

Marine Sniper Shares Secrets

by J. Guthrie

Want to go long on your next hunt, in a competition, or just for fun? Here's a road map on how to get it done efficiently.



Back in the day, whenever that was, 300 yards was the outdoor benchmark that got you into "long-range" territory. Much like catching a 10-pound bass or shooting a 10-point buck, sending a bullet precisely on its way the length of three football fields was quite the feat. This day and age, I have rifles that are zeroed at 500 yards, a mere starting point 200 yards beyond the old long-range benchmark.

The shooting world has gone long-range crazy, and rifles, equipment, optics, and ammunition have improved to the point where a novice that can hold a rifle correctly, look through a scope correctly, and squeeze the trigger can hit targets at ranges only a serious competitor or trained marksman would have attempted a few decades ago. I was recently at a seminar where Remington and Leupold had their new Modular Sniper Rifle in .338 Lapua, a fancy variable scope with an even fancier Horus reticle (see last month's issue for a full report on this amazing optic), and a big pile of ammo out for a few writers to shoot. A Leupold employee, who had only just started shooting, was quick to jump into line. She settled in and with the slightest bit of instruction was making head shots on steel targets at 400 yards. If you want to go long, there has never been a better time.

There are all kinds of long-range shots to be made—chasing mule deer out West, in a sniper competition, or even across a hayfield just for fun—but they all require planning if you want to hit the target and not just burn up ammo. I called up friend and shooting mentor Caylen Wojcik to get his thoughts on a basic long-range road map. Of the dozens of friends I have who are long-range shooters, Wojcik offers a truly unique perspective. He spent his formative years as a Marine scout/sniper (arguably some of the best trained

long-range shooters in the word), worked as a scout/sniper instructor at the division level, and served as a sniper in combat until a rocket knocked him out of the Battle of Fallujah. Though serious injuries prevented him from returning to combat, the Corps tapped him to train Marines, SEALs, and other Special Forces operators at the 1st Special Operations Training Group sniper school.

After Wojcik turned in his M-40 for the last time and returned home to Washington State, the instructor bug had bitten hard, and he started Central Cascade Precision (CCP). The dozen or so courses he offers each year allow him to pass his expertise on to civilians like myself. We met last summer at one of his courses, and what I learned fundamentally changed my shooting forever—and for the better. Wojcik shoots in sniper competitions and is a serious high-country hunter. So not only have his long-range shooting skills been applied in combat, hunting, and competition, but he is darn good at teaching others what he knows in an unassuming, precise way.

We divided the long-range game into three basic parts—equipment, training, and mind-set—and sought to pass along some pointers that would help anyone get started, regardless of whether the shots would come at a critter, steel, or scumbag.



Equipment

While it is certainly true that there is more in the man than the rifle, a good rifle—the right good rifle—and other associated equipment is critical to long-range shooting. Wojcik said to go long there is a circle of components, made of four parts, and all are interdependent on one another. Two adjectives should apply to the rifle, ammo, optics, and shooter: consistent and repeatable. If any one part is not consistent and repeatable, hang it up and go home.

"Consistency equals accuracy, and there is no way to cut corners," Wojcik said.

A good shooting course is a great place for the exchange of ideas and a place to make contacts. The smaller the class, the more one-on-one time you will get with an instructor.

not forsake what is already in the gun safe.

I could fill every page of *Shooting Times* for the next 20 years with a discussion of what rifle in what caliber was the best, settle nothing, and probably start a fight or two. Regardless of barrelmaker and stockmaker, the rifle must be as accurate as your wallet can stand, and it has to be repeatable. And do

"I've had students come to my long-range courses with an off-the-shelf .30-06 and shoot really well out to 600 or 700 yards," Wojcik said. "You don't have to drop \$4,000 on a

rifle. A factory Remington 700 Sendero or Savage are more than capable of providing repeatable results."

But all things being equal, lying down behind an "average" G.A. Precision or Nighthawk custom rifle will allow you to hit smaller targets, much smaller targets, farther away than the average factory rifle. A half-minute of dispersion at 100 yards—a half-inch that will cost you an extra \$1,000 or much more—is the difference between a hit or a miss on a 10-inch target at 700 yards.

Caliber is a huge consideration, and a cartridge's performance needs to match your goals, though moving up and down between bullet weights can dramatically increase range. Most of my class members shot .308s for convenience—good ammo is easy to find, and there is a lot of long-range data floating around for .30-caliber bullets—but there was a dramatic difference between those of us shooting 175-grain bullets instead of the lighter and more common 168-grain bullets. It is my guess that we were able to double our hits past 900 yards. If you are stretching a caliber to its absolute limits and not getting the results you want, step up in horsepower. The price is recoil and cost, but if adding another 300 yards to your effective range is a must, it is the only way to go.



No discussion of caliber is complete without discussing loaded ammo. Buy the best you can. My long-range class was the perfect example. Some friends down the line were shooting white box stuff instead of match ammo, and the rounds simply were not consistent or repeatable enough to get hits past 700 yards. The shooter, rifle, and optic were capable of making the shot, but the ammo was not.

"Handloaders can produce match-grade ammo and save a little money in the process," Wojcik said. "It is a fantastic way to extract potential out of your circle of components."

It also allows you more flexibility with a given caliber. Wojcik loads 210-grain Berger VLD hunting bullets and 208-grain Hornady A-Max bullets in his .308 for hunting, weights that are not available in loaded ammunition. The heavier bullet weights extend his range another 200 yards.

The title under my byline says optics editor, so you know a lecture is coming here. Just like ammo and rifle, buy the best optic you can. Figure out what you can afford and then double it, even if it means delaying that range debut for another two or three months. Everyone in our class had good glass, mostly Leupold, NightForce, and one Schmidt &

A good shooting course will expose you to new and old technologies. Here, a shooter plots targets in a data book after working up the wind call with his iPhone.

Bender, and none of us had any problems with repeatability. There are some tremendous scopes on the market—Premier, U.S. Optics, Zeiss, etc.—all of which have different features and prices. It is a matter of doing the research and matching the right scope to your long-range aspirations. You do not need, if only shooting out to 700 or 800 yards, that 34mm tube with all that adjustment range.

Most high-end optics have scads of reticle and turret options, and they all work pretty well after you read through the manual and get some practice. My Nighthawk rifle was equipped with a NightForce 5.5-22X 50mm with my favorite open mil-dot reticle that had served me well out to 600 yards or so. I found during ranging exercises I had a much harder time getting precise ranges with the reduced number of reticle reference points when compared to my fellow shooters who had Horus grids or Leupold TMR reticles.

In practical terms, my laser rangefinder rendered all the rangefinding reticles on the line instantly obsolete, which brought Wojcik to another important point. Technology, notably laser rangefinders; handheld weather centers; and PDAs, Droids, or iPhones loaded with the latest ballistic software, almost completely eliminate questions of bullet trajectory and can really cut corners on wind calls. If you are inputting accurate bullet velocities (not nominal figures off a theoretical ballistics chart) and accurate atmospheric data, the little computer will tell you exactly where that bullet will land. We, for all intents and purposes, skipped most of the old-school data gathering during our course, only checking bullet drops against our program-generated drop charts at three points on our way out to 1,000 yards. The program never missed my elevation corrections more than a half-minute. President Reagan's favorite Russian proverb was "trust but verify," so we always double-check the data, but it is usually on the money.



Caylen Wojcik (center), founder of Central Cascade Precision, is a talented long-range shooter and Marine scout/sniper, but most importantly he is an excellent teacher.

Wojcik had a few other tips on hardware.

"Buy once, cry once—spend the extra \$50 to get good gear, rock-solid equipment you can depend on," Wojcik said. "I want to buy gear and not worry about it. And don't let something that looks tactical or ninjafied fool you into buying junk. Just because it says it on the box, doesn't mean it is so."

Training

If you are really serious about long-range shooting, serious about putting bullets on a target at range at will, go to a good shooting course. It will push your boundaries and your equipment's boundaries, get you out of the comfort zone, and show you the path to dramatic improvement. Humility is a wonderful thing (a tool in itself), and a good shooting course is a heaping spoonful of humility. I am a decent trigger puller; Wojcik made me much better. Wojcik also showed me I am pretty lousy at reading the wind, and that is what really counts out past 500 or 600 yards. I carried an anemometer around for a month afterwards and watched trees, grass, mirage, and dust in an effort to improve my baseline knowledge for wind calls.

The catch is sorting through all the dozens and dozens of available courses. I have met some truly gifted shooters who can hit anything almost anywhere but who could not teach a class of first graders to tie their shoes, much less shoot long range. We all, hopefully, had gifted teachers in school that really brought a subject to life and made us understand. Long-range shooting instructors need the same kind of skills, not 100 confirmed kills.

"Look at the course curriculum and see if it fits your needs," Wojcik said. "A good student/instructor ratio is 1:15. Also try to go into a school with a clean slate. You don't know what that instructor has up his sleeve that can greatly improve your shooting."

Instructors should be glad to provide you with references and if they will not, that should be an immediate red flag.

Training courses provide a foundation for future training, so be sure to learn the trade before trying the tricks. How much training you do after your training, like everything else in the long-range game, really depends on how serious you are and how you intend to apply what you have learned.

"If you want to maintain proficiency as a competitor or long-range hunter, you need to shoot at least once a month at range under field conditions similar to those that you will face in the field," Wojcik said. "It's tough to put a round count on something like that. I like 150 rounds per day, but that may not be realistic for some people."



Good optics are a must if you are playing the long-range game—you cannot shoot what you cannot see. Repeatability is another absolute must.

Mind-Set

The good news is that any problems that arise on the line or in the field are seldom the fault of a good rifle, scope, or ammunition. The bad news is that any problems that arise on the line or in the field are seldom the fault of a good rifle, scope, or ammunition. Most problems and misses begin and end with the guy squeezing the trigger. Long-range shooting is mostly between the shooter's ears.

"There are guys who show up to my courses, start having a bad day, and immediately blame it on their rifle or scope," Wojcik said. "You have to break it down for them and say, 'Hey man, there is nothing wrong with your equipment.' Know that you are going to miss and accept the fact. Good long-range shooters will identify why they fail and work towards making sure it doesn't happen again. Mind-set relates to training, knowing your capabilities and limitations."

A good long-range shooter also knows when to quit. The superbly accurate Nighthawk Custom rifle I used during Wojcik's course is more than capable of hitting the vitals of an elk at 1,000 yards, provided I make the right wind call. Would I ever shoot an elk that far just because? Absolutely not.

"My .308 runs out of killing gas at around 600 yards," Wojcik said. "Could I shoot animals at a farther distance? Yes, but why risk it? Take ethical, responsible shots. Know your lethal distance. Buying up in caliber and equipment doesn't buy you distance."



The ability to shoot little groups off a bench does not translate into the ability to shoot long range in the field. Wojcik stresses shooting in the field and from positions other than prone. (Photo courtesy of Derek McDonald)

If paper or steel are on the receiving end of a bullet strike and you can afford the ammo, go for it. Just remember that good long-range shooters are repeatable and can always make that shot twice.

I recently shot an episode for Modern Rifle Adventures in Colorado. We were hunting antelope, and I was using a DPMS competition rifle in 6.5mm Creedmoor, one of my favorite new calibers. The rifle, though not ideal for lugging across the high plains, was very accurate and averaged 3.5-inch groups at 300 yards. I knew my dope to the quarter-minute out to 400 and also knew that sitting, off shooting sticks, I could still hold 6-inch groups. When my heavy-horned buck walked up out of a coulee at 314 yards, there was a slight wind and no hesitation. Good equipment defined a "mechanical" margin of error. Training allowed me to maximize the system's inherent accuracy and, more importantly, defined my limitations. Mind-set gave me the confidence to make the shot.

Learn, Shoot, Smile

Wojcik is one of the best firearms instructors I've ever met, period. If you want to learn the basics or more advanced long-range techniques, the courses he teaches at Central Cascade Precision (ccptraining.com) are a great place to start. In addition to basic long-range marksmanship, he also offers a high-angle course, a designated marksman course aimed at AR shooters, and a hunter's course. I'm not in the business of issuing unqualified endorsements, but CCP and Wojcik get an unqualified endorsement from me. Go, learn, hit little targets at obscene distances, and smile all the way home.

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