

Bench Accuracy v.

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Photos courtesy of Author


Firing a rifle from a bench is like whacking a baseball from a pedestal. You can't miss. But in the World Series, balls are pitched.

Last month I muffed a shot at 90 yards. My target, big as a blue-ribbon watermelon, lay between the ribs of an elk that's probably still munching grass in Colorado meadows. Earlier, at longer range, I'd sent five bullets into a knot the size of a half-dollar.

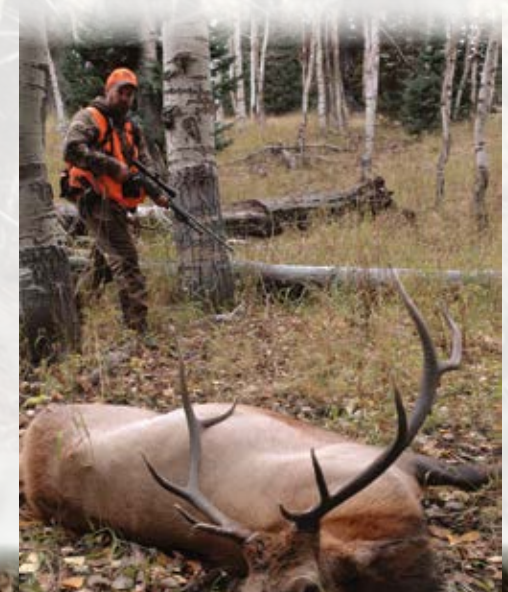
Consistent I'm not. But I'm not alone either.

Testing the inherent accuracy of rifles in the middle of the 19th century sparked a non-competitive diversion that led to benchrest shooting. Ponderous rifles designed for supreme accuracy and ballistic muscle appeared before the Civil War. Later, Joseph Whitworth's strong "fluid steel" barrels improved results. In New England's Gun Valley, factories applied to hunting rifles what enthusiasts learned at the bench. Post-Depression competitors demanded gnat's-lash accuracy of benchrest rifles and loads. Single-shot dropping-block and bolt-action rifles were sifted by weight into classes. Bullets, even primers, were individually weighed and measured. Hulls endured uniforming operations. One case might be used for dozens of firings. Uniformity, intoned the gurus, was the key to snug groups and winning scores. Rifles shooting "in the ones" at 100 yards nipped five-shot knots under two-tenths of an inch!

Then competitors started stretching the range. During the Vietnam era, Mary Louise DeVito fired a 1,000-yard group measuring less than 8



Still-hunting can bring fast shots, offhand. Keep your feet ready. They're your position's foundation.



This Colorado hunter had no chance to shoot from a low position. He fired offhand, over sticks.

Field Accuracy



inches, a World record. But the competition was just heating up! In 2003, Kyle Brown put 10 shots into 4.23 inches at 1,000 yards—a cluster since eclipsed. At this writing, the best five-shot 1,000-yard knot was fired at an IBS event by Tom Sarver at Ohio's Thunder Valley Range, 7 July 2007. Hurling 240-grain MatchKings with 85 grains HI1000 in his .300 Hulk (a shortened, necked-down .338 Lapua), Sarver kept his group to an incredible 1.403 inch! Equally amazing: he fired it in light gun competition, and put every bullet in the X-ring, for a record score of 50-5x!

Few big game hunters expect one-hole accuracy from their rifles. And those who have it can still miss vitals at spitball range. The inherent precision of rifle, ammunition and optical sight matters no more than the price of tea in Taipei if your body isn't still.

Hunters who dare separate their rifles from the bench immediately find new life in the crosswire. Prone, with a taut sling or bipod, it amounts to a gentle hop, in time with your pulse. Sitting and kneeling, the speed and amplitude of movement increase. Offhand, the reticle bounces violently, diving toward the target and as quickly away, as if pulled and thrust by a magnetic field.

Riflemen who put their ego on the line never fire offhand at paper targets. They practice from the bench, as if artificial support will follow them into the woods. It does not.

In the August 1960 issue of *Outdoor Life*, Alex Cox told of an extraordinary hunt that almost fell apart when he found no rest for his rifle:

"The horns were massive at the base. They formed a huge curl close to the head, then flared wide and tapered to thin points. Chuck [thought they] would go 46 inches. I respected Chuck's judgment, but [only one Stone's ram in B&C records] had horns as long as 46 inches... taken in this same part of British Columbia by L.S. Chadwick in 1936.

We were already within 500 yards... But it would be foolishness to attempt such a shot...

It was tough going. Climbing and hanging on were hard enough, and the pace was brisk.... We ran along the slides, over the rocky fingers, descended into the shale bottoms, and climbed out again.

We reached the ravine the sheep had entered. They were not in sight. [Then Chuck heard rocks roll.] He scrambled over the ridge and motioned for me to hurry. I ran up the loose shale bank and got to the top just in time to see the rams disappear about 80 yards above us.

"Get ready!" Chuck yelled, attempts at stealth unnecessary now...

I sat down to take the shot, but as I was to aim above my head, shooting from the sitting position was of little benefit. I had no sooner settled this way than the sheep began to appear, one at a time. In the next few seconds I fired three times at the big ram as he climbed and dodged among the rocks above us. And each shot I could call a miss... I knew it was useless for me to try to shoot offhand as I was doing...

I twisted around and hung my legs off into space, got my chest and arms on the rocks in a prone position. Then I looked through my 4X scope and knew the Lee dot was steady enough. [I triggered the Enfield.] He vanished into a ravine, but I could hear him rolling and tumbling in the loose shale."

That Stone's ram would tally 182 6/8, topping B&C's 1958-59 list to place 5th in All-time records.

Prone, indeed, can be your salvation. Having spent many hours on my belly in rifle competition, I hunt with one eye sweeping the ground for a good place to lie. Even game

in steep, forested places can be shot prone, as were my last three elk. Sitting—crossed-leg, crossed-ankle or knees-up, feet spread—puts you on target faster, but because your ground contact is diminished and your center of gravity higher, it's not as solid as prone. Kneeling is a notch quicker, taller and less steady. In these positions your left elbow has an anchor, so a leather shooting sling (not a carrying strap) can be used to good effect. My choice for 40 years has been Brownell's Latigo sling, of top-grade, non-slip leather. The only hardware, a ring and a small button, won't slap your rifle. The shooting loop adjusts independent of sling length.

Offhand, a sling is strikingly useless. Because your left arm has no support, the loop that pulls the rifle toward you in other positions, transferring weight from your arm to your shoulder, simply tugs your arm toward your ribs. The so-called hasty sling is not a type of sling, but a technique to reduce wobble by looping the sling or strap over your left elbow. I can shoot as well without a hasty sling as with it.



Spotted from afar, this bear next appeared at 40 yards. With no time to get low, Wayne fired offhand.

Centered No More

At the bench, you might crave more magnification, flatter trajectories, smaller groups. Afield, you seldom have a chance to test hardware. Precision is limited by your marksmanship. Distance exaggerates error, as it does at the bench. But error under hunting conditions is greater to begin with, so the yardage at which your reticle no longer stays inside a designated bulls-eye is shorter.

Maximum effective range depends mainly on your position. Your ability to assess drift and drop comes into play when your position is steady enough for long shooting. Even from prone, I seldom fire beyond point-blank range (250 yards with most modern rounds, given a 200-yard zero). Offhand, I keep my shots inside 100. A long-range rifle is thus of little use to me. Ditto a powerful sight, as I hunt with variable scopes dialed to 4x or so. My last animal to date fell to an iron-sighted .303 Savage.

Shooting targets farther than you'd fire at game is good training. Firing at game farther than you can consistently hit a volleyball bulls-eye from hunting positions is, in my view, irresponsible. Targets on a range don't leave you breathless. They don't move or hide behind other targets. I've heard hunters claim they can shoot more accurately at game than they can at paper targets. I've yet to see anyone do that.

Many moons ago in three-position matches, I occasionally fired acceptable offhand scores. More often they were abysmal. Dutifully, I still practice offhand, because it's sometimes the only option on a hunt. Last fall a mule deer buck appeared suddenly in a cedar draw. He dropped to an offhand shot at 27 yards. A bull elk once rose from his bed in a foggy Oregon thicket. My quick poke offhand put him down at 18 steps. Another bull sped away in open pines, then stopped for a peek back. Moving would have sent him off, so I dropped him offhand at 45 yards. Back when gasoline cost 26 cents, and attendants washed your windshield, the first whitetails in the open sights of my .303 Lee-Enfield were killed offhand, some close enough to touch with a long fly-rod.

Close is the operative word here. Steady aim lets you shoot long. Absent that, you're limited to the range at which your sight or reticle doesn't wander off the vitals. One of the biggest elk I've ever seen stood facing me at about 300 steps. Prone, I'd have killed him. The curve of the ground prevented a prone shot, and I couldn't move to a better place. Offhand, I watched the reticle shuck and jive in and out of the chest—and declined.

When a beast locks its nose on you like a shorthair points a congregation of quail, count yourself among the blessed to shoulder your rifle. A steadier position becomes a futile wish. You must fire or pass. Thus, practice in all positions makes sense.

In brush or tall grass, even when you're not discovered, low positions sometimes fail. You can't shoot what you can't see. Kneeling and offhand open-bullet paths denied you in prone and, often, sitting. Once, a blacktail buck I'd been still-hunting stopped in steel-wool cover. I slid around it crosswind and stopped to glass. Minutes later, just 26 yards away, a deer's eye glinted through the twigs. It was not the buck. I looked hard behind her and spied the base of an antler. Both deer had me on radar. The .308 crept slowly to my cheek. My bullet took the buck just below that antler.


Firing from the bench counts as a requisite for other positions, as it helps you establish a zero. For most big game cartridges, I want point of impact to match point of aim at 200 yards. Adjusting a scope to nudge groups the size of a large raccoon is folly. A bench keeps them tight. But once you have that zero, you're wise to prove it from positions you'll use afield. Shooting over a pack is a worthy ambition, and practical for game like pronghorns, commonly shot prone. The bench zero should suffice. But if you use a bipod or, like me, a sling, changing supports can shift impact. My Ruger No. 1 in .300 Winchester once sent bullets nearly 9 inches lower from a sling than from a rest at 200 yards. (The sling limits barrel lift during bullet passage, and relieves forend pressure.) A bedding job trimmed that 9-inch disparity to 4. I refined the Ruger's zero from a tight sling, prone.

Offhand shots with no sling tension happen up close, where two-minute errors matter not.

A couple of weeks ago at this writing, I hosted in Wyoming a woman who had yet to kill her first pronghorn. She'd showed more initiative than many hunters, practicing regularly with a CZ .22 rifle—and not just from the bench. As she owned no centerfire, I loaned her an accurate Mossberg in 7mm Magnum, with Remington's Managed-Recoil loads. After a few failed attempts, she remarked that shooting well on a hunt was harder than at the range. Indeed. The fundamentals must be automatic, so you can contemplate distance, wind, cover, target angle, and animals you *don't* want to kill. You must fire from a place you've never been, and sometimes quickly.

Late in the week, after a long stalk that left us too exposed, a buck stood at 120 yards. Bellied flat, I shoved her pack and rifle forward in short grass. She crawled into the stock. "Take your time." I forced that, to calm her—there wasn't much time. The rifle hopped. On the heels of its report came the "thwuck" of a rib strike. The animal ran. Her shoulders slumped. Another miss, she moaned. "Nope. Come." Blood glistened on the grass. We found the pronghorn, perfectly shot, lying dead a few paces on.

Field accuracy depends little on the hardware in your hands, a great deal on shooting position and technique. Getting as low as conditions permit, with bipod, sling or improvised rest, steadies the reticle. A lethal hit is then just a matter of triggering the rifle without moving it—something you will have practiced without help from a bench. ■



This group is good for an iron-sighted rifle, even from a 50-yard bench. Check placement offhand.

Bighorn MB9, iron sight
Win. 400 Flamingo
50 yds.