

Positions: Stance and Hold

By Anthony Finn

In the first article I spoke about equipment, some different options available to shooters and the importance of familiarisation and practice with your gear (whatever it is). This time I will deal with the issues of position, stance, and your "hold". These are all much bigger issues than can be fully dealt with in an article like this but I will try to cover some main points as I see them.

I would like to again make it clear that I do not profess to know it all, but I do wish to pass on some of the experience passed to me by the many excellent shooters I have competed with, and against, around the world. Some of the techniques will suit you and some won't. This is how it should be, otherwise there would only be one "official" way to shoot, which we know is definitely not the case.

POSITIONS:



Photo 1: ARM-OUT

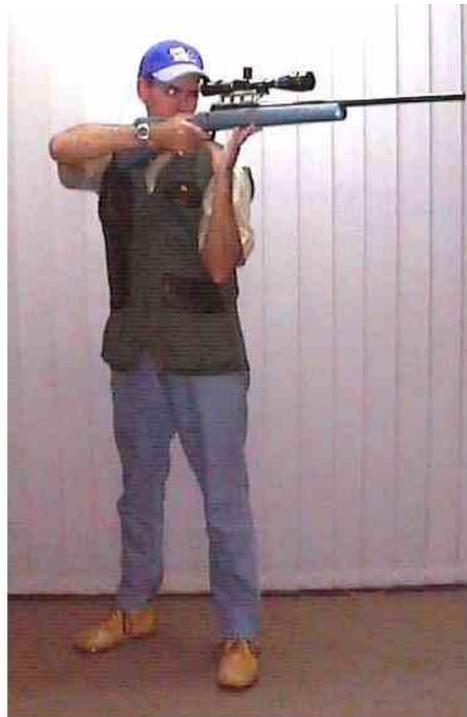


Photo 2: ARM-BACK

There are two popularly accepted positions for offhand shooting. "Arm-out" which is your stereotypical rifleman hold with front hand well forward on the stock, and "Armback"

which is historically more of a target shooting style of hold where the front hand is back closer to the body underneath the "Action" area of the rifle. The big question is, which is better? For most people I would suggest the arm-back position for deliberate range style shooting because it is easier. There is nothing wrong with shooting arm-out if you are willing to work at it and develop the technique and discipline to shoot it well.

For instance, Brett R of Tumut in NSW won the Silhouette Centrefire Hunting Rifle World Championship in 2000 using the arm-out style. Take Running Target Shooters as another example, they must shoot arm-out and can and do shoot very well in this style. The position does require higher personal discipline though, because you will need to shoot quickly and ideally take the shot on the first good sight picture. Easy you say? Not so. This requires a lot of courage and many hours of (correct technique) training until it becomes automatic. Give it a try with your current position, I'll bet you still try to "improve" the sight picture after the first one looks good.

The reason you need to shoot fast is because this position relies on the muscles to hold the rifle (instead of bones) and you will need to get the shot off before the jittering and twitching in your front arm sets in. It doesn't really matter how strong you are, you will still need to shoot quickly and conserve your energy/strength for the rest of the match.

Arm-out Position;

Pros:

Able to shoot accurately and consistently

Feels natural

Easy to learn

Can be more stable in extreme wind condition (with practice)

Cons:

Must shoot fast to avoid muscle fatigue on shots

Requires extensive training and commitment to take first good sight picture every time

Requires necessary strength to hold rifle for repeated shots

Shooting arm-back is my personally preferred method and is the position 98% of Silhouette shooters (here and overseas) use. It is a bone-supported position which means that you can hold it all day with minimal fatigue. Why is that important? Don't forget that not all shoots are just 40 shots. Some competitions, where you shoot air rifle, two classes of Rimfire and two classes of Centrefire, may be contested over several days; there is often a mixture of 40 and 80 shot matches. And don't forget the shoot-offs just when you thought it was safe to relax! If your position allows your skeleton (bones) instead of your muscles to take most of the weight of your rifle, you are less likely to be physically exhausted after the first couple of events.

Arm-back Position;

Pros:

Less demanding on your muscles especially with heavy rifles

Allows more time to make the shot (especially important in windy conditions)

Inherently more stable as rifle sits on a more solid (bone supported) platform

Cons:

Feels awkward at first

Some physical builds may have difficulty with it due to forearm length, distance to hipbone, etc.)

Whilst I have an obvious personal preference for the arm-back position, I would suggest if you chose to shoot this way too that you practice the arm-out position as well so you can employ it in different disciplines or in extreme wind conditions when arm-out may be more

stable. An example for this is Rapid Fire in Field Rifle Competition; some of the top shooters in this discipline will use arm-out for rapid fire and arm-back for the offhand event

because (in general) the arm-out position gives more control of the rifle while cycling the

action. It can also be quicker and smoother to mount the rifle arm-out which is a benefit in rapid fire.

STANCE:

Now you have chosen a position you prefer, let's look to the stance. There are some basics to

cover and as there is not enough room to discuss in detail all the issues in an article of this

type, I will stick to dot points.

Start at the ground and build up from there:

$\frac{3}{4}$ Place your feet shoulder width apart or marginally more if required to feel stable (slightly wider in windy conditions)

$\frac{3}{4}$ Weight distribution should be approx 60/40 (60% on front foot)

$\frac{3}{4}$ An imaginary line drawn across your toes on both feet should line up anywhere from

directly in line with target to 20 - 30 degrees off target (to left of target for Righthanders). This can be more open for the arm-out position

$\frac{3}{4}$ Try to keep your head as upright as possible, leaning your head forward to sit on stock is ok (not tilting left to right), this is an inner ear, natural balance thing and will result in less body swaying. If you tilt your head over as you shoot, the body will sway more because subconsciously you are trying to stop from falling over

$\frac{3}{4}$ Cant (lean) the rifle over to meet your face, don't lean your face over to meet rifle. Canting the rifle is fine and is easier on the neck and back as well. There are however some issues I should mention when canting the rifle:

1. Sight the rifle in with the same cant you will shoot with (regardless of method, e.g.; bench, sitting post or offhand)
2. It is best to cant the scope as well (to compensate) so the reticle looks upright when your position is right
3. Canting will also give you a more natural hand position on the palm swell of the stock as opposed to a vertical stock position (try it and see)
4. There are many theories on canting (for and against) especially about sighting in and bullet strike etc. Consider this, you sight-in on each range before you shoot right? You also have a spotter (Centrefire) to call the fall of shot or a swinger or target to see the bullet strike on right? My advice is, shoot the shot, see the result, make and record the scope adjustments and then shoot the match.

5. All in all, take notice of the actual results not the theoretical ones.

Some key factors in correct stance/position:

$\frac{3}{4}$ Comfort - if it's not comfortable you will not be able to shoot consistently well over a long period. If you rely on muscles to hold well you will fade as you tire (regardless of your relative strength)

$\frac{3}{4}$ Stability and balance - You will feel more in control and your hold will be more predictable and flowing in its pattern

$\frac{3}{4}$ Consistency in position (body & rifle) - If you mount the rifle the same way each time, it is easier to achieve and maintain your natural point of aim

$\frac{3}{4}$ There is no magic hold or position that will 'lock you in place' or totally prevent the natural movement of your body and rifle (wobble)

Above all, choose a position that you can maintain all day and will deliver the same quality of hold on the 100th shot as it does on the 10th shot.

HOLD:

Hold could be summed up as "how still you can keep the rifle and sight picture". It is the area on the target (or around it) you can hold and maintain the sights with consistency. You will often hear shooters talk about their hold and say things like "my hold is really good today". What they mean is that they are able to hold the rifle on a smaller section of the target or with a smaller "wobble pattern" than usual.

Your holding ability is something that you will need to work on to improve. It is not something you can buy and it is linked to your stance, position, breathing and the time and effort you put into practicing the correct technique. It is also something that is very individual. You may have a wobble pattern that is in an oval shape over the target from 8 o'clock to 2 o'clock whilst another shooter will have an 11 o'clock to 5 o'clock wobble pattern. What difference does it make? None, if you both let the shot off when the sights approach the centre of the target the same result will occur.

It is important that you work to make your hold consistent and that you learn what your hold looks like, and when to break the trigger so the bullet impact will be in the middle. You may be thinking that the "good shooters" just hold the rifle still, put the crosshair in the 10 Ring and let the shot off right? Sorry, that's not quite how it works because there is one

thing that
you must know.

Nobody holds the rifle still, not World Champions, not Olympic Champions, nobody.

You can however, do something to improve your hold, try this:

Draw a shape (animal or circle, your choice) that is about 5 - 6 inches in diameter; stick it on the wall and practice holding on it from about 10 metres at home. Down the hallway is generally good. At this stage you don't need to be dry firing just holding on the target.

As you improve in holding ability and can easily hold inside the target area, progressively step down in the size of the aiming point.

You can introduce some trigger work or dry firing as you go. Spent Rimfire cases are good to prevent damage in rimfires or "snap caps" for centrefires. The main objective of dry firing is to practice the correct technique of smoothly firing the rifle as the sights align with the desired point so it becomes an automatic response. A key area of trigger control is the ability to fire the rifle without moving the sight alignment.

A good exercise for this is to open the bolt, hold on the target and repeatedly pull (or press) the trigger while holding within the target area. At first it is very hard and you will realise why you have been missing those targets you expected to hit. This is a very good exercise and will improve your scores.

It is also excellent for pre-match nerves, have a go (on Pigs) and see how well you can hold and work the trigger without upsetting the rifle's balance. Your confidence will grow and you will start the match mentally better off.

I have been taught to practice in the same way that I will shoot the match and I suggest you do the same. What I mean by this is to wear the sort of clothes you normally wear to shoot in. This includes footwear, hat, earmuffs or plugs and shooting glasses (if applicable) and give thought to the surface you normally stand on to shoot. If you always shoot on concrete, practicing on carpet will give you a different feel when shoot a match and may change the way you react subconsciously (nerves etc). A bit of ply on top of the carpet will fix this and give a solid feel.

Remember the purpose of practicing is to create muscle memory of the position, stance, etc. and to reinforce the correct technique until it becomes automatic and natural. This way when you are shooting at targets, the moment the rifle approaches the correct aiming point the shot goes off automatically. It is possible and does happen, honest!

As an example, most people will have experienced driving home from somewhere and when they pull into the driveway think to themselves, "which way did I come home?" You have done it so often that you can do it on autopilot. With enough

practice of the correct technique you will be able to shoot very well predominantly on autopilot too.

I had intended to cover Breathing and Natural Point of Aim in this issue as well but that will have to wait until next time. I hope you can get some helpful points out of all this that will improve your success and enjoyment of our chosen sport. Good Shooting