

Becoming an International Class Shooter

For most of us, silhouette shooting is just a game, a hobby to keep us out of trouble. Like most hobbies, we shoot when we can, practice when we can and just enjoy the game for what it is...a friendly get-together once a month to share guns, shooting and the outdoors, a way to relieve the stress from a long work week. Many shooters will start in B or C class, those with little or no handgun experience. Others, who may have a lot more experience shooting, will start out in A or maybe AA class. One of the great things about silhouette shooting is this class system, where we are all competing with other shooters having similar skills knocking down the steel targets. You may be an A-class competitor shooting right next to an International class shooter, but you are not competing with him, only yourself and other A-class shooters.

But who is this International Class shooter next to you? And how did he get to be so good? At most ranges he is certainly respected, sometimes revered and sometimes even hated for being so successful. After all, he seems to win everything. I mean, he just lays there and all the targets fall...it looks so easy. And then he knocks over a bunch of chickens at 200M...I can't even knock them all down at 50M! It doesn't seem fair...he doesn't look like anything special, no different than I am. When you get right down to it, heck, I'm even better looking than he is! Why can't I be that good? Have you thought any of these things before? Many have at one time or another, including myself. So what does it take to attain the coveted International Class designation?

Background

Right from the start, I will tell you that this is not a guaranteed, fool-proof method. I'm also not going to require you to send me money for my "secrets". It is the culmination of my experiences, hopefully it will help you as it did me.

My very first IHMSA entry in 1985 netted me a sterling 3x40 with a Ruger semi-auto. I knew I could do better, so I re-entered and shot an impressive 5x40. But, I was hooked. I really had no idea what I was doing, and had only shot a handgun once or twice prior to that. Very soon I was introduced to a AAA-class shooter and we became friends and partners. We practiced in the cold Indiana winter and by my first spring match, I had improved to a 32x40. By the end of the summer I was shooting scores of 36-37 with an occasional 38. We were both just having fun shooting silhouettes. Big Bore silhouette with a 14" .30-30 Contender was added, with about the same results and even more fun with the added noise and recoil.

Another year passed with the same scores and a couple of 39's on rare occasions, but I was still just having fun. The only thing we did was practice whenever we could and travel to a lot of matches. Then two things happened that changed everything. My partner quit silhouette and a forced job change sent me to northern Kentucky, where I knew no one...I was on my own. In short order I found a range where I could practice with my .22 swingers and a couple of clubs to shoot silhouettes at. My new schedule gave me a lot of time for practice during the week, but few weekends off for matches. When you're out practicing on the silhouette range with no one around, you become...contemplative. You start talking to yourself...well, not really talking, but thinking.

I started wondering why I couldn't get that elusive 40x40 and make it into International class. If I could regularly shoot 37's with an occasional 38 or 39, why couldn't I get those last one or two targets? There must be a trick to it...the top shooters seemed to get 40's on a regular basis. Maybe there was some kind of barrier there, similar to the sound barrier. Once you got through it, it was easy. Since I had no one to ask, I decided I would attempt to figure it out myself.

Being an airline pilot for many years, I've developed a very analytical mind. As pilots, we are thrust into many situations that demand clear thinking processes to sort out the myriad of variables that may affect the outcome of each flight. Learning to fly a new airplane is a tough, demanding process that takes a neophyte and turns him into a well-qualified pilot in very short order. Becoming a top silhouette shooter is a very similar process, although it may take quite a bit longer than becoming a

good pilot because we generally have years of prior flying experience behind us, whereas a silhouette shooter may not have a lot of experience before he tries this game.

When we first try silhouette, it is a whole new ballgame, yet there is some familiarity with certain aspects of the sport. Yes, we know about sights, triggers, cartridges, shooting positions, but a lot of silhouette shooting seems foreign to us. It is the same with a new airplane...I knew about landing gears, wings, basic aircraft systems, but all the new switches, instruments and systems were a mystery. A glance at the instrument and systems panels seems to reveal an overwhelming array of unfamiliar stuff...man, I'll never learn all this in a week, and suddenly I have an overwhelming urge to get sick! But airline training starts with the very basics, then builds on those basics one step at a time...each system is learned by itself, then how it relates to other systems...a building-block process that leads to full knowledge and skill coordinating everything into one smooth flight. Many pilots liken it to opening your mouth, putting a fire-hose in it and turning it on full blast...airlines don't have years to train pilots: you've got to do this in only a couple of weeks at the most. As new silhouette shooters, we don't have to learn this overnight. We have the luxury of time, but the process involves the same type of learning system.

The System

The first thing we have to do is break everything down into the basic elements. Being a top shooter isn't just pulling the trigger and watching the targets fall, it involves the entire aspect of the sport and how everything relates to it. Shooting silhouette involves guns, ammo, sight systems, spotters, range equipment and the shooter himself. Each is important to the process, although some are obviously more important...having the wrong gun won't help you become a good shooter, but you can shoot well without a spotter. I started with the basic peripheral equipment, hoping to eliminate the easy stuff first. I had a shooting box that would hold my gun and all the accessories I need. These include shooting glasses, ear protection, screwdrivers, sight block, sight setting book, spotting board and all the other small things I've needed on the line. Having all this with you when you shoot saves time and frustration by not having to run back to the truck for something essential. I have had all this stuff for years and I was satisfied all was okay here.

Spotting Equipment

Next was my spotting equipment. This checked out okay...I have a very good spotting scope with which I can see bullet holes on paper at 200M and a good solid tripod. Invest in a decent scope if you have to...the cheap ones make it hard to see your shots and the lack of optic quality will cause eye strain while using it, something you definitely don't want if you expect to shoot well. Also get a good, heavy-duty tripod. I see many inexpensive tripods with very skinny legs and light weight. These will bounce around too much with any kind of wind, making spotting very difficult, again causing eye strain. With a good-quality spotting scope, they become too top-heavy and are easily knocked over, damaging or destroying your optics. I recommend the ones used for mounting video cameras...they are very stable and will better support the weight of a heavy scope. I knew a shooter who used a transit (the same thing you see surveyors using all the time). It looked way out of place at the range, but you couldn't budge this thing in a hurricane! A lot of people use binoculars for spotting, and they do work well for reducing eye strain, but they have a couple of limitations. Magnification is low, usually 7-10X only, and they are impossible to hold steady. Your spotter will miss many shots, due to this moving around. If you use them, mount them on a good tripod at least.

Guns And Ammo

Next I turned to the guns. Like most shooters, I saw what the top competitors were using, and based on input from them, I bought the same basic guns...Contenders, XP-100's, and Dan Wesson's. I knew

they were all accurate guns, capable of shooting perfect scores every time. The factory sights were all good, repeatable sights and my Unlimited guns wore Bomar/Bond combinations. No problems here. Then I turned to the ammo...could this be the cause of missed targets? I reviewed all my load data and testing results and found no problems. All my ammo testing was carefully done off a solid benchrest, using wind flags and chronographs. The selected loads were all capable of groups from less than a half-inch at 100M to no more than an inch and a half for Production and Unlimited guns. Revolver loads would all do less than 2.5" at 100M. All ram loads were tested at 200M, as were my shootoff loads. For the rimfires, I had done a lot of testing and had settled on Eley ammo, which would shoot under 1.5" at 100 yards. I was confident that my equipment was more than adequate for perfect scores.

The Shooter

All that remained was me, the shooter. What was I doing, or not doing, that kept me from that elusive 40? There had to be something, the problem was finding it. Shooting .22's is a lot harder than shooting Big Bore, so I figured if I concentrated on small bore only, any gains made should transfer over to the easier, bigger targets. I went to the range with new determination, and all my equipment. I had no spotting partner, so I was on my own. After setting up my .22 swingers, I just sat there for a few minutes, thinking about what I was trying to accomplish. Everything starts with your shooting position, so I began there. My shooting position is a bit different from most others...some people call it a crippled cockroach position, or sidewinder...I don't even have a name for it, but it is very stable and supports the entire weight of the gun, unlike the standard Creedmore position. All I have to do is grip the gun barely tight enough to keep from dropping it and point it in the right direction. I began by just getting into position and dry-firing to try to see if anything was amiss.

I dry-fired a 40 round match with my production TC, trying to note any inconsistencies. Right off I noticed one thing...while going through some banks of targets, I found myself occasionally shifting my position slightly for some of the targets, while not shifting it for others. Instead of aligning my body correctly for each shot, I was sometimes forcing the gun to line up on the target, instead of letting it naturally align itself. You absolutely must get into your shooting position exactly the same way for every shot and adjust it so the gun lines up on target without any muscle pressure in any direction. Rifle shooters know this as the NPA, the Natural Point of Aim. Face the target and get into your shooting position with your eyes closed. Once you are relaxed and correctly in position, open your eyes and look at your sights. If the gun is not pointing at the target, you must adjust your position until it does with your eyes closed. This is your NPA and you should strive to perfect this for every shot. If you force the gun on target, even slightly, you introduce variables which can cause misses. The good thing about this is that you can practice it at home, until it becomes second nature. This is one of the keys to good shooting, and I can't emphasize it enough. You want to train yourself to be a shooting machine...living and breathing, but a machine none the less. You want to end up just like the computer-programmed robots on a factory auto-assembly line...every action identical to the last shot.

With this small revelation, I thought I had solved the problem, so I shot a practice match...another 37, not great, but at least no worse than normal. I continued to practice for several days with no real improvement, although it did seem a little easier after awhile. I would practice by shooting 5 shots on each swinger, timing each bank just as if it were a match, then stopping to rest and view the results through the spotting scope.

While practicing one day, I fired a shot that missed a turkey, and I knew it when the trigger broke that it would miss, as the sights had drifted off target, but I shot anyway. All of a sudden it hit me like

a brick wall...that was it! I knew it would be a miss and it was. I realized that I had been doing that very same thing for a couple of years...letting shots go that weren't exactly on target. They were close, but not where they should have been. Obviously, you wouldn't shoot when the sights were pointing 5 inches off the target, but what I had been doing all this time was letting shots go that were almost on target, but not where they should have been. I knew they were not at the ideal spot, but they seemed close enough and I had squeezed the trigger anyway. The problem was that most of the time I had actually hit the target...it wasn't pretty, but the target had fallen. I mean, after all, that's what those legs, feet, noses, beaks and horns were for, right? And there was the revelation...it had worked most of the time, although not all the time, and had become ingrained into my subconscious. The few targets that were missed were the ones that were not quite close enough to score, but good enough to allow my subconscious to pull the trigger. There were my 37's and 38's. I had unknowingly trained my subconscious to be sloppy. Now that I had determined the problem, how do I correct it?

The Cure

Since my sloppiness had caused my misses, I figured all I had to do to get that first 40, and International Class status, was stop being sloppy. That turned out to be harder than I thought. It takes a lot of work to retrain your subconscious mind, and it doesn't just happen overnight. I started with the .22 chickens and conscientiously went through each step to fire one good shot.

Examine all your actions and movements for consistency. Start with the basics, where you place your shooting box, ammo and screwdriver. Do it the same every time and minimize movements. I see shooters twisting and turning after every shot, sitting up to reload, laying back down...looks like they have ants in their pants. Put your ammo box on the same side as your loading hand, right under where it naturally falls to the side. Don't place it where you have to twist your body to reach it and disturb your position. Same for your sight-setting screwdriver. You want ammo and screwdriver right where you can reach them without even looking for them or changing your position. Do you use a shooting mat? Sometimes? At some ranges? Use it all the time, regardless, same for practice sessions. How about your shooting glove and elbow pad? If you use them for big bore, you should also use them for .22. Of course you don't need them for rimfires, but using them all the time improves your consistency, both in shooting position and grip. Plus, the added advantage of always using them will eliminate those times when you forget to put them on for Big Bore until after the first shot breaks and the concrete has scrapped all the skin off your elbow...not very conducive to good scores. Look at all the little details...small changes can all add up to make big improvements over time. Even things like shoes...tennis shoes sometimes, boots others? I wear the same set of boots for every match and practice. It doesn't sound like much, but a little thing like that will make your position more exact each time you lay down to shoot.

Here's something I see all the time. A shooter grips his gun, then spends several seconds adjusting his grip until it is just right. Then he lays the gun against his leg, reaches up with his thumb and cocks the hammer back, disturbing the grip he just carefully established. He then goes through the same movements again until he gets it just the way he wants it. All this does is waste time and effort and introduce grip errors. Try this...once you get your grip established exactly the way you want it, reach over with your non-shooting hand and cock the hammer. You won't disturb your grip and will save a bit of time and effort...much more consistent this way.

Now that we are cocked and ready to fire, the hard part comes, sight alignment and trigger squeeze. We all know what correct sight alignment is, but it takes work to maintain that alignment until the shot breaks. Where do you hold on the target? It all depends on individual preferences. Some shooters like to hold on the belly of the target, the classic 6 o'clock hold. Others prefer placing the sights on the center of the target. Either way is fine. Adjust your sights so that a perfect hold on the target places the bullet in the exact center of the target. This will take lots of practice, just write down your sight settings for each match and practice. Eventually, you will get sight settings that won't change from one time to the next. If they do, then you are doing something different. Obviously, weather and light

conditions can change how you perceive the target and sight alignment, but on good days they should be the same every time. Learn to call your shots. Concentrate on the sight picture and see exactly where the sights were at the break. You should be able to do this for the majority of your shots, and your swingers will verify the validity of your call. When you can do this consistently, you will be a much better shooter, because it's the proof that you are concentrating on what you need to do for each shot.

Trigger squeeze should never disturb your sight picture. We all jerk the trigger on occasion, or at least snap it when we should be squeezing it, but this is another area where practicing with .22's is a big advantage...no recoil or noise to intimidate or distract you. Dry-fire practice is also a good teacher. You should be able to dry-fire your guns without disturbing your sight picture. Another tip...get a good trigger job done on all your Production guns and go with a light, custom trigger for the Unlimited ones. It's hard enough to break the shot exactly when you want to, even more so when you have to drag the trigger through several pounds of grit and creep. Then the trigger slams into the rear of the trigger guard due to excessive backlash, sending your shot off the mark. Contenders have a backlash adjustment to prevent this...set it properly and lock tight it in place. I prefer 10 ounces or less on my Production guns and 2-6 ounces for the Unlimited XP's. My Calfee XP-22 has a one ounce trigger...an absolute joy to use, but it requires new disciplines to keep safe. Do not even think of putting your finger in the trigger guard until the sights are on target! Once you get used to a decent trigger, all others seem impossible to use.

After all this effort refining my position and technique, the key to improving my scores was to not accept taking a shot unless the sights were pointed exactly where they were supposed to be. I had to work at each one, trying to put each shot dead-center on the target. I strove for perfection on every shot...don't release the trigger until it is exactly where it's supposed to be. This required a lot of mental effort on my part, as initially I still had my normal tendency to try to take a "close-enough" shot. I would catch myself, stop, re-breathe and start over, making it as perfect as I could.

Results

Did this cure my problem? Not instantly, but with a lot of work on sight alignment and my mental game, I started to see improvement on target. A lot more shots were near the center, with less edge hits. Were they all perfect? Hardly. No one can make it perfect every time, but that shouldn't stop you from trying on each shot. After a lot of 38's and 39's, I finally shot my first ever 40x40 on July 5, 1987. What a rush! I had finally done it! The very next week, I got my second leg into Big Bore International class. Now I was officially a top dog...well, at least in the Top Dog Class. Six days later, at my home range in Crittenden, KY, my first International-Class entry was a 40 + 10 FP shootoffs at 150M. Since then, I've shot a few hundred perfect scores, and probably the same number of 39's and 38's. Just because I figured out what I had to do doesn't mean I can do it all the time. Distractions and the occasional lack of concentration can easily result in a miss...just goes to show that right when you think you have everything figured out, you can still mess up.

What have I learned most from all this? You have to work at this game to make it look easy. If you just want to have fun, and don't care how many targets you hit, by all means, enjoy yourself. But if you want to knock down the most targets at each match, then it will take some dedication to the task of making one good shot, 40 times in a row. Despite the extra work, silhouette is more fun now than it ever was. Now my goal is to get all the shootoff targets...that's going to take even more refinement. I still have to be careful with the full-size targets; any sloppiness on my part will prevent me from having fun on the shootoffs. Silhouette is no different from any sport...if you want to excel, it's going to take some work, practice and dedication. Just don't forget to have fun in the process!

