

# Some Tips on Shooting Better Silhouette Scores

BY RICHARD BLAYDEN

As a youngster in the 50's I loved to watch the old cowboy movies and always imagined being a "crack shot" with one of those revolvers they always touted – but had limited opportunities to shoot anything but a cheap air-gun in the UK. Much later in life and living in South Africa I read an article on handgun metallic silhouette shooting and thought "that's the sport for me" and ventured into my initial ownership of "real guns".

On arriving in Australia in '85 I was delighted to find a SSAA Silhouette range nearby so joined up and that's where the bug bit deeply. A few years later I moved to Sydney, joined a PA affiliated club and learned a lot from the other shooters there. I made my first representation in the NSW Pistol team at the 1994 PA Nationals.

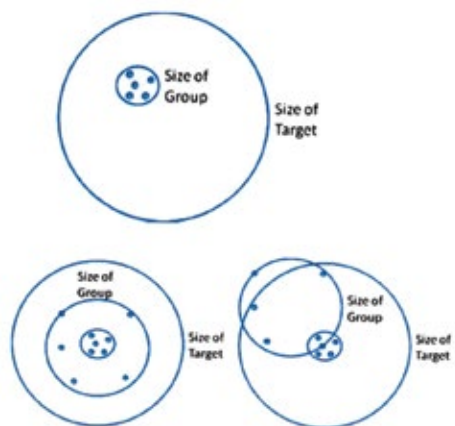
Since then I have represented Australia successfully in the Oceania Games, the IMSSU European Championships, the IMSSU World Championships and the NRA Nationals in the USA. On moving back to Brisbane in '99 I became a member of the Queensland Pistol Team for several years before giving away the 'serious competition stuff in 2004. Since then I have shot regularly at club, interstate and national competitions and continue to do so for the fun, friendship and the thrill of still shooting international grade scores.

Along the road I have learned much about the physical and mental challenges of handgun metallic silhouette shooting and have pleasure in sharing those experiences in the form of these coaching tips for other shooters hoping to follow a similar path. So here goes, first some tips on basic technique coupled with some indication on what's going on inside the head of an international shooter whilst he or she is shooting what seems to be an effortless 40 x 40.

These basic tips are followed by two further articles on "Tips for Shooting in the Creedmore Position" and "The Art of Spotting for Handgun Metallic Silhouette".

## Basic Technique

Ever wondered why you can shoot some great shots but still not achieve consistent high scores – or even 40's?. This may help – I hope so, because if you can shoot 20% of the target with near centre hits then you already have some elements of the technique required – you just need to polish and maintain that technique for all 40 targets. As with all other forms of shooting, the first step is to understand where variation in shot by shot performance comes from.



Firstly we have variation in your gun / ammo combination's ability to shoot tight groups. If the gun's group is much smaller than the target then no problem other than to adjust your sight setting (elevation and windage) to centre the group on the target. Work on your ammo to get the best possible performance from your gun.

Next we have the group size set by your own ability to repeat and maintain an effective sight picture and pull the trigger smoothly **without imparting any movement on the gun** (don't 'snatch' the trigger!). If we add the two group sizes together we can see how we start to miss the target. Variations in wind speed and light conditions can make the situation more difficult.

Most guns with the right ammo will shoot group sizes that are considerably smaller than the size of the silhouette targets – except perhaps in the ½ size unlimited matches. The biggest challenge is to learn how to minimize your own impact on group size by sharpening up your shooting process – and confidence is one of the key drivers of a good shooting process.



Unfortunately, it's very easy to slip out of "the zone". Loss of confidence induces worry making it harder and harder to "pull the trigger" during which time you're trying not to breathe, your eyes become tired (lack of oxygen), your hands and arms begin to shake, your sight picture deteriorates and your level of worry (lack of confidence) increases, etc. and your shot misses the target!

Over-confidence breeds lack of care and concentration and leads to silly mistakes – so does over-dosing on coffee or too much partying the night before!

Your best sight picture (and steadiest hand) in freestyle usually occurs within the first few seconds after engaging the target, so the optimum time to pull the trigger is somewhere between 6 and 12 seconds after commencing sight alignment on the target (faster for standing – 4 to 8 seconds because you have a less stable base when standing). So how do you build the confidence to pull the trigger that quickly?

## Building Confidence

Building confidence starts at the re-loading bench! Take care with your re-loading to ensure the best possible quality of ammunition to ensure required performance and reliability, and to eliminate doubt at the firing line. You are probably going to travel quite a few kilometres and spend a fair amount of cash each time you go to a major competition, so why not invest a bit more time in ensuring that your ammo is all the best before you go! If using a tight (bench rest) chambered gun (e.g. Freedom Arms / BF) it can pay to cycle all your newly made rounds through the chamber to make sure there are no tight-fit cases that are going to get jammed and upset you on the firing line. Take the utmost care of course because you don't want any shots going off at the reloading bench-bolt actions need the most care because they 'cock' automatically on closing (you may be able adjust the sear screw to 'heavy trigger' to reduce risk of accidental discharge else do it at the range).

Other things you can do to help maintain confidence on the shooting line include:

- Keep your ammo clean at all times (from the reloading bench to

and especially on the firing line) so that you don't pick up dirt/dust that may cause it to jam in the chamber or damage the gun.

- Give your guns some TLC- Tight (all screws / sight fittings are tight – especially check all 'body screws' on revolvers), Lubricated (remove excess lube / oil from the barrel before firing) and Clean (remove all dirt from working parts and fouling from the barrel) to ensure everything functions effectively during the match. Check your hammer spring stiffness regularly (especially for Thompson Contenders) and replace as required.
- Before you go to the firing line, make sure that you have all necessary sight settings, screw-drivers, ammo, timer, ear-muffs, shooting glasses and aperture adjusted properly, water bottle. Take only what's necessary and don't cram the shooting bay full of needless junk.
- When your match starts, sighters are important. Try to get 'perfect shots' on all four sighter targets and have your spotter record where they hit (or missed). You will need this information during the match to make minor adjustments in sight settings if necessary- and to do that confidently you need to be confident that you made 'perfect' sighter shots (sight picture, control and trigger pull).
- When you shoot the chooks – try to shoot your best possible group. Although chooks should be the easiest targets to knock down, having shot each one 'dead centre' builds your confidence in the gun's grouping ability and in your own ability to shoot it well – but don't get overconfident! Do the same in the pigs and you will be building your confidence to do the same on the turkeys and then the rams!
- Think about executing a perfect process 'perfectly' and the results will be good – don't think about the result else you will be looking at the target to see it fall (a good way to miss it) rather than watching your sight picture 'right through the trigger pull'.
- To shoot 5 targets in 2 minutes you have 24 seconds per target. Try to get the first shot away 10 to 15 seconds after the "fire" command and then work to a tempo of 20 seconds per shot thereafter. This will ensure that if you do get a jam or a misfire, you have 20 to 30 seconds of spare time for sight adjustments or to reload so you can make all 5 shots confidently and effectively.
- Have a timer in your kit and use it – always! A timer will only cost you around \$20 and that is probably the best investment you can make to improve your scores because, when you lose track of time, your mind will start to play all sorts of tricks on you – most likely causing you to panic and miss targets unnecessarily. Even though it is only 2 minutes, you must manage your time well to get good scores – ask your spotter to watch the time and prompt you if you are taking too long on a shot.
- Don't load your gun on the "load" command and get ready (in your shooting position) to shoot immediately you will be hanging

in there getting a stiff neck, sore arms and tired eyes too soon. Revolvers take a bit longer to load, but for single shot pistols it can be better to wait until there are only 10 to 15 seconds to go to the “fire” command and invest the waiting time in breathing and stretching the neck to ensure you are relaxed and your eyes are well oxygenated. Refer Article #2, “Tips for Shooting in the Creedmore Position”.

- Be prepared for extreme temperatures:
  - On very hot days have a small sponge-bag and wet flannel in your kit. A quick wipe of the face, neck, hands and forearms between details can be wonderfully refreshing and help stop sweat running into your eyes or dripping on your glasses- both of which can ruin your sight picture.
  - On very cold days, put your shooting glasses on well before you start shooting so they can warm to body temperature. If you put them on cold and immediately lie down to start shooting they can fog up with your warm breath and ruin your sight picture.
  - Also on cold days, ‘rug up’ and keep warm! If you are too hot it is easy to take off a layer (jacket) of clothing, if you get chilled and your core temperature drops it can take 20 or 30 minutes to warm through again – during which time your body will be in ‘survival’ mode and will steal your concentration and you will miss targets because of the discomfort.
- Your spotter should be helping you to maintain your confidence by giving immediate feedback on each shot so that you know the result as soon as possible after letting it go – this helps eliminate the your desire to look at the target when you should be focusing on executing the shooting process. When you are the spotter, make all communications calm and positive to reinforce confidence. Refer Article #3, “The Art of Spotting for Metallic Silhouette”.

## Maintaining Focus and Control

Maintaining confidence is one critical issue – the other is to maintain focus and control of our own shooting process- and that often means blocking out all distractions from outside of your shooting bay, and from inside your own head – which you will undoubtedly experience the first time you make it into the State Team or enter an Interstate or Nationals competition on your own accord.

### 1. Pulling the trigger without imparting any movement on the gun.

If this is an issue, in your normal shooting position, try dry-firing on some spent cases or dummy rounds and make sure you can pull the trigger with zero movement in the sight picture - if the gun moves during your trigger pull you have a problem and need to work on it. A good method is to make 20 dummy rounds and mix in 5 live ‘full house’ rounds - then load your gun without looking at the ammo’ (or have someone load it for you) and then try shooting them. You will have a 1-in-5 chance of the round actually going off and you will feel ‘stupid’ when the gun jerks or recoils when the hammer goes ‘click’ instead of bang. If you can master the zero imparted movement during your trigger pull, then, even when the shot takes you by surprise with a load ‘bang’ and associated recoil you will be pleasantly surprised at how accurate the shot was.

Get used to and don’t pre-empt the recoil. The gun isn’t going anywhere and shouldn’t be hurting you if you are holding it properly – e.g. firmly but not too tightly or loosely. If the recoil is too much then back-off the loads a bit - 200 meter rams these days are set to topple relatively easily compared to when silhouette first started and ‘full-house’ loads are generally not necessary. All the other targets can be knocked down consistently with surprisingly light loads!

It helps here to appreciate the four general zones of awareness and thinking (see diagram below).

A good shooter will have grown the ability to block out all external distractions of other people shooting, talking and generally mucking around behind the shooting line – but not at the expense of missing the range officer’s commands (the spotter can help here by repeating the range commands).

A good shooter will also have learned how to block out any internal thoughts about “OMG – everybody’s watching me”, and “oh hell, what if I muck this up and the whole team loses out”. These are negative internal thoughts, they are mostly imaginary and they must not be allowed to enter your mind during the match.

Once a good basic technique is attained and appropriate quality control is applied to all aspects of reloading and match preparation – then the game becomes 99% mental. I can well remember coming off the line in major competitions having shot an apparently “easy” 40 and feeling like I had just run a marathon – not because of the physical effort, but because of the mental effort and focus required to do that routinely and consistently.

Putting all this together is called ‘Match Discipline’ – apply it diligently and you’ll soon be gaining momentum on the improvement trail.

Most importantly, have fun along the road and enjoy it.

