



Rifle

By SFC Eric Uptagrafft, 1996 Olympian

PART-TIME SHOOTER



Not everyone can be a full-time shooter. Due to life circumstances and the decisions we make, we can't all be assigned to the Army Marksmanship Unit (AMU) or be a Resident Athlete at the Olympic Training Center. Some of you are still in school. Others are pursuing a civilian career or have family responsibilities. A few are coming back to the sport after taking some time off. How do you pursue your goals as a part-time shooter? Can you have international success and make the Olympic team while shooting only part-time? It's hard, but it is also possible.

While I am currently assigned to the International Rifle section at the AMU, I had some of my greatest success during the time that I wasn't at the AMU. From the end of 2000 to the spring of 2008, I had a full-time civilian job, was an officer in the Navy Reserve, and continued to pursue my goals in shooting. During that time I won four world championship team and individual medals, three world cup medals, two world cup final medals, tied the world record in prone and won best male rifle shooter at CISM. Not too bad for a part-time shooter.

The first task in being a world class part-time shooter is to develop time management skills. I was working 40 hours a week in my civilian engineering job and 20 hours a week doing my Navy obligations. That doesn't leave much "spare" time for training. I had to learn quickly how to manage time. When working toward a big match I would have a certain amount of daily training time set aside. Whatever else I had to do in my busy day, I knew I would at least get my practice in. Dur-

ing that training time you have to be focused on the training. We're talking quality, not quantity. Ten well executed shots is infinitely better than 100 rushed shots. Make sure your training area is as clear of distractions as you can make it. No TV, radio, screaming kids or barking dogs. Get your gear set up and get right to the training. If it only takes five minutes to set your equipment up, then you should be well on your way to training at minute six. If you are training at a public range, be careful of too much socializing. Remember that not everyone has the same goals as you. Many shooters are recreational only. They are there for the companionship and social aspect of our sport. There is a time and place for that, but not during your precious practice session. Your training time is limited, so make the most of it.

If you are a part-time shooter, be very careful of position and or rifle adjustments. As a full-time shooter, I try to give a change a week to see if it really works. Almost every change seems to be positive the first time I try it. It is the second and subsequent tries that really tells me if something is going to work long-term. If you are a part-time shooter who only gets to train a couple days a week, you might need to try a change for weeks or a month before you see if it really works. Once you find something that works, stick with it. Write it down. Part-time shooters usually train in spurts. Let's say you find the magical rifle adjustment. Everything is clear and your adjustment seems obvious to you. Fast forward a couple of months after life got in the way you weren't able to get to the range much if at all. You know you made this miraculous change to your rifle settings but can't for the life of you remember what it was. This will give you grey hair...ask me how, I know. Again, once you find something that works, stick with it. I'm paraphrasing here but a wise man once said that thoroughly training an imperfect position is better than endlessly searching for that elusive perfect position. My prone and kneeling positions are essentially unchanged over the last fourteen years. Are they perfect? No. But I know them like the back of my hand and can shoot them as well as or better than anyone in the world.

Gather a support team around you that understands and supports your goals. I'm lucky that my wife, Sandra, is a pistol shooter. She knows what I do and why it is important to me. She will do

anything in her power to assist me. Try to find a coach who can help you. Some coaches are limited in their expertise, especially for a more advanced shooter. Once you start moving up in experience, you will have more access to better coaches. Don't be afraid to ask other shooters for help if you think they have something to offer. Many top-level shooters will help another shooter if they are asked. Just remember that there is a time and place to ask another shooter for help.

For you more experienced shooters who cringe at my suggestion above that less experienced shooters should start asking you questions: help them if you can. I've found that I get as much or more out of coaching as the shooter gets. This isn't to say I'm a bad coach (I hope), but when I coach, I am forced to analyze, think about and verbalize what I do and why. Some of the best shooting I did in my career was during a time period when I did a lot of coaching too. In 2007 I was deployed to Kuwait with the Navy Reserve. I managed to convince my chain of command that I should help coach the Kuwaiti rifle team on my one day off per week. I did that weekly for my seven month deployment. I also talked my commander into letting me leave the country to shoot the Munich World Cup in the middle of my deployment. While there I shot a 599 prone after no shooting whatsoever for the previous eight months. I attribute a very large amount of that success to the coaching I did. I believe that it helped me keep my mind in the game and come back much faster than if I had just taken that time off.

One of the biggest benefits I felt I had as a part-time shooter was the balance I had in my life. Shooting was important to me, but it wasn't the only thing. I also had my civilian and reserve jobs, as well as my family life with Sandra. All my eggs weren't in one basket and that takes a lot of the pressure off. This made almost every match I shot more like a vacation than a high-stakes sporting competition. Now that shooting is my job, I have to work extra hard to keep that balance.

Range access can be a big challenge for the part-time athlete. When I lived in Colorado, I was about two hours from the OTC range in Colorado Springs. At most I would get down there once a month. There wasn't anything that resembled an international rifle range near where I lived. The closest thing I could find was the Boulder Rifle

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Club, but there is a 10 year waiting list to become a member. In order to get a conditional membership at BRC, I agreed to help coach their junior high-power rifle team one day a week. At that point, I had access to the range, but no 50 meter targets to shoot at. I solved this problem by building a portable frame to staple the NRA 6-bull 50m target to. I also made portable wind flags to give me a clue what the wind was doing. I had to shoot from between concrete bench rest tables, but it worked. Whenever I felt I needed some outdoor training, I went to Boulder. Many moons ago I was a junior shooting up in Spokane, Washington. I only got to shoot at the 50-foot club range about once a week. The rest of the time I shot air rifle in the basement of my mother's house. I shot out of my bedroom, down the hallway and into the den. My five-bull targets were taped to a stack of phonebooks sitting on the fireplace mantle. What I'm trying to get across is where there's a will, there's a way. Think outside the box.

Now that you are outside the box, think about cross-training. In Colorado, with the exception of the Rocky Mountain Rifle Championships and 3x Air, there were no other international matches of any kind. I wanted to shoot more matches, so I

turned to cross-training. I shot some high-power rifle matches, American prone matches and shot in a winter 50-foot league. While the target and course of fire aren't the same, the middle is still in the middle and a match is still a match. I'm not much of an air rifle shooter, but I shot it for many years as a training tool to help my small-bore standing. This is another example of cross-training that I highly recommend to anyone who thinks they are only a three-position shooter. The nice thing about air gun shooting is that there are many more ranges available out there, or if your situation permits you can shoot in a basement, garage or barn.

If all else fails you can always dry-fire. I remember when I was growing up shooting, many of the 1960's and 1970's legends of shooting told stories of how they dry-fired their way to an Olympic medal. I took that to heart and spent much of my teen years dry-firing. Twenty years later there are some great electronic training aids that make dry-firing a viable stand-alone training method. These devices have transmitters and receivers that attach to your target and rifle and then plug into a computer. What you get now is direct feedback from your dry-firing. These train-

ers "hear" when you pull the trigger and plot your shot on the computer screen. You get to see a trace of what your hold looks like, and also your final shot placement. What a training tool! I used my electronic trainer for approximately 95% of my training and I believe its use directly resulted in my international success from 2001-2007. For less than the cost of a case of Tenex you can get either the Rika Home Trainer or a Scatt. For a little more you can buy a Noptel. There is no substitute for live-firing, but I find there is real value to computer assisted dry-firing. A side benefit of a high percentage of dry-firing is that you aren't wearing out your barrel as fast as us full-time shooters are. But a word of caution: you should always dry-fire with an empty cartridge case in the chamber, or use a dry-fire firing pin. A damaged chamber can result from a too-long or broken firing pin if you don't.

I'm not going to say that being an international success as a part-time shooter is easy. It isn't. What I'm saying is that with some planning, dedication and a lot of work it is possible. See you at the range. Good luck, and good shooting!

The soft overcomes the hard,
The slow overcomes the fast,
Let your workings remain a mystery,
Just show people the results.

-Lao Tzu

Are you a naturally talented air pistol shooter? Or a hard working athlete?

Either way, you will need hard work and professional guidance to reach your peak performance. Don't let others have any advantage over you.

Email sillintercoach@yahoo.com for information.

If you follow the instructions and don't improve your score in two months, you will receive your money back!

Silvino Lyra is a 1999 USA/NRA International Advanced Shooting Coach who has coached gold and silver medalists at the Pan American Games and 5 Olympians in the 2000 & 2004 Olympic Games in the 10m air pistol element of Modern Pentathlon.