember that, if you didn't have bad shoots you'd never recognise when you had a good one.

So if you're going to enjoy your sport then you must learn to love it all - even the bad shoots. Of course, some of you with masochistic tendencies actually enjoy a good moan about your shooting, but don't take it too far.

Look upon your bad shoots as lessons learnt and move on to better things. If you've had a bad shoot it's likely to be because you were doing something wrong, in which case you could use that shoot to work out *what* it was you did wrong, and then make sure you don't do it again.

Think positively!

Now apply that attitude to your training and practice.

The virtues of getting fit and training for your shooting were mentioned earlier, and obviously practice plays a very important part in that scenario as well, but practice is boring isn't it?

How do you motivate yourself to go up the range and practise when it's all you can do to find the time to get your match cards shot?

Ask yourself a question, do you want to shoot better than you do?

Of course you do. You'd love to walk back from the prize table clutching the club championship trophy with the thunderous applause of your fellow club members ringing in your ears.

Even the quick handshake from the club captain as he hands you a team runners-up medal is a rewarding and pleasurable experience.

You *will* shoot better if you practise, but there are two very important things about practising that you should be aware of.

Firstly, you've got to *want* to do it, because if you're there under sufferance you won't do the job properly.

Secondly, practice must be interesting. If you get bored that's as good as switching off part of your brain, and you need all your mental ability in order to learn anything from your practice session.

If you said to the average shooter "go up the range and practise", they'd probably go up the range and shoot some cards without stickers on them, but that's not good enough.

In order to practise correctly you need to have an objective, and you mustn't try to learn too many things at once. It's much better to concentrate on small individual things during practice, rather than just shooting for as good a score as you can get.

Practising shooting doesn't necessarily mean just shooting at a normal target and counting the score. You must have a plan, something you're going to achieve. If you then achieve that goal, that's as good as having a good shoot.

Learning something from your shooting is rewarding, but how can you learn something if don't set out to do so in the first place?

It is all very well saying "I'm going up the range to practise shooting in the wind" - that's very laudable but it's not enough. You need a definite plan, like aiming off, or shooting quickly and waiting for the right wind, and then measuring groups not scores.

Making practice fun will help stimulate your interest, so devise some things to do which are a little different; by way of explanation there are coaching techniques which can be learnt from other sports.

Lots of practising can be fun if it's against someone else. Teachers know that it's easier to get children to run about on a sports field if they're divided up into teams so that they compete against each other. That makes it more exciting.

There's no reason why you can't make your shooting practice as exciting.

Of course you can't start running about on the firing point, that wouldn't go down very well with a lot of people, but you can devise other things to do that don't mean just shooting for a score.

The first thing to do is to find somebody else in your club who is interested in improving their shooting.

Then arrange a few practice sessions on the range together, but set out *in advance* specific plans of exactly what you're going to do. This will stop you standing on the firing point looking at each other wondering where to start.

If other people get to hear about the fun you're having they may want to join in as well, and the more the merrier.

The secret is in the planning and setting the objectives, so there are a number of areas you can look at:-

One of the things that catch people out is shooting too slowly. Really top shooters can shoot very fast because sometimes it's necessary to do so.

Details are timed, so if anything goes wrong (with your equipment, for example) you may find yourself having to catch up, and to be thrown into a panic because you can't take your usual five minutes for a shot will have a disastrous affect on your scores.

Being able to shoot fast but accurately is easy, but you won't be able to do it if you don't practise. Imagine being at an open shoot with five minutes to go before the end of a twenty-shot detail and you haven't fired a shot yet.

Could you complete a twenty-shot course in five minutes? Of course you could, that's almost a leisurely pace. The '*Queen Alex*' shooters have ninety seconds for ten shots so you would actually have a couple of minutes you don't need!

Speed shooting is something you can practise on your own if you have to - just set your timer for less and less time and see how well you shoot. With several of you, one could act as the timekeeper and call out the passing minutes; that tends to increase the pressure, which is also good for you.

You may at first think that as you're allotted twenty minutes to shoot, that's the amount of time that you should use when you're practising, but there are a number of reasons for learning to shoot fast.

Outdoors you need to be able to shoot quickly to take advantage of the right wind conditions, which don't always change at a leisurely pace to suit you.

Or something might happen which means a major alteration during a detail, or the detail has just started when you discover that you've left your bolt in the car boot. (It happens!)

Careful planning can stop some of these things happening, but shooting involves one of nature's major laws: "If something can go wrong it will, and at the most inopportune moment".

Two of you could organise a race, round a target. Award a point for every minute or part of a minute that one person is faster than the other, and add it to the score.

Next try wind coaching.

This takes two of you; one does the shooting the other watches the wind and says when to fire the shot. The shooter acts as a machine and only follows instructions. Then swap places. You'll be amazed at what you can learn from this exercise, particularly if you do it regularly in different weather conditions.

Then try the 'one shot match'. Challenge as many members as you can to a one shot match. If people object to going all that way just for one shot, they're missing the point, but to appease them combine it with some other exercises.

It's fairly self explanatory and you can make up your own rules, but to get you started I'd suggest the following: allow everybody to sight in and then make

them stand at the back of the firing point. At the whistle everybody gets down and fires one shot and then gets up again.

This is best done at 50 metres or 100 yards because there would be too many bulls at 25 yards(!) Ties can be decided by re-shoots until there is one clear winner. You could even add a time limit.

This competition really makes you concentrate on getting that all-important first shot in the bull and makes you get down in the correct position first time.

Next try shooting one shot at each aiming mark on a 50-metre card and keep going round the card until you've put five on each. Then do it again in a different direction and compare the groups and where they are. Does your group always end up in the same place on the same aiming mark? Doesn't that make you wonder why?

Another exercise is to take out everybody's foresight elements then shoot a couple of cards; you'll be surprised at how well some people will shoot, and so will they.

You could make everybody shoot with club rifles and keep swapping them around. You could make them all shoot without spotting scopes and just judge them on the smallest group.

If you have somebody in your club who is a wizard on a computer then persuade them to design and print up some different-shaped targets. Try squares and ovals. You don't need scoring rings - just work on group size. You'll be amazed how a different sight picture makes you concentrate.

These are just some ideas, and all of them will teach you something, whether it's about wind behaviour, how fast you can shoot, or getting down in the right position. Now you can start thinking about devising your own practice routines.

It doesn't take much imagination to work out something which is different, fun and interesting, and you could be pleasantly surprised at the results. You could even devise your own unique competition.

Cut the centre out of a 50-metre aiming mark - just inside the 'nine' ring - and get people to see if they can put twenty shots through the hole. If you think people might cheat (heaven forbid!) then mount a backing card far enough behind to separate the shots.

That was easy wasn't it?

Think what all this practice could do for your club. It will generate interest, team spirit, camaraderie, and give the novices something to have a go at without frightening them off. (You could always cut the hole as big as the eight ring or even the seven).

One thing that must be stressed is safety. If you're going to have all sorts of different things going on, please make sure your range officer stays awake at all times. People leaping about all over the firing point can sometimes forget the command "check your weapons are clear".