

## CHAPTER 22

### IMPROVE YOUR SCORE

This section is not for those shooters of a nervous disposition, or anybody who is easily offended; now is the time to be rude about your shooting - *it isn't good enough!*

Hands up all those people who have just agreed! If you know your shooting isn't good enough, why aren't you doing something about it?

If you're a beginner with less than one year's experience, you have every excuse and hopefully this book will have helped you along the tortuous path in some small way.

Shooters with over four years' experience will have cracked the technique and should now be refining the finer points of beating their 'A Class' colleagues.

There's a great deal of difference between the four years of somebody who shoots two or three times a week, and the person who only shoots once a week; in fact, in the latter case the rise to the top could be delayed by several years.

Make no mistake - your rise to the top of the tree is entirely down to you; nobody else is going to drag you up the ladder - you're going to have to do it all by yourself. But if you're dissatisfied with your shooting, read on.

This isn't to knock you down, but hopefully will stimulate some thoughtful discussion around the campfire and eventually lead to some change of tactic, which may ultimately turn you into our next Olympic gold medallist.

OK, so it may take more than a few choice words to get you onto that podium, but Olympic gold medals certainly aren't won by people who think they *can't* do it.

How is your shooting? Does it leave anything to be desired? Is there some particular area where you're perhaps not absolutely one hundred per cent perfect? Could that area be worked on? How do you determine where you're lacking in perfection?

For those of you who've just said "everywhere", here's some good news: while nobody is perfect, most of you have large areas of perfection that you didn't know you had.

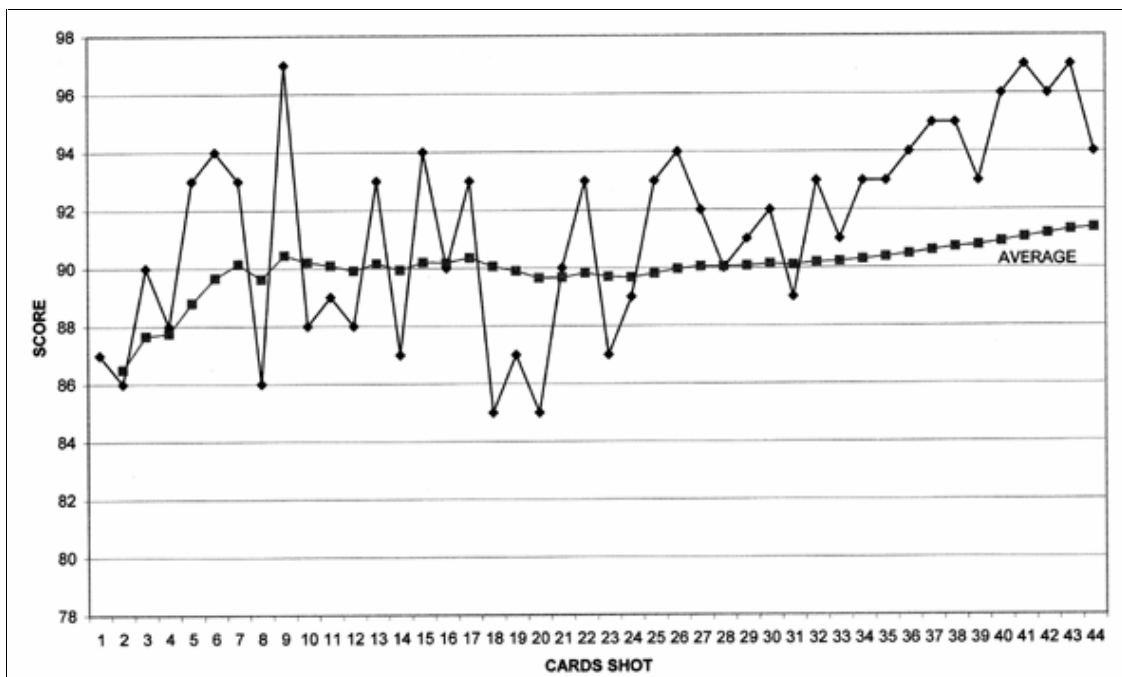
Just think about your shooting for a while; think how far you've come. You may think you're in the doldrums and aren't getting any better, but every time you shoot you learn something, it's just that you're not benefitting from it.

You're in a very difficult sport - and a minority one at that. But don't think that you're the poor relations in the shooting world; the reason why there aren't more people shooting smallbore target rifle is because it's too difficult.

Many people say that they used to shoot rifle but they got bored and moved onto something else, or they never started because it looked too boring. What they don't realise is that it's very difficult, and can only be done successfully by a very small band of people with patience, courage and determination.

As far as 'boring' is concerned, can you imagine anything less boring than the podium at the Olympic Games? It would be nice if you were there for the 100 metres (which would probably make you a lot of money), but medals are medals, and everybody who takes part in the sport knows what you went through to get to the top.

Firstly, let's pat you on the back for getting as far as you *have* got, as you've achieved a considerable amount. By just taking part in the sport you're showing a depth of character that many people lack; most people you pass in the street couldn't do what you're doing; it takes concentration, determination, courage, perseverance, precision and above all, a very good sense of humour.



Plotting your scores will show your upward progress

Now, down to the nitty gritty. What are we doing to do about *your* shooting?

The first thing to do is take stock of your strengths and weaknesses. You may have a particular talent for one part of the sport which you didn't know you had; you may also have a weakness you didn't know about, and most people tend to overplay their strengths and attempt to forget their weaknesses.

Let's just suppose for a minute that you earn your living as an engineer; that may be something you have a natural talent for, or that you enjoy doing; the chances are that you'll apply your engineering principles to your shooting, albeit unconsciously.

That can be bad news for you: shooting isn't about engineering - too much emphasis in that direction can lead you up the wrong path. Obviously everything has to work correctly from a mechanical point of view, but there's more to shooting than pure engineering.

Some brilliant shooters don't even know how their gun works; apart from knowing how to cope with basic mechanical failures during a match, they beat the competition on their shooting technique and experience, not by shimming the bolt to reduce the headspace by half a thou. to suit one particular batch of ammunition. (After all, you wouldn't expect a *Formula One* racing driver to turn up a new crankshaft on a lathe, would you?). So it is possible to engineer yourself *out* of the bull.

Sit down one evening and analyse your character to see whether it influences the degree of success you achieve with your shooting. We're not talking about one of those annoying newspaper questionnaires supposedly designed to determine whether you're God's gift to women/men, but a quite serious study of your own strengths and weaknesses.

Think about how your job might be able to help you in your shooting. Pretend you work in an industry that has those so-called efficiency experts who used to be called 'time and motion' men.

You may dismiss what they have to say about your job because *you* know how it should be done. But supposing they said something which could help your shooting. After all they're only interested in getting the maximum efficiency out of you and that's exactly what you'd like to do with your shooting.

However, if you're now thinking about signing up for a course in high-powered management training in the hope that it will improve your shooting, forget it; all it takes is commonsense and a little bit of intelligence.

The self-analysis that this type of course encourages isn't a bad thing, and you'd probably be told to start off by taking a blank sheet of paper and drawing a vertical line down the middle. Then you'd be asked to list all your strengths on one side and all your weaknesses on the other.

Of course, this is a fairly useless task in a general context - but supposing you did it in direct relationship to your shooting. What parts of your character would be advantageous to your shooting?

Are you fastidious?

Not many people would openly admit to that because they think makes them unpopular with other people and, carried to extremes it undoubtedly is, but it may well be an advantage to a shooter.

If you're forgetful, you could put that down as a weakness; there's obviously no immediate cure for a failing memory but, recognising that your memory is not what it should be, is the first step towards improving the situation, and the answer might be something as simple as a notebook and pencil.

Be honest with yourself - there's no point in ignoring the fact that you're inclined to be impatient because, while you're shooting, you'll occasionally let a shot go without waiting that little bit longer for the wind to come round and, of course, you get an 'eight'.

Your lifestyle will have a great influence on your shooting, but it would be extremely difficult to make any dramatic changes there.

If, for example, you're rushing all over the country (or the world) because of your job, then put that down as a weakness to be dealt with (for example, by shooting all your match cards during the less busy periods).

At the other end of the scale, a routine 9-to-5 job could also be a weakness because you get out of the habit of concentrating, so another interest which requires some brain exercise could help you to overcome that disadvantage (chess, computer games, a tactical sport, for example).

Supposing you're impatient - well patience can be learned; if you're careless you can practise taking extra care; if you rush around a lot, try slowing down for a while; if you have difficulty concentrating, then work on it - it will come with practice.

Don't worry if you've finished your list and found that you have a lot on the weaknesses side; with a little bit of effort you should be able to work on those weaknesses and turn them into strengths.

Here are a few other random examples, which illustrate the sort of thing which might influence your shooting:

### **Weaknesses**

Difficulty concentrating  
Demanding job, or self-employed  
Unfit; high pulse rate  
Indecisive  
Forgetful  
Impatient

### **Strengths**

Experience - shooting for a long time  
Good equipment  
Supportive wife/husband  
General good health  
Don't smoke  
Fastidious

It's fairly obvious what can be improved upon with a bit of effort. That doesn't mean that you should change your job but, by improving your general level of fitness (particularly if your resting pulse rate is more than 70 b.p.m.), you'll find it easier to cope with the stresses of a difficult job.

Previous chapters have already covered certain aspects of concentration and mind control, so you've only got to work on the indecisiveness. It's no use admitting that you've got a fault unless you're going to do something about it, so if you find that you're taking too long over your shooting because you keep hesitating about whether to let a shot go, enter some individual competitions and set yourself a specific time limit.

For example, do a 20-shot competition card in 10 minutes; some of your shots may feel a bit rushed, and you may lose some shots to the wind, but you will learn something each time you shoot and after a few goes, when you don't lose as many shots as you thought you would, you'll gain the confidence to make the right decisions and shoot more quickly when you need to.

So, sort out what your weaknesses are and work on them.

Most smallbore target rifle shooters in this country probably started off shooting the same way: they turned up at a rifle club as a complete beginner, some kind soul got them kitted out with a rifle, sling and whatever other equipment was available, took them into the range, showed them how to lay and what to look through, and then left them to it.

That system has actually produced some quite good shooters so, in the absence of any other way of getting started, it works after a fashion.

Most clubs have a band of experienced shooters available who are only too pleased to help, to pass on tips, and generally to get the *tyro* to the point of being a competent club shooter. The problem occurs when the beginner has the basics, has been shooting for a year or so, has reached a mid-90 average indoors, and now wants to go to the Olympics, or the Commonwealth Games, or wants to shoot for his/her country or county.

What do they do now?

The next steps are the most difficult, because the higher your average gets, the smaller the improvement you can make. If, for example, you shoot an average of 95, that could be made up of any score from 90 to 100, so if one card is a 90 you need to score that magic 'ton' to return to your 95 average.

However, as your average approaches that perfect score, you have less opportunity to make up for your bad cards, so if your average goes up to 98 and you then shoot a 95, you *can't* shoot a 101 to make up for it, so you need a 'ton' *and* a 99 to get back on course.

So where is all this leading?

Basically, if you want a 98 average you can't afford 'eights'; after all, if your rifle and ammunition were left to their own devices there wouldn't be any 'eights', so the answer must lie with you. What *you* have to do is recognise when things are going wrong and put them right before you have a disaster.

Supposing you have a 95 average and you've just started your card with a couple of bulls and a couple of 'nines' - so far, an average shoot; but then your fifth shot is an eight - that's four points dropped with five shots to go. If you were to continue with your average performance so far, you'd be about to drop a further two or three points.

*That* is the time to lift your shooting up a notch and shoot above your average; you *can* do it because you've done it before, and this time you only have to do it for the remaining five shots.

Shoot each shot as though your life depended on it; put the maximum effort into your concentration and put everything you've got into those last five shots. When they're all bulls and you walk off the range with a 96 instead of what could potentially have been a 93 or 94, you're going to feel pretty pleased with yourself.

If you were lucky enough to recognise why you got that 'eight' - fine, you won't do it again (will you?), or at least you'll have to find some other excuse next time. But don't just assume that, because you think you can stop any other 'eights' appearing on that card, that's the end of the story - you now have to stop producing a nine every couple of shots.

Some people will undoubtedly overwork those last five shots and perhaps drop points through trying too hard, but don't worry about that - this isn't an instant cure - nothing in rifle shooting works that fast. Just keep trying it and gradually you'll feel more in control and you'll learn to find just the right amount of concentration necessary to gain you those last five bulls.

The really bright, intelligent shooters out there are reading this and already probably moving on to the next point, which is of course: if you can do it for the last five shots, you can do it for the first five as well.

It's not as simple as that; you had the stimulus of getting an unexpected eight to wake up your concentration and get it moving, so what are you going to use as a stimulus when you *start* the card?

The answer lies in your sighting card: use your sighter to 'sight in' your concentration as well. Don't just fling a few rounds at it and then expect your concentration to suddenly, as if by magic, appear out of nowhere and remain at peak level during your match card.

Concentration needs to be eased into place and it has to be complete. You can't just think "I must concentrate on what I'm doing" and expect it to stay in your mind; it's not as easy as that.

Use your sighting shots to help concentrate your mind, work at those shots - every shot down the range will tell you something; listen to what those shots are telling you.

If you're zeroing in because you've been shooting at a different distance, then you have a lot of work to do, so you're going to be very busy for the first five minutes of your detail.

Don't just wind on a handful of clicks to see where the shot goes and then wind on some more. Calculate in advance how many clicks you think you need; were you right? Has your group moved as far as you thought? If not, why not?

Have you got the combination of windage and elevation right? (Rarely will you only need one and not the other). Have you settled down in the correct position? Does everything feel comfortable and in place? Is the sight picture right?

Are all your shots dropping nicely into the centre of the bull or is there a bias in one direction or another which you should be taking up with another click on the sights?

If your brain has to ask the questions *and* provide the answers, that's going to keep it fairly busy, but at least you'll have got its concentration capabilities working.

Here's a tip for those of you shooting indoors (it also applies to outdoor shooting, although not to such an extent): when you get down into position, be sure that you're getting into the right position for the match card, *not* the sighter. Line up your ideal shooting position with the card, rather than off to one side where the sighter is.

Lots of people will tell you to move your body between shots, which is fine if you can calculate the thousandths of an inch necessary, but most people will be incapable of making such minute movements with a large body. It's better to line yourself up on the centre of your match card and make the final small adjustments with your reloading elbow.

Don't get nicely centred on the sighter and then wonder why you're dropping shots when you get to the other side of your match card.

If you're already zeroed in at the range you're shooting, you won't need so many sighting-in shots, and this is the time when it would be very easy to get blasé.

You still need to work at your sighting shots: they can tell you if you've got down into the right position. If your group isn't in the same place as it was before, why isn't it? Perhaps it would be better to get up and get down again, rather than starting to adjust your sights, in case you've simply got down in the wrong position.

Of course, you may have sighted in incorrectly on the first card and you're now in the *right* position, but that's all the fun of shooting, and you really should get it right the first time!

It's very important to be prepared mentally if, for example, you're half way through the winter season and you suddenly have to make some major adjustment to your sights ('major' means more than the odd click or two); it could be that you've inadvertently altered your position and are now zeroing in on a false position. The time spent on your sighter is the time to think about what you're doing.

By keeping your brain alert and concentrating on the task in hand you can be prepared for changes which shouldn't have occurred.

The other advantage to having a sighter card is to get you into a rhythm. There's no need to shoot to a rhythm to the exclusion of all else, but by concentrating on each shot on the sighter you're rehearsing the way in which you'll shoot your match card.

During this time you're also settling into position, so put about five shots on the sighter before you start on the match card, even if you're totally convinced that you're accurately zeroed in.

Some people just want to get on with it, rather than 'wasting' time on the sighter and if you're a top shot and are *that* confident of your ability, by all means go ahead. Just remember that the single shot which took out the dot on your sighter, *may* be the one wild shot at the edge of your group!

*Always* think in terms of your whole group, not just of individual shots, even on a 25-yard card. When you're sighting in, work at moving your group, not single shots; it takes at least three shots to tell you where - and how big - your group is.

Thinking about your group while you move around the card is vital; it's relatively easy outdoors because you get enough shots at an aiming mark to see your group forming, but it can be more difficult indoors because you're usually only firing one shot per diagram, so it's even more important to watch where your shots are going.

It's amazing how many points are lost, particularly amongst those club members with lower averages (although it's by no means confined to them) because their group is too high, too low or off to one side. Making an adjustment of a click or two during a card could easily save a disaster.

That doesn't mean that you shouldn't start chasing every shot with a sight adjustment - that could lead to an even greater disaster. I'm talking about reading your card and noting, while you're going from aiming mark to aiming mark, whether all your shots are ending up to the left or right of the dot, or high or low.

Most points are lost by groups being low then high, rather than left or right; perhaps it's because people are more conscious of their group slipping off to one side.

A top shooter with the right equipment should be capable of shooting a group no bigger than a quarter of the size of the bull, whatever the range. With that in mind, you should have plenty of room to make adjustments if your group starts to form too close to the nine ring.

For all those potential top shots out there, if you can get five shots between the dot and the nine ring without touching either, and between 3 o'clock and 6 o'clock (or any other quadrant), then you're starting to get somewhere!