

CHAPTER 6 CLOTHING

SHOOTING CLOTHING

What would a complete stranger to the sport think if he unexpectedly came across a smallbore target rifle shooter dressed in all their shooting clothing? To the uninitiated - and even to the newcomer to the sport - it must seem to consist of a bewildering array of accoutrements.

What he wouldn't realise is that all the equipment and clothing now in use has been developed and refined over the years.

In the early days of rifle shooting you were expected to shoot in your ordinary street clothes. Using properly designed clothing would probably been seen as being unsportsmanlike in this country, but as with most other sports, technology has reared its ugly head and taken over.

The benefits to be gained from proper-fitting clothing designed for shooting can't be ignored. The rules allow a certain amount of support to be gained from clothing, and shooters, quite rightly, wish to take advantage of this; if you don't you're at a disadvantage (which could cost you points).

However, don't dash down to your local gun shop and buy every item of shooting clothing you can find - each piece of equipment has to be bought with care, and with a certain amount of research.

GLOVES

Before choosing a glove it's important to understand *why* you might need one at all.

Supporting the rifle with the bare hand becomes uncomfortable after a short while because of the pressure from the handstop and the sling. You also transfer your pulse beat through bare flesh and a pulse beat will cause an unsteady aim even if you can't see that tremor.

We seem to get nine months of cold weather in this country and only three months of warm, so a glove which contributes to keeping your hand warm is an asset. You have no means of massaging that hand or doing any of the things you would normally do to warm it up when it gets cold, so you have to lay there with your hand motionless; therefore it gets very cold.

The skin of your hand is also loose and doesn't have a particularly sticky texture (or at least it shouldn't have) so your bare hand could move or shift slightly while you're shooting. A glove, on the other hand (pun!), will be

covered in a non-slippery surface and will stick to the rifle, reducing any possibility of movement.

Choosing a glove can be a traumatic experience simply because of the overwhelming choice of colours and designs, but your decision must be based on fit and comfort.

Gloves come in a number of styles, but the modern favourite is a well-padded five-finger one, with non-slip patches all round the outside. They range in price from about £20 to £50 (at 2004 prices), and the variation in cost is going to be down principally to the type of materials used and country of manufacture.



A pair of gloves

Of course, hands come in different shapes and sizes, but there aren't quite the extremes that you get with body shapes, so although gloves obviously have to fit well, they only usually come in small, medium, large and extra large sizes, so you can't get a glove made-to-measure.

If you're asked to provide a measurement for a glove (because you're buying one mail order for example), then that's usually taken by wrapping a tape measure around the widest part of the palm and quoting the total circumference. It would also be a good idea to discuss finger length at the same time if you're unable to try the glove on.

The most basic glove might be little more than a fingerless leather mitt just barely covering the palm of the hand, but even that is considerably more comfortable than the bare hand.

The fit of the glove is important, so time spent trying them on before you purchase is time well spent.

Make sure that none of your fingers reaches the end inside, even when pushing the glove down as hard as you can, otherwise when you're shooting there will be intense pressure on the end of your fingers, which can be really painful.

The glove should be of just such a size that you can hold your hand out absolutely flat without feeling that it's restricting that movement. However, you shouldn't be able to get hold of any spare material across the width of your palm.

It should be a bit of a struggle to get the glove on for the first time; that's because they're usually quite well padded and that padding will compress slightly during use. If the glove slips on easily when new, it will be too big after a while.

Most gloves will have an elasticated cuff which will also make it slightly difficult to pull on, but persevere - it will get easier.

You can't beat being comfortable while you're shooting and there's nothing in the rules which says you have to be uncomfortable, so you may as well treat yourself to the luxury of the most comfortable glove you can find. It will ease the pressure on your hand, keep your pulse beat away from the rifle, and keep your hand warm.

HATS

Shooting hats come in a wide variety of colours, but there isn't much variation in design. Nearly all of them consist of a cap with a long peak, and side flaps which drop down, all of which can be a tremendous help in blocking out unwanted light and distracting movement, particularly when shooting indoors.



A hat

Usually they come in one size (which is adjustable), with some form of fixing at the back. When trying hats on don't make the mistake that most people do when they first put one on: the hat should go on the *back* of the head, *not* pulled down low over the forehead.

When you're in the prone position you're usually looking out the top of your eyeball, because your head is bent forwards, therefore the peak needs to be up and out of the way. It also needs to be above the rearsight of your rifle and that also means it has to be high on your forehead.

Outdoors is another story; here it's more important to have general all-round unobstructed vision to enable you to see and read wind conditions. However, you have to decide whether you're likely to lose more points by wearing a hat and not being able to see all the wind flags, or whether *not* wearing a hat (and allowing the low Spring or Autumn sun to distort your sight picture) will have a worse effect. It's not easy, is it?

If you have to stand around in the sun before you shoot, do consider wearing a hat so as to avoid sunstroke-type problems.

In short, be prepared for all eventualities, remain flexible, and weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of each individual set of circumstances.

A sweatband is another useful piece of equipment at fairly small cost. It keeps any hair out of your eyes and away from the rearsight, it can hold a small eye blinder (ammo box lid!) if necessary and, course, it absorbs sweat and stops it running into your eyes in very hot weather.

It can also hold your Bisley competitor number and, last but not least, you can sew a lens-holder onto it if you need a corrective lens but can't get on with (or afford) shooting frames.

Don't choose too tight a headband, though, as it could give you a headache, and remember that you lose 10% of your body heat through the top of your head, so in very cold weather wear a woolly hat (or something similar) as well!

JACKETS

This is probably one of the biggest and most expensive purchases you will make (after the rifle), and a bit of research would be worthwhile, so as not to waste money on the wrong thing. It is also probably the most effective piece of equipment you will buy, after your own rifle.

The biggest and best source of information can be fellow club members: look and see what types of jackets they're wearing and ask them what they think of them. If you're in a small club without very much variety in shooting jackets,

have a look round the open shoots, or even better, go to the smallbore meeting at Bisley - you'll be amazed at the selection of styles available. Be warned, however, that jackets in particular are subject to fads and fashions and while they don't exactly feature on the catwalks of the Paris fashion houses, they do tend to appear in trends.



A typical rifle shooting jacket

Very often a club member will sport a new jacket, which immediately attracts the interest and envy of other members and, before you know where you are, there are several new patchwork quilts walking the ranges. There's nothing wrong with that at all - in fact the modern trend towards brightly-coloured jackets is certainly livening up the image of smallbore target rifle shooting, which has been a hide-in-the-corner-type sport for far too long. But how do you go about choosing the right jacket?

Many people start with secondhand cast-offs generously donated by other club members, so if you're a beginner looking for something to ease the pain in the elbows, *any* jacket with padding is going to make life more comfortable.

When you move on from that stage and are looking for a jacket to get you into X Class, then I'm afraid you're going to have to spend some money, but a good, proper-fitting jacket could last for many years, so look upon it as an investment. However, if you're committing yourself to spending a lot of money on a new jacket, you should consider having it made to measure. No two shooters are the same size (just look round the club and compare people's heights and girths!), so standard-sized jackets are very rarely going to fit exactly.

You're allowed to get support from a jacket, but you won't get that unless the jacket fits you properly; it's no good, for example, being able to move around inside it - if you can, then you stand no chance of maintaining a consistent stable position.

It's amazing how the body's tendency to grow can catch you unawares (particularly after Christmas), and it's not unusual to see some shooters contorting themselves to get into their jackets. At least if your jacket *is* too tight you know you won't be moving around inside it while you're shooting!

The *International Shooting Union* (U.I.T) rules also need to be considered. These dictate, amongst other things, that there must be a certain amount of overlap at the front of the jacket (currently 70mm, but this can change).

Therefore, if you're likely to be shooting under U.I.T. rules (which cover most international competitions, but very few club or national events) it's worthwhile keeping up to date with any changes relating to clothing or equipment to make sure that the jacket you buy complies with the rules.

Most continental jackets are automatically made to meet U.I.T. specifications (i.e. the manufacturers add on an allowance for the required overlap), whereas if you have a jacket made to measure by a British manufacturer, you can often choose U.I.T. or non-U.I.T., the main difference being that, with non-U.I.T. you get a bit more padding in the elbows, a pocket at the back, and a tighter jacket generally.

All club, county and national league shooting is conducted under the *National Smallbore Rifle Association's* rules, as are the Bisley and Scottish national meetings and most open shoots. Therefore, if you only shoot in this type of competition, there's no need to worry whether your jacket complies with U.I.T. rules.

There are a number of extremely good well-made jackets readily available and most of them can be 'made-to-measure' at no extra cost. If you suffer from the 'non-average size' syndrome then you'll have to get a made-to-measure jacket. There's no point in buying a jacket that doesn't fit properly - you're just wasting money.

As a stop-gap until you can afford a top jacket, you may have to make do with something that isn't ideal, or if you're a teenager with a huge growth rate then off-the-peg is reasonable; just be aware that, unless the jacket fits well enough to support you, it won't be doing its job properly.

The basic material of the jacket will be the first decision to be made, and your budget will probably have some say in the matter here. A good basic British

double canvas jacket, made-to-measure including a sling retaining loop and non-slip elbow pads will probably be about one third of the cost of a leather one made on the Continent.

The first question that springs to mind is “why is there such a price difference?” quickly followed by “which one is best?”.

The price variance is mostly down to cost of materials, which is borne out by the fact that one British manufacturer of a double canvas jacket also produces a leather one (with canvas lining) in the same design for nearly twice the price. With Continental-made jackets, the exchange rate is also a factor.

As to which one is the best, that’s almost impossible to answer, apart from in general terms like “you get what you pay for” and “the better the jacket fits you the more improvement there will be in your shooting”.

To do your shooting any good at all, the jacket you choose must have a non-stretch heavy canvas lining to give you support in the shooting position, but what you have on the outside *is* a matter of personal preference (and finances).

Obviously, the weight of leather in the jacket will be a guide to its strength, rigidity and endurance, so a (cheaper) sheepskin leather on the outside will not last as long or wear as well as a good cowhide. However it’s the canvas lining which is doing most of the work, so although a cheaper leather jacket may begin to look somewhat worn after a while, it won’t necessarily cause you any problems.

Because canvas is cheaper than leather, if this is put on the outside of the jacket then you can save money without sacrificing toughness and support - hence the double canvas jacket.

There are a number of other factors which require special attention, particularly in places like the elbows (inside and outside), the position of the sling loop, and a shoulder pad to take the rifle butt.

The part of the sleeve which falls within the crook of the arm, should be of a much thinner and more pliable material than the jacket itself, so that the arms can be bent comfortably. Different manufacturers use different materials and it doesn’t really matter what the material is, so long as it doesn’t prevent the arms from being bent comfortably.

Elbow pads should obviously be non-slip and can be padded; once again the U.I.T. have a thickness rule here, but if you only shoot under NSRA rules, then don’t worry too much, and, as mentioned earlier, you’re unlikely to buy something which doesn’t conform with the rules unless you specifically ask for

it (as with some of the British-made jackets).



Soft material inside elbow and rubber outside

Another major decision to make concerns the front fastening, i.e. whether to have a zip or buttons. Buttons are the favourite, particularly the type which screw together through the jacket. All that is required is for a hole to be punched in the right place (which most people can manage) and it beats all that sewing if the button comes off; it also helps enormously if you do happen to put on (or lose) weight.

Some manufacturers actually send little screw-in buttons loose with the jacket so you can fix them yourself. However, if you have one of these jackets, fixing the buttons is not something to rush into, particularly if you shoot 3-positional, as a button which may be right for the prone position could be completely wrong for kneeling, etc. Also, you may need to take the U.I.T. 'overlap' rule into account.

The best way of tackling this is to enlist the assistance of a club member who can mark the jacket while you're in the shooting position; it should pull together fairly high at the top, because if it's loose it can affect how the rifle butt fits in the shoulder.

A jacket, which is cut too low at the front, is likely to gape when in the prone position, so much so that the rifle actually ends up in your shoulder *inside* the jacket. Loose material (particularly in the prone position) is also bad news, as it can move around, taking your rifle butt with it.

Don't dismiss a zipped jacket as being unsuitable - it's just that buttons can be moved more easily. However, if you do end up with a zipped jacket, look for one that opens at the bottom as well as the top; this is mainly for the benefit of the 3-P shooters in the kneeling position, but it does also help prone shooters get up and down.

You should choose a jacket as long as is permissible under U.I.T. rules (currently to the ball of your clenched fist) because that helps prevent it from riding up when you're shooting prone - the more of the jacket you lay on, the more chance there is of it staying still.

It also means that you're less likely to shuffle down inside it, which you would do if you positioned your elbows correctly and then moved backwards on the mat like a tortoise retreating into its shell. This would create a great deal of loose material around the back of the neck and in the shoulder - although this is inevitable to a certain extent, you should avoid it as much as possible.

This also brings up another very important design feature, in that the jacket should be cut very low around the back of the neck. If it's too high then it may dig into the back of your neck (even if you haven't shuffled down inside it), interfering with your blood circulation and, consequently, your vision. All jackets should have a soft flexible piece at the back to stop them being a pain in the neck.

Some jackets have straps which can be tightened to take up the loose material in the shoulder when in the prone position; this is a particularly good idea for 3-P shooters (whose jackets are cut slightly differently) because there's an enormous difference between the standing and prone shoulder positions.



The straps tighten up loose material

Having invested in a new made-to-measure jacket, don't worry too much if it feels very tight when you first try it on. Just lift your arms above your head (which is where they are effectively when you're shooting prone) and you'll probably find that it loosens off considerably across the chest.

It may feel tight elsewhere, but after a while the jacket will take on your form and, while it doesn't exactly stretch, it does at least fit better after it's been worn a few times. If you're collecting your jacket from a shop then see if you

can lay on the floor with a rifle and check whether the elbow pads are in the right place.

Most jacket manufacturers have self measurement forms so if you're going to 'do it yourself', then it's important to read the instructions carefully and get at least one other person to check your measurements

A better bet would be to go to the shop supplying your jacket as they will probably be experienced in measuring lots of different people, and will know where mistakes could occur.

For example, it's not unusual for your job, or a different sport, to affect the shape of your jacket (right-handed bricklayers can have very muscular left arms; people who constantly work at a desk can be very round shouldered; rowers or weight lifters can have very muscular arms and shoulders). Someone with experience could take this into account when measuring you, and insert additional measurements if necessary.

If your local gun shop is not able to measure you, then do ring round - it might mean a journey but it will be worth the effort in the long run to get the right thing. As a matter of interest, some measurement forms give you profile sketches of different body shapes (some of which are not very flattering) and you choose the one closest to your own (not the one you would like!), in addition to providing multitude of measurements.

Shooting jackets can be altered if you happen to change shape, so don't despair if you have an ill-fitting garment. However, you might find that your local tailor doesn't have heavy enough machinery to cope with the heavyweight materials involved, so you may have to send it back to the manufacturer.

Finally, treat your jacket with care, it's an expensive item and should last you a long time; a little leather food every so often will help leather jacket, and an occasional clean of a canvas one will stop it looking too scruffy.

SWEATSHIRTS

When getting measured for a jacket you should wear your normal shooting clothing, as changing what you wear under your jacket will alter its fit; this also means, therefore, that you should stick to the same thing in winter and summer.

This, then, raises the question of what to wear and whether to invest in a proper shooting jumper.

Firstly, it's essential to wear something thicker than a normal shirt: a woolly pullover or sweatshirt is ideal, but if you do choose wool, make sure it's a fairly plain knit with no fancy ribs, particularly on the sleeves, as this could be very painful on the elbows.

Heavy canvas-lined jackets can develop creases on the inside which could bear on an important pulse, so if you wear something thick between you and the canvas, not only does it reduce the risk of a heavy pulse, but it also fills out the voids created inside the jacket and makes it fit better.

On the whole, sweatshirt material is probably the most suitable and, of course, a normal casual sweatshirt will be quite acceptable, providing it fits reasonably snugly and doesn't have too much loose material to bunch up inside your jacket, because this could become uncomfortable and cause a pulse.

There are also several different types of jumpers on the market, which are specifically designed for shooters.

The most popular type is a knitted cardigan with a full-length zip that opens at the top or bottom and with double-thickness elbows. The knitting is arranged in a tight ribbed pattern with no seams over the shoulders, and it's designed to open and close around the shooter's curves and bulges, presenting a perfectly smooth appearance without any creases.

This is by far the best, but there are others, so before making a decision you should try to have a look at them all in action and get the opinion of other wearers.

TROUSERS

The need for correct-fitting trousers is very important to the 3-P or air rifle shooter; as with the jackets, you are allowed a certain amount of support from trousers, so having the right piece of clothing for the job is a boon.

Many of the comments made previously regarding jackets also apply to trousers; be especially careful when buying them for 3-P and make sure that they fit correctly, particularly in the kneeling position (try them on in the shop when you collect them) as an ill-fitting pair of trousers can be agony.

Once again, there are U.I.T rules relating to number of zips, thickness and waistband, etc., but as most of the trousers available are made by continental manufacturers who stick strictly to U.I.T. rules, you shouldn't run into any problems here.

Most trousers can be made in the same colours as your jacket, so if you really want to brighten up your firing point you can always invest a colour co-ordinated set.

Although it's the standing and kneeling shooters who benefit from correct-fitting made-to-measure trousers, prone shooters shouldn't ignore this part of their clothing completely. I don't mean by this that you should invest in anything particularly specialist, only that it's important to be comfortable while you're shooting, so avoid anything which is too tight. (Jogging trousers are ideal because they're loose and stretchy and have elasticated waistbands, and can be heavy and warm for the winter or light and cool for the summer).

BOOTS

Boots are an enormous asset to both air rifle and 3 positional shooters - for standing and kneeling they should be considered as essential equipment. With their almost solid flat soles they are of great assistance in the standing and kneeling positions, but they are *not intended for walking in* as this bends the soles on which you rely to act as a solid platform.

You should therefore store them flat when not in use (stiffening plates are available for clamping them to), only putting them on a few minutes before you start shooting, and taking them off if you have to walk to change your cards. You should be supplied with a chair for any 3-P or air rifle competitions, so make use of it!

Most of the boots available in this country are made by continental manufacturers, so you should have no problems with them complying with the U.I.T. rules. What make or style you choose is very much a matter of personal preference; so long as they are comfortable, have an opening at the back (if you're shooting kneeling), and are easy to put on and take off, you can let your finances be your guide.

Footwear is not so important to prone shooters, and people have been seen shooting in everything from welly boots to open-toed sandals. The over-riding criterion is comfort, which involves being dry and warm and not getting cramp, so choose something which fits you well, which gives you some support, and which you don't mind getting scuffed - prone shooting can be quite hard on shoes, as the toes tend to come into contact with the ground a lot.

It would be impossible to recommend any particular type of footwear for prone shooting, but more and more people are wearing trainers, which are very comfortable while being flexible enough to cope with some of the contortions your feet get into when shooting. If you attend open shoots regularly, a pair of waterproof shoes or boots should certainly be taken along, as a sudden shower can turn an open shoot from a pleasant experience into a nightmare of cold, wet and possibly muddy feet.