

Practice Made Perfect

How the 6.5 Guys optimized their training routine to achieve better results in competition

By the **6.5 Guys** (Steve Lawrence, Ed Mobley)



When we first started shooting long range precision rifles, our practice consisted of activities that made us feel good. We spent most of our time shooting off our bellies because it was easy to hit small targets at long distances and who wouldn't enjoy that? After all, many take up shooting because it is an enjoyable and relaxing activity that can serve as a counterbalance to the stresses we all face.

The deficiencies of our original training practices became obvious when we began

to compete in local matches. The PRS style matches required competitors use improvised or compromised shooting positions. It was also difficult to make precise rifle shots within the short time constraints imposed in matches. These challenges and more resulted in mediocre match performance.

Even though we consistently made it out to the range for practice, the sessions were oriented more towards hanging out with friends rather than honing our abilities as competitors. While our routine provided some benefit as reflected in our match scores, we came to realize that we had a choice: Continue to derive our enjoyment from practice sessions along the social aspects or fulfill our ambition to become better precision rifle competitors. We opted for the latter and this required a complete reexamination of our approach to training.

This article will be the **first in a series** exploring the elements of our precision rifle practice regimen that continues to evolve over time. In this article we provide a high level overview. In subsequent articles, we will examine each area in greater detail.



Start with a Plan

As we began to rethink our approach to training, we first identified our individual strengths and weaknesses as shooters and what skills we needed to work on. As we've heard one top competitor state, "Practice what you suck at." We started to perform after action reviews of each match and this provided us with empirical data that we

used to plan our practice routine.

We started to think about our shooting in terms of categories of skills: Fundamentals, dot drills, weak side shooting, use of props and barricades, wind calling, improvised shooting positions and use of support bags, etc. By breaking down our shooting into components, we were able to make focused improvements during our training sessions and this started to yield a cumulative positive benefit.

Reexamining our strengths and weaknesses also meant taking a step back and making an honest assessment of our overall competency level as precision rifle shooters. It was important for us to validate that we understood and had a good handle on the fundamentals of marksmanship. As a result, we made the decision to attend a two day precision rifle clinic which started with the basic fundamentals of marksmanship and concluded with key skill areas for PRS style match shooting. By the time we completed the precision rifle clinic, we both had a laundry list of items to work on in practice. You can meet our instructor and get a better understanding of the training we undertook by watching this video "A Look at Precision Rifle Training": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhhDp_E-xpl

Our practice sessions continue to evolve, but they all begin with a training plan before we even step on to the range. We plan in advance how long our practice session will run, the expected round count, and areas of focus. Planning in advance

"I'm a big believer in taking a structured approach to skill development - otherwise I'm just making noise and wasting ammunition at the range. The structured approach boils down to 4 phases: Plan, execute, measure, and assess.

I start with a training plan of what I want to accomplish in the practice sessions. Next, we design and develop training drills and exercises to develop those skills. As we execute the training plan for the day, I evaluate my progress towards mastery of those skills and techniques. The real test of progress is at the matches we attend. After action reviews coming out of a match brings this back full circle to provide input into what things I should continue to focus on in training.

I have a long way to achieve the level of proficiency I aspire to but this approach to training has accelerated the progress towards my long term goals."

-- Steve

allows us to coordinate if we need to bring specific steel targets or some of the homemade shooting props and barricades that we constructed.

Once at the range, the training plan is used as a guide so we maintain our focus and make efficient use of our time. Additionally, the training plan is reviewed afterwards so we can note our individual progress and determine if any of our drills should be revised to make them more effective.

Focus on the Fundamentals

One thing we realized early on is you can't ignore the fundamentals of marksmanship in training. It forms the foundation upon which all other skills are built upon. It becomes increasingly difficult to advance your abilities if you are working around an ingrained bad habit or haven't properly mastered the fundamentals to the point they can be executed instinctively and subconsciously. Most other match skills rely on executing the fundamentals in compromised shooting positions and under time constraints. Hence, a focus on the fundamentals must be a part of any robust training plan.



Our training sessions typically dedicate about a quarter to one third of the time to focusing on the fundamentals. We start off with a cold bore shot, move on to dot drills, and then we integrate positional shooting exercises. Our focus on the fundamentals is geared towards ingraining consistency in everything we do behind the trigger. This includes: building a stable shooting position, sight picture/alignment, natural point of aim, trigger control and follow through, observing bullet impact, etc. Working on the fundamentals early on in the practice session is like a set of warm up exercises before the real training starts. It sets the stage for moving onto more advanced drills for the day.

Make the Most of What You Have

Unless you are fortunate enough to live in an area with wide open spaces, your training may be confined to your local shooting club - The 6.5 Guys are no exception. This generally means shooting at ranges of 100 to 200 yards and making the most of it. These constraints can be overcome by using both paper targets and small AR500 steel targets. A top PRS competitor who we personally know does most of his training on a 100 yard range.

When training at reduced distances, it doesn't make sense to wear out your match rifle or consume expensive match grade ammunition. Many top shooters employ training rifles chambered in more economical cartridges with longer barrel life such as .223 or .308. In the near future, we too will be

moving to dedicated trainer rifles. Other top competitors compliment their training by shooting rimfire and air rifle.

As mentioned earlier, every practice session starts with a paper target at 100 yards where we verify our cold bore shot, confirm zero and conduct dot drills. While there are a number of different targets available for purchase and download, we designed our own paper target so we could log our performance in a consistent and organized manner. We will continue to refine our target over time.

Once we're done with paper, it's on to steel targets. We place an assortment of steel targets at 200 yards and they are sized from 1.5-3 MOA to emulate what one might encounter in a match. Our goal is to shoot at the smallest target that we can reliably hit 80 percent of the time. If you are limited to shorter distances just size your steel targets accordingly.

Create Training Props

We have found that successful preparation for competition requires incorporating many of the common elements we see at matches into our practice routine. Most of the PRS style matches have competitors shooting off of props or other objects found in the field (e.g., rocks, tree stumps, fence rails, etc.). One of the first things we realized we needed to do to improve our training was



to get off our bellies and practice shooting from positions other than prone. However, the problem was we didn't have any of the props (barricades, roof tops, shoot houses, parapets, etc.) commonly found at matches. We instead started out with what we had at hand and this included things like a sawhorse, milk crates, and an empty water barrel. Items like these allowed us to simulate many of the props we didn't have.

An adjustable sawhorse, like the one shown below can be used to simulate challenges typically encountered with various barricade designs. More complex scenarios can be devised using the sawhorse and attaching a piece of plywood across the narrow top. Also, fastening a piece of plywood across the legs can simulate a shoot port.



Several milk crates, a few pieces of plywood and a few bungee cords make for a basic, yet modular training platform. You can set them at multiple levels to simulate the parapets found at matches. Barrels, ladders, chairs and the like can also serve as make-shift practice props.

Despite our resourcefulness at improvising shooting props from basic items, it didn't take long for us to design and build our own shooting props. We created a pair of barricades and soon after a rooftop segment. Looking back, this was one of the best things we ever did to improve our regular practice sessions. Now, every practice session at the range includes a variety of drills using the barricades and props we built. You can learn more about our barricades (including our original design plans) here: <http://www.65guys.com/new-years-resolutions/>



Simulate the Stresses of a Match Environment

In our first handful of matches, we would step up to the stage with butterflies in our stomach. The loud beep of the stage timer would immediately kick in an adrenaline rush and get the heart racing. As new competitors we often had a muddled game plan for each stage and panic would ensue as we tried to find a good position to shoot from. Or, if we had practiced a good

position it turned into a wobbly mess with each heartbeat. Knowing the clock was ticking down, a hurried series of shots were sent down range before the time expired – the result was often more misses than impacts.

The pressure to perform on a difficult stage under short time constraints in a field match can induce stress. Under these conditions, shooters will usually revert to executing what they have practiced and are most familiar with.

In a match most stages have a time limit, so we began to use a shot timer during our practice sessions. After several months of practicing with a shot timer, the sound of the timer at the start of a stage no longer induced the anxiety it once did. Additionally we discovered the timer is an invaluable tool for measuring your performance and assessing your level of improvement over several practice sessions. Examples of things to measure and assess are: How long it takes to get a first shot off and impact the target, split times between shots, hit percentage versus overall time to complete a stage while hitting all of the targets.

Training with a timer has helped us develop a good sense of timing: Our desire is to complete a stage before time runs out while avoiding rushing which leads to missed shots. The use of a shot timer in training has really improved our performance. Matches now resemble practice and vice-versa.

To simulate a match environment during practice, we emulate stage designs we see from time to time. Examples include positional shooting (standing, kneeling, seated, prone) with only the rifle – no slings, bipods, support bags, etc. This requires some experimentation to develop an approach that works best for you, for example applying known techniques such as the Hawkens for prone shooting. Additionally, we learned it is important to practice everything weak side (non-dominant eye for aiming through the scope, and non-dominant hand used for trigger manipulation) from any conceivable position. It may seem odd at first but we found that you'll adapt.

There is a familiar axiom said in shooting competitions, "There are no good ideas the night before a match." This is especially true for your rifle and gear. It is generally a bad idea to come up with a new way of using a piece of gear the night before or during a match.

Precision rifle matches are unique in the shooting sports in that almost any piece of equipment is allowed so long as it is not specifically restricted and the competitor carries it during the match. What this means is if you decide to use a particular piece of kit for a match be sure to incorporate it into your practice sessions so you are thoroughly familiar with it. Likewise, understand the limitations of your gear. We believe practice sessions provide a great opportunity to explore optimal ways to use new equipment for common stage designs and props. Also practicing the quick deployment and use of shooting gear while under time constraints is an important skill to have. For example, tripods are great but will take time to properly setup and may not work in tight quarters.

Wind Training

What typically separates the top-tier shooters from the rest of the field is their ability to "dope the wind." This represents the ability to assess observable and measurable wind conditions using knowledge, experience and even information from other shooters. The objective is to develop a "wind call" which determines how much to dial or hold-off for each shot. This is truly an advanced skill and entire books have been written on the subject.



While precision rifle practice inside of 200 yards has its benefits, there is no substitute for training at longer distances (200 to 1000+ yards) under varying wind conditions. For this reason, we make a point of heading out to remote areas to conduct field training exercises (FTX) every couple of months. The FTXs allow us to practice long distance shooting in field conditions while refining on our wind calling skills.

Due to the year round nature of our training, we are exposed to extreme weather conditions. The side benefit of FTXs is they prepare us to compete in just about any environment. For example, we have competed in matches that have varied from frozen rain in the winter to 120 degrees and sustained winds over 30 MPH in the summer. We're fortunate to live in the Pacific Northwest which offers everything from rain forest to high desert climates. We seek out those conditions that will test our abilities, our equipment, and our resolve to tough it out. We do all of this so we'll be that much more prepared for the challenges of the next field match.

"I always look forward to our Field Training Exercises (FTX) as they serve as a capstone to our training program. Getting away from the square range presents me with new challenges, and learning to adapt and accommodate has turned me into a better shooter.

For example, it's easy to become overly familiar with the training props and settle into a routine. By contrast, shooting off of natural obstacles gets you out of that routine and forces you to think. It is my goal to remain calm and collected in the face of something new and unfamiliar.

As our FTXs involve lots of packing and unpacking at each shooting position, I'm learning what to pack and how to pack. I'm not an organized person by nature, so this reduces the fumbling and nervousness that I feel as I get ready for a stage during a match.

-- Ed

Drill to Reinforce Muscle Memory

The majority of our training regimen utilizes repetitive timed drills that are designed to develop specific skills. For example, one drill we've devised is to start standing at the ready rifle in hand. At the start of the timer, the shooter takes one shot from each level of a 3-tiered barricade at a 2 MOA target (3 shots total) in under 45 seconds. One of us will shoot while the other manages the shot timer. When the shooter is done, we'll switch positions. We'll typically run a drill like this about 5-6 times or until we believe that we've



accomplished the training objective. If we clean the targets in the first few runs, we'll shorten the par time to increase the level of difficulty. Afterwards, we'll move on to a new drill guided by the training plan for the day.

Training through repetitive drills has several advantages. First, it allows us to identify a workable shooting position for a given prop. When we encounter a similar prop in a match, we'll already have a good game plan resulting in a sense of cool confidence. Second, the drills nurture muscle memory allowing us to instinctively apply good fundamentals even in awkward positions that seem to be the norm in PRS style matches. Finally, the drills reinforce match conditions where we learn to work quickly under the clock, acquire the next target, build a stable position, and execute a clean shot.

Train the Brain

It is a documented fact that the mindset and mental attitude of the competitor are huge differentiators if one wants to maximize their performance. For this reason, we have embraced certain techniques to "train our brains" in order to emulate the mindset of top shooters.

Following is a set of principles we adhere to:

- Positive mental attitude – This is the first step to getting the most out of training and time on the range. Before every drill we clear our mind and focus on the task at hand. We start each shot with the expectation that we are correctly applying the fundamentals to get a good clean shot on target. Shooting partners should provide encouragement and positive feedback throughout the training session.
- Don't dwell on the missed shots – Nothing will discourage you faster than dwelling on and getting frustrated by missed shots. It's important to quickly diagnose why shots are missed and make the necessary corrections to get back on target. We've found that if shots are consistently missed during a drill, we are most likely rushing and all that is needed is to slow down. Don't practice consistently missing – instead practice what it takes to connect with the target.
- Reinforce what works – a good portion of practice, particularly for new drills, is going through the process of refining our techniques to learn what works best for us. What may work well for Steve may not be what's best for Ed and vice versa. Once we find what works best for us under a given scenario, we try to form a mental map so we can reproduce success. Once we know what works, we drill, drill, drill to develop muscle memory.
- Envision the game plan – before running through a practice drill we will visualize in our minds eye, step by step, how we will perform the drill. If there are new things or we are having trouble in a particular area, we break things down into incremental steps and go through them in our mind. We will repeat this process so it is clear what we need to do and in what order. Often times we will dry fire through an exercise several times before loading up with live ammo.



We came across an article by Gary Anderson “Ten Lessons for Competitive Shooters” and this has provided some useful philosophical underpinnings. In the first article published on our web site www.65guys.com, we outlined how we would extend his philosophy into our shooting. You can read the article here: <http://www.65guys.com/articles/gary-andersons-lessons-for-competitive-shooters/>

It is important to make a point of learning from the more experienced shooters you meet along the way. Shooters tend to be supportive of those who want to learn so don't be shy about seeking out mentors. While you work on your personal relationships, you can get a jump start with the interviews we performed of other nationally ranked competitive shooters in “A Talk With PRS Competitors” which you can find here: <http://www.65guys.com/a-talk-with-prs-competitors/>



Measure and Track Your Progress

The effectiveness of training cannot be accurately evaluated without some form of objective measurement over time. Ideally shooters should track what drills are practiced and overall performance statistics.

We currently measure and track certain elements of our training such as cold bore shot placement, zero retention, dot drills

and average par times for our regular drills. Our individual scores and placement in matches is the ultimate measure of progress as competitive shooters. So we also conduct after action reviews from each match we attend. Admittedly we still have room for improvement when it comes to tracking our progress, but we have seen significant improvement in our skills thanks to regular practice.

We recommend setting specific and measurable performance goals and developing a training strategy to achieve your goals. Measure and record your progress during training. Finally, attend matches to get an objective assessment of how you perform in relation to other precision rifle shooters. Competition is a great way to benchmark your performance relative to other precision rifle shooters and will help you identify performance gaps so you can optimize your training plans.

Supplement your practice with dry firing

Sometimes it's just not possible to get out to the range when we want to get some additional trigger time. We have learned that performing dry firing exercises is a great supplemental skill builder beyond live fire training at the range.



When Olympic legend Gary Anderson was a child he couldn't afford ammunition so he dry fired constantly. We do the same thing. We also set up our barricades at home and shoot at reduced sized targets using the Indoor Optical Training Aid which you can see here: <http://www.65guys.com/dry-fire-practice-and-the-indoor-optical-training-aid-iota/>

For every live round that you fire, expect to dry fire 20 or more times. Watch your reticle when you dry fire and adjust your technique to minimize any movement at the moment the firing pin drops. Experiment with your positions and understand what makes a steady versus an unsteady position. Determine if you are really relaxed. Often you believe you are relaxed but upon closer examination you learn that you are muscling yourself into position.

While dry firing doesn't harm your rifle, we've discovered that the firing pin tips will break off every 8-9 months which represents 10,000 or so dry fires. As a result, we have a firing pin for dry firing and another for matches.

Putting it all together

We usually coordinate the day before on our training plan. Our discussion covers things such as what we'll practice, round count and particular targets or props to be used. If there are other things we want to accomplish such as work on load development, test a new piece of kit, etc. we prepare accordingly. Although the specifics of our practice sessions will vary from week to week, they follow a similar format:



- Shooting positions on the firing line are secured by moving the shooting benches back beyond the firing line. Some ranges have permanent benches and in those situations we've had to improvise. Next, we set up any props we brought with us such as barricades, rooftops, barrels, parapets, etc.
- Steel targets are placed at the end of our 200 yard rifle range and our paper targets are setup on the 100 yard line. Our steel targets at 200 yards are sized from 1-3 MOA to emulate what one might encounter in a match. Our goal is to shoot at the smallest target that we can reliably hit 80 percent of the time or more. Any larger and you are not challenging yourself, any smaller and

you will be frustrating yourself. Given a particular scenario, we've noticed that we can reliably hit smaller and smaller targets over time.

- Every practice session starts with a paper target at 100 yards. In fact, we've designed and created our own paper target specifically for our practice sessions. It all begins with a cold bore shot taken from the prone position. For us, the cold bore shot is the most important shot of the day. It gets us laser-focused on sending out a good first shot. The impact is noted and tracked over time in our log books. After the cold bore shot, we confirm our zero and if necessary make adjustments. Normally, you should not see significant zero shifts between practice sessions. If you do, and your equipment checks out, examine the consistency of your position.
- Continuing with our paper targets, we perform a series of dot drill exercises consisting of five rounds each. These are timed drills with each series executed under shorter time constraints (30 seconds, then 25 and then 20). At least one of these series starts from the standing position so we learn to build a shooting position quickly. We also want to fire the first shot quickly but not so quick that we miss the target – it's a balancing act. Once we get done with our "paperwork" we'll rarely shoot prone again for the duration of our practice session.
- We conduct exercises focused on positional shooting both with a sling and without a sling. If there is something new that we want to try out, this is when we'll do it...when we're fresh. An example would include learning how to shoot "gangster style" with a rifle on its side. Yes, we've actually seen that in a match. Depending on the exercise, we may shoot at paper or steel targets.
- The remainder of our session consists of timed practice shooting at steel targets from various positions using a variety of props. We take turns where one person shoots and the other person runs the timer. It is our objective to shoot under time constraints that are similar to or slightly more aggressive than what we would encounter in a match. We make a point of getting in some weak side practice as well. Sometimes you'll surprise yourself how well you can shoot weak side with a bit of practice.
- We both maintain shooter logs and take notes throughout our practice sessions. The logs don't have to be anything fancy – a notebook will suffice.
- After our practice ammo is exhausted (usually 75-100 rounds per session), we clean up our shooting stations, pack up our gear and head to a local restaurant to grab a bite to eat.
- Between training sessions we'll review our logs and make adjustments to our equipment. We'll usually conduct some dry firing to confirm any changes.



We've found an important part of this formula is having a shooting partner or group of friends you can regularly train and practice with. A good shooting partner can provide feedback, coaching, encouragement and some friendly competition during training and at matches. While this is a broad glimpse into our current practice regimen, it will continue to evolve based on what we encounter in competition and where we fail to perform at a consistent level.

Through our journey as riflemen, we have come to learn that precision rifle shooting is a perishable skill. Like any other sport, a consistently high level of performance requires regular, focused practice. Just about anyone, at any skill level can improve through well planned and executed training. The reward is more first round impacts and higher placement on the leaderboards.

Remember – Life is an adventure... Stay on Target!