HOLDING Drill

Glen Zediker with Troy Lawton

TROY LAWTON is one of the very best offhand shooters on this planet. He's competed in rifle silhouette and running target and has national records and championships in each event. Troy has also fired two perfect 40-target silhouette rifle scores in competition. Pay attention...

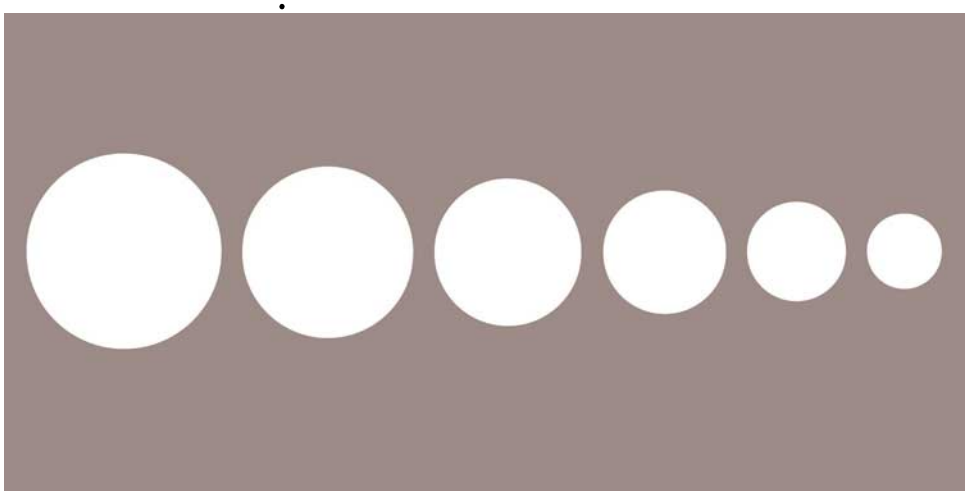
Everyone wants to shoot better offhand scores. Excluding strictly prone events, a rifle shooter's finishing position is usually a byproduct of the standing score. The road to becoming a good offhand shooter is fairly well mapped out: it takes a lot of work on position and then it takes a lot of practice. Of course, that statement doesn't tell you anything you don't already know. This article will put some "what" into the "how." There's no question that a lot of rounds put downrange in match conditions (regulation target, regulation distance, regulation procedure) is absolutely necessary to shoot well offhand, but a steady diet of it may not provide all the input you need to improve.

When you're out on the course you're most concerned with the scoring value of each shot, and for good reason! Score wins or loses. However, looking to improve the score may require literally taking a different look through the sights.

Troy Lawton uses and recommends a drill designed to improve hold. This drill will not necessarily improve shot selection, but we'll talk more about that later. Also note that after I explain the drill in the next few paragraphs there's then going to be some additional information to consider before trying it. That information, however, would make no sense without first understanding the format of the drill, so keep reading...

SETTING UP

Manufacture a series of target circles as shown and affix them to a wall wherever you do your dry-firing. Possibilities for making the targets include using a circle template as found at an office supply, a compass, or, ideally, a computer and laser printer. You're now going to dry-fire (and you know the gun is empty because you've looked into the chamber) and determine a circle size you can maintain the sight fully inside during the best segment of your hold. The best segment of your hold is not necessarily the specific point where you'd break a shot. It's something only you can define, but it's the time during which you're on the target and waiting to see the sight get where it needs to -- you're waiting and willing to fire.



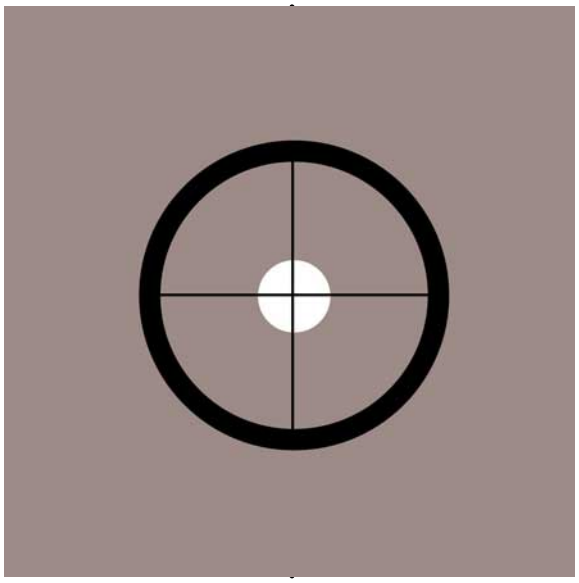
After finding a circle you can keep the sight fully within for the duration of this holding period, reproduce that circle on a piece of paper and go to work with it. Shoulder the rifle, bring it to bear on the target, and maintain the sight within the

circle. After a half-dozen or so successful experiences, confirm that you can maintain a hold within that area by dry-firing a half-dozen or so times.

The most accurate feedback during dry-firing comes if you increase pressure slowly on the trigger until the hammer drops -- strive for a "surprise" break. Keep in mind that the goal is to release a shot at any time during this holding period and land it inside that circle -- you're not necessarily trying to hit the center of the circle.

SIGHT PICTURES & PERSPECTIVES

These targets are designed for best use with a scoped rifle. Crosshairs show up well and will precisely show movement area. Therefore, you need a scope to really benefit from this drill (not necessarily a target model -- just something with crosshairs). Or you could modify the targets to accommodate your iron sights. For instance, you might try using white squares with a post front sight. Correspondingly, adjust front aperture size on full-aperture irons to suit the target.



Note also that while magnification amplifies apparent movement, even a 4x scope radically better defines the target. If you are attempting to do this drill with a service rifle, for instance, you need to have a target that you can see well enough in order to gauge the quality of your hold. Therefore, the size of the target you'll use is influenced by your sight picture.

If you had the outstanding ability to maintain a 2 moa hold, for instance, a 2 moa target at 15 feet is difficult to see, let alone tell whether or not you're keeping the front sight (which will appear about 6 moa itself) within that area. In this case, what's important is the amount of target seen around the sight post. If a 2 moa hold were to be visibly confirmed, it would require a target that allowed 1 moa to show on either side of the sight post when the post was centered.

Although this drill works best with scoped rifles, use your imagination (and your computer printer...) to come up with something that works for your needs. Point isn't to do the drill some certain way. Point is to use it to help you improve your offhand hold. The idea is more important than the instructions.

There is, then, no "regulation" target to use in this drill. All that matters is that the target is appropriately sized to show your movement area. Experiment.

BUILDING UP IS SIZING DOWN

Back to the drill: after you've confirmed your ability to hold within the original circle you chose, make a target with a smaller circle and go back to work. There's no end to this exercise: you can always try to hold a smaller area. It's recommended to reduce the circle size by one-half-moa each step. You'll need a calculator to figure out what that might be in inches.

One final note on procedure: Given the initiative, the ultimate means to confirm an ability to hold within a certain sized circle is to reproduce that target scaled for, say, 100 yards and live-fire. This also makes the targets easier to manufacture as you can use tin cans and spray paint. Also, it goes without saying that substituting an air rifle for dry-firing provides more honest feedback.

No matter how you choose to fire an offhand shot in competition, it's always better when there's less rifle movement. Aside from the obvious, less movement usually also means more controlled, consistent movement. I strongly suggest reading what David Tubb has to say on offhand shooting technique in his book* Highpower Rifle*, published by Zediker Publishing and available elsewhere on this site.

THE EFFECT

One reason this drill "works" is that it changes the shooter's focus from a point to an area. Since you're reducing the focus on shot break through holding without firing and also by drawing on the "surprise" break, you're going to focus on your hold. This may be a new, or at least different, experience for a lot of shooters. The goal is to make the holding area the same, or smaller, than the highest scoring area on the target you'll shoot in competition. That won't happen without a lot of work, and given the nature of an outdoor event like Highpower Rifle, will never happen with regularity due to uncooperative weather conditions.

Using this drill will help you understand the distinction between a point and an area. The exact point where the sight was on firing -- not the hold -- determines score value. There are days, as any Silhouette shooter knows, when the hold might be moving from animal to animal, but if the shot breaks when the crosshairs are on a spot on an animal the bullet will hit very close to that spot. So shot selection is more important than hold, and it always will be.

If shot selection is more important than hold, why then bother improving the hold? Shot opportunities, for one. If your hold is better, you'll have more chances to select a center shot because you'll have a greater number of choices. When the sight is holding more steadily in an area, you can be more discriminating in shot selection. Also, when the hold maintains the sight nearer the area that defines target center, there is less chance that a mistake (a shot that goes a little sooner or later than planned) will track off center as much.

This drill also exercises followthrough and deliberation. It's the opposite of "picking off" shots (making a quick trigger pull the moment the sight touches center). There's nothing wrong with that technique, and it's used by some of the very best offhand shooters in the world, but it's one thing if it's a planned method and it's something else entirely if it's done because it has to be.

GETTING BETTER

Your hold will improve after working with this drill. Guaranteed. What, specifically, you need to change to bring in your holding area could range from technical to procedural to mental, or combinations. We'll come back in another issue and see if we can give you some ideas on improving all three.