

THE SNIPER MATCH CONUNDRUM

Here is the age-old riddle of any competitive shooter i.e. how do I get my group small and then get it in the middle. Marcus O'Dean tells.

I have been competing in my service rifle association's sniper matches for some years now and having a fair degree of success, which I put down to good theoretical knowledge applied to the various practical aspects of shooting competition with scope-sighted rifles. There are many in my club who have a great deal of difficulty achieving any success in this vastly different aspect of military shooting and my ad hoc coaching on site was only going so far to assist my fellow riflemen. I am assuming that what I see in my club may be fairly representative of what's happening elsewhere in Australia, hence this article, where I will attempt to crystallize the lessons I have learnt in eleven years on the line.

Match Format. The typical sniper match in the MRCA is shot at one range ie 200, 300, 400 or occasionally 500 metres using four sighting shots followed by two 10-shot snap matches on targets which typically have a 1 MoA five-ring with 4 points awarded for hits anywhere else on the target which ranges from an A4 manilla envelope (200m) to a standing man figure 11 (500m). The targets are hand held from below the mantlet and exposed for four seconds over a couple of square metres with about ten seconds off time. Other clubs and associations do things differently, I know, but the lessons learnt at Malabar are applicable anywhere. It is necessary, therefore, for the shooter to not waste any time lining up for each shot and absolute precision in release under such circumstances is almost impossible.

EQUIPMENT

* **The firearm you use** will depend mostly on what's in your cupboard with a scope on it would generally be classified according to its age, sophistication and potential accuracy. So you may have original Enfield No4T .303 sniper rifles shooting alongside the latest Savage or Remington Target/Tactical model in 6mm BR or 6.5-284 but expecting the Enfield to be competitive with the Tactical rifle is unrealistic. Nevertheless, under competition conditions, a cool head with a No4T occasionally trumps quite a few of his less prepared tactical brethren. Many just turn up with their general purpose hunting rig, typically something like a Ruger Model 77 sporter with a 3-9X Leupold scope and attempt to defy the odds - and that's half the fun. Whatever rifle you use, ensure that it will be serviceable enough to stand up to the rigours of rapid fire with safety.

* **Optics.** Many sniper matches permit the shooter to have a spotter and, if that is the case, a good spotting scope is necessary ie something that can reliably see bullet holes appear on a target at 300 metres - a big ask, but the feedback from a spotter so equipped during the conduct of the snap match will mean being able to shift point of aim to get back in the centre. So, a Kowa or Swarovski spotter is a meaningful indulgence in this case. I'm saving up. Similarly, the riflescope, especially if you are not using a spotter, needs to be as crystal clear as possible, so you can see a group forming. This is only possible of course, with modern optics, as a 3X Number 32 scope on a No4T will just have no hope of seeing bullet holes at any great distance. The turret adjustments on your riflescope should be as reliable and repeatable as possible - but more on that later.

* **Shooting Mat.** Anything that will keep the ants, sharp rocks or divets from distracting you will do and it only needs to come up to the point where your chest lifts off the ground in the prone supported position; the ground gives great purchase to elbows and other supports.

* **Cheek pad and slip-on recoil pad.** You need to get a reasonable cheek weld and with service rifles with scopes mounted, you need an improvised cheek pad to get you there. You can whip one up in 5 minutes with gaffer tape and foam or get a purpose-made leather one if you like. The slip-on recoil pad will add a valuable inch to your length of pull so you avoid a "Weatherby Eyebrow" but it also gives some relief from the repeated recoil of a .30 calibre service rifle. I use a "Limbsaver" and it is brilliant.

* **Front Rest.** The front rest can be a bone of contention. Many swear by commonly available bipods but I have found that you need an absolutely stable surface to rest them on or you will sink lower or bounce out of your carefully attained position during the shoot. I am absolutely adamant that the best form of rest available is a rock-solid sandbag. It can support a long part of the forend, thereby not isolating support to a part of the rifle that could destabilise at the shot (bipods, if not fitted at exactly the right place or "node" will do exactly that). A good second option is a cast iron, purpose-made front benchrest stand with a good, hard-packed small sandbag, that can mould to the forend, on top.

* **Ammunition.** When the bull subtends around 1 MoA, you cannot afford to use substandard ammunition, so put away your stock of 1967 headstamped POF .303 and start handloading or use good factory ammo like Sellier and Bellot. In the case of .308 or .223, the Winchester Palma Match offerings are very good, provided your barrel has the right twist. In .303, fill your cases to the base of the neck with AR 2209 and seat a Sierra 174gn Match King on top at factory length and you'll have a good start. With other chamberings you need to do your homework to see what projectile/charge/case/primer and seating depth combination provides sniper match gold.

Building Good Technique. Once you have your equipment squared away, you need to develop your skills so that your confidence builds and you become a competent shooter with a scoped rifle. When a service shooter moves from shooting prone unsupported with a sling to the sniper match standard of prone supported, he often assumes that his groups will automatically tighten enough to score well. This means he may not concentrate on basics like attaining a solid Natural Point of Aim (NPA), consistent points of contact on the rifle from shot to shot, good breathing, hold, release and follow through. If any of these essentials is neglected in a sniper match, the results are, if anything, more pronounced than when shooting unsupported, purely because the bullseye is so comparatively small.

1. To start, lay out the groundsheet at roughly twenty degrees to the line of the target and place your front rifle rest just past the front centre of the mat.
2. Then form a groove in your front bag that lines up with the target, so you can lay the rifle in it already oriented properly. The front support should be as low as you can comfortably make it.
3. Lay your ammunition and other essentials to trigger hand side of the rest at the extremity of the mat.
4. Plant your spotting scope, if you are using one, on the other side so there is minimal head movement required to see your target. If using a spotter to assist, he needs to be where you can hear each other.
5. Lay down behind your rifle and assume the prone supported position and fine tune it, with particular attention to your body's orientation to rifle and target. Establish your NPA by lining up on the target, closing your eyes for 5 seconds and re-checking where the crosshairs point. Make adjustments to body, rest and rifle position.
6. The rear hand is the one that controls the rifle position from under the butt during the shoot - by simply squeezing your closed fist under the butt, you can control elevation well and windage to a fair degree.
7. Establish which target is yours and, if using a high magnification scope which does not permit you to see target numbers above, find distinguishable reference objects in the foreground that you can easily identify to help you re-acquire your target between shots.
8. Then breathe deeply and relax.

Preliminary Preparation. Here is some advice that will get you to the stage that you are not wasting ammunition when you front up to a sniper match.

- *Choose your ground* 1. Look for a classification of rifle that may be under-represented so that, at least in the early stages, you have a chance of getting into the confidence building that trophies provide - then move into more competitive classifications.

- *Choose your ground 2.* Look for a firm, level spot without divets, ants' nests or hard rocks etc. One that looks like it was made for you and your rifle on that day is the one you want to choose.
- *Zero before the match.* Don't, whatever you do, roll up to a sniper match without a rifle zeroed for the range you are shooting that day. Many scopes, particularly "affordable" ones have inconsistent adjustments and need to be as close to zero as possible to perform.
- *Use sighters wisely.* Do not adjust your scope after the second sighter (assuming you have four). Use all your sighters, watching where the group trends with the later shots.
- *Mentally Prepare Prior.* Provided you have a good zero and are confident in your equipment, start to visualise how your shoot will go in your own mind. Visualise success and it is more likely to happen. If you are a worry-wart who keeps making excuses for yourself, you are destined to bomb out.
- *When the match starts.* Unless your last two sighters were dead centre, aim off to let the shots hit centre. As soon as you hit that adjustment turret, you venture into the unknown.

Notes on the use of telescopic sights

Many shooters discover, when they get back to 500 or even shorter ranges, that their 3-9x40 scope has run out of elevation adjustment. When selecting a scope, look for one with lots of elevation adjustment and consider using 20MoA tapered mounting bases on your rifle. A cheaper option is to carefully shim under your back mounting base with a couple of thicknesses of Coke can, which will raise your MPI by some 8 to 12 MoA, sometimes enough to get by with. A caution here though - shimming can cause your scope tube to be bent and stress the internal workings, so it is better done on a one-piece base if possible. This will keep your scope more closely to the centre of its adjustment range and, therefore more reliable and repeatable.

When you adjust the point of impact with your rifle/scope combination, you must be aware that it is quite usual for your first two or three rounds not to catch up with the adjustment you have made, due to there being backlash in the erector setups inside the scope. The recoil gradually settles it down and then you get your true adjustment on paper. To mitigate against this somewhat, you must go past your intended adjustment and come back to defeat the inherent backlash. For example, you wish to move your 1/4 MoA adjustments so your point of impact shifts 4 inches right at 200 metres. This will equate to about 1 3/4 MoA or 7 clicks. Instead of moving 7 clicks right, go 10 instead and then wind back 3; this will probably save you some ammunition.

Once you think you are hitting the centre, shoot a three-shot group and watch the successive shots drift in one direction - this is the erector setup settling. Take the MPI of the last two shots and adjust on that to get you back to centre and shoot another three-shot-group. By now you should be close to a correct zero and ready to take your sighting shots at the start of the match. Naturally, if you have a specific target / tactical system for such matches, you will have a high-end scope with target turrets with very repeatable adjustments and minimal backlash - Nightforce comes to mind - but even when so equipped, it pays to use the above guidelines and you will absolutely minimise your errors and maximise your effectiveness.

All that remains is for you to get out there and start having some fun with that scoped rifle in the safe.

CAPTIONS

1 & 3. Using good ammo and shooting a rifle that is performing at its optimum, even a light sporter like this Sauer 202 in .30-06, will get you in the medals in sniper competition shoots.

2. The result of careful load development. This one-inch three shot group from the Sauer .30-06 was shot at 200 metres and is now the basis for sniper competition. Sierra 190gn Match King, Federal case well-prepared, PMC primer and 52gn of AR 2209, COL 3.305" as per Sierra Manual.

4 & 5. A work in progress - an M17 in .30-06 with an ancient Jap Nikko Stirling 4x scope which has friction adjustments. This rifle will be able to shoot against other adapted military rifles in a modified classic classification.

7 & 7a. The author's current "classic modified" rifle for sniper shoots. A pristine No4 Savage-made Lee Enfield with old 4x Pecar reticle moving scope. Mounts are no-drill S & K, which are rock-solid. This rifle has won its class twice in two outings and is up there with state of the art rifles in scores.

7b. Author's preferred front rest setup for sniper matches. An old Patt' 37 webbing haversack filled with smaller sandbags. It supports a good length of the forend and is very solid and secure. Much preferred to a bipod when shooting on soft sandy soil or hard surfaces.

8. Second preference for front rest setup is a purpose-made bench setup. Not as heavy as a sandbag but legs can sink into soft soil, necessitating a mid-shoot change in position that will be damaging to keeping group centered.

9. Aids to the sniper match competitor: a "Limbsaver" pull-on recoil pad will help with continued recoil and add some eye relief to avoid cuts or bruising and the home-made strap on cheekpiece enables the shooter to have an adequate cheek weld on a low-combed service rifle intended for iron sights.

10. The result of all the preparation and applied knowledge: this is from a double ten-shot snap shoot at 200 metres in competition with the No4 .303 and good handloads with Sierra 174gn Match Kings. Total group size $4 \frac{5}{8}$ inches for twenty shots centered pretty well on the 3-inch bull - score 91/100. Won its class and came second overall to a Unique Alpine .308 with Nightforce scope - it scored 93 by the way.