Shoot Well

By Pete Nelson

This article is about high powered rife accuracy using a telescopic sight. It is addressed to no one in particular, just notes for my future reference and my own enjoyment. However, perhaps some readers will find it useful.

By about three years ago I had accumulated a small number of scoped, high powered rifles, as well as a few military surplus rifles. Some of these have purchase dates going back 20 years or more and I had done essentially nothing with them. Calibers included .270 Winchester, .30-06 Springfield, 7mm Remington Magnum and .375 H&H Magnum. Except for the 7mm, they had not been fired by me. More recently, I bought a couple of .308s.

Except for the .375 H&H Magnum and the 7mm Remington Magnum, the recoil and ballistics are similar. After a bit of research into recoil I decided to dispose of the.375 Magnum (almost double the recoil of the 7mm Magnum!), which I had bought new in the early 1990s, and did so. It is an elephant gun, far more powerful than anything needed in the lower 48 US states and, I imagined, quite unpleasant to shoot.

Then followed a long, but enjoyable and educational, saga of sighting in my rifles. Gun work was needed and there were some new purchases, including scopes, along the way. I have become fond of mil-dot reticle scopes that, with a little mental math, allow ranging targets.

Most of my rifles were purchased used and I was quite surprised to find that virtually none of them had been sighted-in. I also discovered, to my dismay, that the average American rifleman generally does a poor job of caring for his firearms. (I do not.)

This is about learning to shoot well, which I did mostly by trial and error at the range, with a few helpful hints from others along the way. I did have some upland game and duck hunting experience in my youth (a very long time ago) and thus was comfortable with the recoil of a 12 gauge shotgun. However, I had no experience with high powered rifles. The recoil turned out to be similar. (See Compared: Rifle and Shotgun Recoil.)

Let's assume we are at a rifle range with a scoped .30-06. We are shooting from a bench rest, punching holes in paper targets 100 yards out.

1. Rifle stability is paramount and a fore-end rifle rest is thus necessary. I (and probably you) cannot shoot well offhand, at the range or in the field. Use a steady fore-end rest.

2. The elbows are rested on the bench, forming a triangle with the rifle. One hand is on the fore-end and the other is on the grip.

3. The trigger finger is held outside the trigger guard until you are ready to fire a round.

4. Both hands should then grip the rifle tightly and hold it firmly against the shoulder. This position is maintained during the trigger squeeze and follow through.

5. The relaxed trigger finger is then gently inserted into the trigger guard and lightly touches the trigger.

6. Several deep breaths are taken and exhaled and a less-than-full breath is then taken and held until after the round is fired.

7. The cross-hairs are centered on the target and held there as best you can. Know, however, that no matter what you do, there will still be some slight rifle movement. As long as you are alive, this will be the case, so live with it.

8. Then s-q-u-e-e-z-e the trigger, slowing increasing trigger pressure when the sight is on the target until the round fires. Ideally, you will not anticipate or know specifically when the trigger will release.

That is it. If you carefully follow these procedures, you will soon be shooting well. There are no excuses. Modern scopes and rifle barrels are superbly made and accurate. Before shooting, you might check that the screws attaching the scope to the rifle and the stock to the barreled action are tight. Aside from human error, these are the most common causes of inaccuracy.

The vast majority of your difficulty in maintaining a consistently high level of accuracy will come from tightening your hold and/or flinching as you fire a round. To prove this to yourself, hold on target with an unloaded rifle and watch the cross-hairs move when you clench your fists. (Also, note the movement as you breathe.)

Flinching, which is involuntary movement at the moment of firing due to anticipating recoil or muzzle blast, puts your shot inches off and sometimes WAY off. Do not blame the rifle for this. The trick is to dissociate your trigger finger from the grip hand. Give your trigger finger a life of its own, with the rest of hand all business, pulling the stock semi-hard into your shoulder. Practice this with an unloaded rifle.

Have you noticed, when watching a really good shot on one of the TV outdoor channels, that they are completely still as they fire a round? There is your lesson in accuracy.

You must become comfortable with all of this. Stay at it and it will eventually feel natural.

I do not notice normal recoil anymore. My 7mm Remington Magnum rifle would be an exception, but I have been able to tame it with rifle modifications. If recoil remains a problem, it can be substantially reduced by having a muzzle brake fitted. This will dramatically increase muzzle blast (itself a major cause of flinching), but will not affect downrange ballistics. You will, however, have to pay money to a gunsmith to get it done.

Well, that is it. I am shooting tight groups at 100 yards, meaning nine rounds in a three inch group at the point of aim. There are plenty of shooters who will tell you about their one inch or half-inch groups (usually three shots), but there are also a lot of liars who shoot rifles and we all tend to remember our good groups and forget the bad ones. It is kinda like fish stories. If you watch them do it, you can believe it.