

Equipment Notes For The Beginning Highpower Rifle Competitor

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These notes and observations are for the beginning highpower shooter. Highpower is an equipment intensive sport, though good training and practice count at least as much as equipment. Safety equipment purchases are absolutely and immediately necessary, while other items may be borrowed from others at matches and practice sessions. Highpower shooters are a generous and sharing lot, provided you ask in advance. Before making major purchases ask around and find out what is working well for local shooters. Used gear is often available; put up "wanted" posters or advertise in club newsletters.

In no particular order, here are the things a beginning shooter will need. In some instances the advice is to start with an improvised item rather than immediately buying an expensive item like a shooting coat.

Hearing protection: Most ranges require hearing protection, and you will shoot better when you use it. A high Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) is desirable, but a high NRR usually also means more weight, bulk and cost. The muff type protectors are conveniently quick to put on and take off. Many shooters prefer the ear plug type protection, which is available as inexpensive foam puffs and more expensive custom molded versions. I personally prefer the bright daylight fluorescent orange foam puffs sold by Dillon, topped by a pair of Peltor shotgunner muffs.

Eye protection: Very, very rarely a cartridge may leak powder gasses or rupture, carrying bits of metal back toward the shooter. Eye protection is necessary, and usually takes the form of sunglasses, prescription lenses or special shooting glasses. Select for impact resistance. See eye care professional for special shooting lenses.

Rifles: In NRA competition, two types of rifles are used: the match rifle and the service rifle. Match rifles are usually bolt actions with heavy barrels, five round magazines and special stocks. Most commonly chambered for the 308 Winchester or 223 Remington families of cartridges, they bear precision adjustable rear sights with an aperture front sight. Most match rifles are built up by custom gunsmiths from standard factory actions. A growing number of match rifles are seen based on semi-auto actions such as the Colt AR-15 or Knight SR-25.

Service rifle means a US military service rifle or its civilian equivalent. This means the M1 Garand in 30-06 or 7.62mm NATO/308 Win, the M14/M1A in 7.62/308 or the M16/AR-15 in 5.56mm NATO/223 Rem. Military rifles from other countries or an earlier era are regarded as match rifles. As the service rifle may be fired in match rifle events, but not vice-versa, new shooters often begin with the service rifle.

Basic service grade M1 Garand rifles are available for sale to highpower competitors through an organization called the Civilian Marksmanship Program. Used to be Army sponsored, now a "government sponsored enterprise". The process involves a lot of paperwork, takes several months, and is worth while because the rifle will be in much better condition than those being brought back into the country from the Philippines, Korea, etc.. Contact: Director of Civilian Marksmanship, P. O. Box 576, Port Clinton, OH 43452; (419) 635-2141; www.odcmp.com.

Many shooting clubs have a number of M1 Garand rifles loaned or sold to them by the CMP under a program to promote military-type marksmanship among civilians. Clubs use these rifles at club matches and training clinics. Limited supplies of surplus military ammunition may also be available

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If I were starting the highpower game today I would go with an M16/AR-15 type service rifle. Initial cost is less than for an M14/M1A, accurizing costs less, ammo costs less, they stay tuned up, recoil is lighter, parts are easily available, easily convertible to match rifle, etc. Besides, this is the service rifle of today!

Sling: For the match rifle, any type of one arm sling is allowed. The most common is a simple leather strap with two buckles allowing adjustment for length and a snug fit on the upper arm. The sling is not used in the offhand position, and is usually taken off the match rifle. Fields and Jensen make good match rifle slings.

Service rifle shooters have a choice of the military one piece cotton or nylon web sling, or the two piece leather military sling. The leather sling is best; look for one 1-1/4" wide, made of heavy leather, front strap at least 50 inches long. Brownell's makes a good sling, Turner Saddlery makes the best; don't bother with light duty stuff like Hunter or Uncle Mike's. The cotton web sling is okay, and easy to use; stay away from the slippery nylon one! The sling stays on the service rifle in all shooting positions, though it is used only in the sitting and prone stages.

Chargers, clips or magazines: Have at least three which work in your rifle. Only two are really needed, but what if one gets lost or damaged? Test each for smooth function. Be aware of local legal restrictions.

Gun case: Used to protect the rifle from damage and prying eyes. Hard cases offer the most protection, are lockable and required if you fly with a firearm. Soft cases are less bulky and more convenient.

Cleaning gear: Clean rifles shoot better and last longer! You need a sturdy one piece plastic coated steel cleaning rod, rod guide, bore brushes, a patch holder and an old toothbrush. Avoid aluminum or brass cleaning rods: the soft metal can pick up grit and damage your barrel. I like Dewey and Parker-Hale rods. Also needed are a powder solvent, a copper solvent, patches, gun grease, gun oil and some rags.

Ammunition: For the beginner, almost any safe ammo for your rifle will do. Various types of surplus are available, and will work fine for your first few matches as you learn the game. As skill improves, you may want to reload for economy and accuracy. The loads listed below work well for the author.

* * * DISCLAIMER: Reloading and use of reloaded ammunition can be hazardous. Read up on safety procedures, view videos and seek competent instruction. Wear safety equipment such as eyeshield and gloves. The author assumes no liability for other persons who may use data in this article. * * *

30-06: Military cases, standard force primer, 45 grains IMR 4895 powder, 168 grain match bullet.

7.62/308: Military cases, standard force primer, 41 grains IMR 4895 powder, 168 grain match bullet.

5.56/223: Military or civilian cases, standard force primer, 25 grains Hodgdon 335 powder and 55 grain bullet, or, for 1-9 or faster twist barrels, 26 grains WW 748 powder and 68 or 69 grain match bullet. Heavier bullets are available for specialized handloading. See latest loading manuals for more information.

Data book: Some sort of notebook to record sight settings, ammo used, windage adjustments. Special notebooks with pre-printed record sheets are available. I like

the Creedmoor book. A seed corn notebook or other small wirebound notebook will do.

Temporary score book: Important! Obtain one of these at the first clinic or match you attend. Until issued a formal classification card by the NRA, this booklet is your classification record for subsequent competitions.

Rule book: A current NRA Highpower Rule Book will guide you as to what is allowed and expected. The rules change a little each year. Contact at www.nra.org. and go to competitions division.

Timer or stopwatch: A convenience, helps you pace yourself during slow fire matches. A regular wristwatch will also serve.

Clothing: Should be comfortable. Wear outdoor clothing suitable for the weather. From the ground up:

Shoes: Sturdy, with a fairly firm, flat sole. Athletic shoes are popular, as are hiking boots; no sandals.

Pants: Nothing too restrictive, as you must shoot in the sitting position. Blue jeans and chinos are a good choice. I like tan BDU's, supported by carpenter suspenders. Shorts are not a good choice as a hot cartridge case on the back of the knee is somewhat distracting . . .!

Shirt(s): Shirt with collar (to keep sun and hot brass off), and a sweatshirt. I like old white dress shirts.

Hat: For sun protection and to cut glare while shooting. Needs to work in combination with your hearing protection. Ball caps are popular; I like the 'Nam era "Boonie Hat"- full brim and chin strap.

Glove or mitt: Special shooting gloves are nice, but many shooters use a sturdy lined work glove on their forward hand. For years I used an old ski glove found by the side of the road while biking.

Shooting coat: A shooting coat helps stabilize the shooting positions, dampens muscle tremors and pulse beats, and softens the effect of rifle recoil. Coats range from inexpensive all fabric "USMC" types (\$40) to custom sewn leather versions (\$400). Most shooters use a coat made of leather or Cordura™ fabric with quilted padding, rubber traction patches, sling hook and adjustable take up straps. I like Champions Choice and Creedmoor; my next coat will be a Creedmoor standard model in Cordura™.

A shooting coat is a big investment. The beginner may want to improvise for a while by using a jean jacket or chore coat over one or two sweatshirts. Avoid slippery nylon fabrics!

Mat: Some sort of mat or pad is needed for the prone position, and is useful in the sitting position as well. Look for a water repellent bottom, padding, rubber traction patches and tie strings. Many shooters will let you use their mat if you ask. A five foot length of self padded carpet runner or indoor/outdoor carpet can be substituted. I like the Champion's Choice mat, with lots of Scotchguard or Camp Dry water repellent on the fabric. I don't like mats with slippery plastic bottoms.

Spotting scope and stand: Again, many shooters will let you use their scope if you ask,

but you will soon want your own. Justify the expense by using it for big game spotting, bird watching, etc. Avoid discount store scopes- they are no bargain! Most shooters choose a scope of 20-25 power, with a 45 degree eyepiece. This will allow you to see 30 caliber bullet holes at 200 yards, and spotting disks at all ranges. A padded cover will help protect the scope from bumps, rain and dust. Champions Choice offers a good basic scope; Kowa are the top of the line. As newer scopes come on line, good deals are available on one generation back equipment.

Stands for spotting scopes allow adjustment for use in all the shooting positions. A camera tripod makes an awkward substitute. The most popular bipod types are the old Freeland design and a newer design by EKL. Several tripod designs are now on the market, and seem more stable than the bipods. I use the Mo's tripod. The Ewing and Giraud tripod designs are superb- strong, exceptionally stable, and convenient to use.

Rain gear: Necessary, even in sunny Colorado, for the shooter and his gear. Poncho or rain suit for the shooter, and a plastic tarp or 55 gallon size trash can liner for the rifle, spotting scope, etc.

Shooting kit: To help keep all of the above organized. A folding stool with a bag is most popular. Many shooters use a tool box. A sturdy wood box or plastic storage crate will also serve. Bear in mind you may have to lug this stuff some distance! At park & hike ranges I use a clean trash barrel strapped on a light duty dolly.

Keeping It All Together: There is a lot of activity at a rifle match, and it is easy to misplace things. Put your name on every item of equipment and supply. After each match or training session reorganize your gear so as to be ready for the next event.

Final thought: When possible, trade with local merchants. Sometimes specialty items are available at major matches. Ask around about good used gear. Listed below are some reputable mail order suppliers.

Champions Choice, Inc. Champion Shooters Supply
201 International Boulevard P. O. Box 303
LaVergne, TN 37086 New Albany, OH 43504
(615) 793-4066 (614) 855-1603
(Broad line supplier) (Mostly smallbore)

Mo's Competitors Supplies O. K. Weber
34 Delmar Drive P. O. Box 7485
Brookfield, CT 06804 Eugene, OR 97401
(203) 775-1013 (503) 747-0458
(Funky 'catalog') (Mostly match rifle and long range)

Creedmoor Sports, Inc. Widener's
P. O. Box 1040 P. O. Box 3009, CRS
Oceanside, CA 92051 Johnson City, TN 37602
(888) 273-3366 (800) 615-3006
(Software- coats, gloves, etc.) (Reloading tools & supplies)