

Lessons Learned from a Rifle Skills Course

by

Henry McBurney



NRA Certified Rifle Instructor George Angell observes as shooter demonstrates proper and safe technique.

The recently completed first Virginia Hunter Skills Weekend jointly sponsored by the Virginia Hunter Education Association (VHEA), Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (*dgif*) and the Holiday Lake 4-H Center held at their facility in Appomattox, VA is in the history books and the rifle skills portion, which was modeled after NRA skills courses, was an unqualified success. The objective of the rifle skills course was to convincingly demonstrate to the participants that by following all firearms safety rules and employing the four fundamentals of rifle shooting the hunter and shooter will

become a much better shot. By virtue of being better shots, rifle shooters become safer and more ethical hunters.

As in all of the courses offered during this skills weekend, the rifle skills course was designed to not only offer classroom instruction but to effectively demonstrate through simulated field hunting scenarios and live fire exercises the benefits of correctly employing the fundamentals of rifle shooting and following all safety rules. The classroom portion began with a review of the NRA firearms safety rules and focused on the four learned behaviors required in rifle shooting: 1. Breath Control, 2. Sight Picture, 3. Trigger Squeeze and 4. Follow Through. The simulated hunting scenarios encompassed realistic hunting situations employing 3-D targets and obstacles with “shoot”-“don’t shoot” questions at each station. Group discussion reinforced and participants freely offered opinions on all of these situations.

The live fire portion of the rifle skills course utilized five courses of fire with .22 rim fire bolt action scoped rifles and ammunition provided by the *dgif*. The five live fire portions were designed to effectively demonstrate the benefits of correctly following the fundamentals of rifle shooting and the benefit of employing some kind of shooting aid while shooting a rifle, regardless of the shooting position.



Figure 1. Wesley's Apple Target

The first course of fire was shot at a range of 25 yards utilizing a shooting bench and sandbags to familiarize the students with the rifles used on the range. Sight pictures, trigger pulls and point of impact of the Ruger Model 77 rifles. The second course of fire was three shots fired at 20 yards at an apple target firing from the freehand (unsupported rifle) position followed by shooting three shots from the standing

position utilizing a rest to support the fore end of the rifle at a squirrel silhouette target. While shooting a rifle from the freehand position at game is seldom successful and always discouraged, the value of this shooting exercise was to demonstrate what poor results are obtained while shooting from this unsteady position even when shooting at an apple (which in our mind's eye is a big easy target) at only 20 yards.

Wesley Johnson, a seventeen year old participant from Mocksville, NC with some rifle shooting experience was in the afternoon Rifle Skills Class. Wesley's bench rest course of fire was pretty good and yet Wesley's three shot group offhand at 20



Figure 2. Wesley's Squirrel Target

yards, shown in Figure 1., was really disappointing to him but better than many observed during the day. Wesley had only one hit on the apple and two complete misses. The second course of fire was also from a standing position but this time was done while employing a post (to simulate a tree) to steady the rifle while shooting three shots at a squirrel silhouette target with the vital areas highlighted at 20 yards. Wesley's results are shown in Figure 2. and demonstrate the very dramatic improvement he realized by employing some kind of shooting aid. Great shooting Wesley! You won't go

hungry with that kind of accurate shooting. Participants also shot from seated positions with and without the use of shooting sticks at 20 yard rabbit targets and from the prone position at a groundhog silhouette target at 47 yards.

At the conclusion of the course Wesley was committed to never shooting a rifle freehand at any game animal as he learned from this hands-on skills course the value of always shooting a rifle utilizing some kind of rest. That is the kind of result for which the Virginia Hunter Education Rifle Team under the leadership of Sgt. David Dotson, *dgif* Hunter Education Coordinator was striving to achieve. Thanks, Wesley, for making our day and for sharing your commitment and targets with us!