

CRAIG
BODDINGTON
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

ACCURATE HUNTER

**.22 RIMFIRE:
THE GREAT
TEACHER**

**...FOR
EVERYBODY!**



Joe Bishop, left, with a nice Alberta whitetail, taken about 1990, rolled with a snappy running shot. This was the first of many great shots Boddington saw Bishop make. He attributed his field shooting skill to lots of practice with a .22.

Joe Bishop, hunting buddy and long-time Boone and Crockett member, sadly gone, was an awesome hand with a rifle. Didn't matter if it was a distant ram, a moving deer or antelope, or a buffalo in close cover. Bishop was one of the coolest, calmest, and deadliest riflemen I've known. I gather it was not always so.

Joe became a hunter in his forties. A Coloradan, he'd done a little deer and elk hunting, but in the 1980s, he went on safari in Botswana with little experience, hunting with the famous (and famously gruff) PH Fred Bartlett.

I infer some things didn't go exactly according to plan. At the end, Bishop told Bartlett he'd like to come back...if Bartlett would have him. According to Joe, Fred told him: "Yes, but you must do something. Get a good .22, and shoot a brick of ammo every month between now and your next safari." Joe told me he did his homework, shooting thousands of rounds of .22 rimfire ammo off his porch. Years later, I saw the results of his intensive training with a .22.



LEFT: Boddington in a Wyoming prairie dog town, using the left-hand Ruger 10/22 off sticks. There's much to be learned from shooting prairie dogs, and even more when practicing field shooting positions.

BELOW: In preparation for a prairie dog shoot, Boddington zeroed the left-hand Ruger 10/22 at 50 yards with high-velocity hollowpoints. The .22 Long Rifle is sharply limited in range, but the combination proved deadly on prairie dogs to about 80 yards.



The first time we hunted together, about 1990, I saw him roll a nice Alberta white-tail, running hell-for-election across a frozen grain field. When the buck somersaulted, I was swinging and just about to shoot. Whether I'd have made the shot we can never know, but Joe did. I thought it had to be a lucky shot. Nobody is that good. In years to come, I accepted it was not a fluke; Joe Bishop was amazing, and I don't think he ever appreciated that. When he shot, he expected to hit and almost always did. This can be attributed to Fred Bartlett and lots of .22 ammo.

I was about ten when Dad gave me an Ithaca falling block single-shot .22 and set up a bullet trap in the basement. I shot thousands of .22 shorts! In the 1960s, I started hunting with a scope, but I learned to shoot with that little Ithaca and its crude buckhorn rear and ramp front. As a father, I wasn't so smart. I wish I'd started my daughters with open sights, which quickly teach how slight variances in sight alignment create huge errors. And, when you shift to a scope, how simple it is!

At least, I started my kids with .22s, as most of us do. The .22 rimfire is the Great Teacher. With minimal recoil, mild report, and cheap ammo, that's what most of us start with. Over time, many of us go on to other and more powerful firearms and drift away from the .22. That's not terrible, but it's a good idea to circle back...frequently!

Sometimes this is a necessity, like going to the doctor. Joe wanted to hunt with Fred Bartlett again, and his "prescription" was clear: Go back to the Great Teacher and shoot a lot! It's all too easy to acquire a flinch...but it's the Devil to cure one. I'm fortunate; I haven't yet had to fight a flinch with a rifle. However, most serious trapshooters eventually go through a spell of the "flinchies," and I certainly had mine. There are many manifestations. Most common is probably an involuntary jerk as the trigger is pressed. Inability to complete the trigger press is worse; I've seen veteran clay shooters almost run toward the trap trying to get the trigger to break.

Shotgunners often go to a "release trigger" to cure

a flinch (the trigger is pressed back to set, and the gun fires when pressure is removed). Riflemen usually have an easier cure: Go back to the Great Teacher, and start all over, relearning the basics with a .22. Shooting a .22 is the best way to cure flinchitis! A good, accurate airgun can achieve the same results!

North American hunting is tough because we often plan a hunt for one specific animal, and the hunt can hinge on just one shot. With so much variety, Africa is different. Maybe you missed yesterday and, horrors, missed again today, but there is time and opportunity to recover. When I surveyed African professional hunters for my *Safari Rifles* books, several commented that they keep a .22 (and lots of ammo) in camp so, if things didn't start out well, they could go to the range and fix the problem.

On the typical one-species North American hunt, we don't have that luxury. This makes pre-hunt practice even more critical...and that training should include a lot of shooting with a .22! I've said it many times: Much practice for field shooting can be done with a .22. To practice the critical basics of breath control, sight alignment, and trigger press, it is not necessary to expend expensive ammo and withstand unpleasant recoil and muzzle blast. Likewise for practicing shooting from field positions!

It is essential to shoot the rifle you're going to hunt with enough to be comfortable and familiar with fit, feel, mechanics, and trajectory. But you don't have to overdo it. At the range, we'll shoot a few rounds through a centerfire. When a barrel gets warm, we'll shoot a



TOP: Sighting in a vintage Kimber of Oregon .22, in preparation for a squirrel hunt. Left-hand bolt-actions are rare in .22 rifles, so this rifle is an old friend. **MIDDLE:** The secret to good training with a .22 is to use small targets. Off sticks at 25 yards, these steel targets look plenty small! **BOTTOM:** Coming out of the Kansas hardwoods with a nice mess of tree squirrels. Squirrels and .22s are a great teaching team, offering good lessons in patience, woodcraft, and shot placement.

magazine or two through a .22. Such a regimen is almost certain to keep bad habits at bay. We keep little interactive steel targets on the range—fun with instant feedback.

Long-range shooting is such a thing today that I can hear the arguments: The .22 rimfire is limited in both accuracy and range, so how can it help me roll a buck at X00 yards? Specifically, it probably can't. To shoot at distance, you must shoot at distance. Even the most accurate .22 rimfire, with the best ammo, is questionable on small game at 100 yards, and a puff of wind wrecks havoc. Accepted, but remember the mantra: "aim small, miss small."

The .22's range is limited, so use small targets! Formal NRA smallbore competition is shot at 50 feet, which is close, but the "10-ring" is just .15-inch in diameter! Our steel .22 targets are set at 25 yards. One is a much-dented rimfire metallic silhouette, with miniature ram, pig, turkey and chicken. The other is a new Birchwood Casey target with five 1.5-inch swing-when-hit steel discs. Over sticks or offhand at 25 yards they look small and far!

We've included .22s in our range sessions for years, but it was another Boone and Crockett friend, Dr. Richard Hale, who reminded me of other lessons from the Great Teacher. His Kansas farm is a couple hours north of mine. In the middle of the pandemic, he sent me pictures of a mess of Missouri tree squirrels taken with his gorgeous Winchester Model 52.

When I was a kid, we'd often go squirrel hunting after school but, shame on me, it had been years. Our southeast Kansas hardwoods are full of squirrels, both red and gray. Richard inspired me, so next time I went to the farm I took a good .22.

In a perfect world, the ideal situation for practice is

to have a .22 with similar action and sights to your favorite centerfire hunting rifle. I don't have a Winchester M52, and if I did the bolt would be on the wrong side. I do have an old Oregon Kimber, scoped with a left-hand bolt. I've had it for ages, but I don't think I ever took it tree squirrel hunting. I'd forgotten that .22s and tree squirrels go together like peas and carrots—and make a pretty good teaching team!

To hunt tree squirrels effectively, you must move slowly and quietly, pay attention, and be patient! Most of us learned these lessons as kids, but there's nothing wrong with a refresher course—what a ball! Good for shooting and shot placement, too, when only head shots are allowed!

I've also described prairie dogs as excellent instructors. They are, but in different ways. Shooting prairie dogs in the windy West provides some of the best training in judging wind, adjusting for deflection, and for shooting at distance. If you can hit prairie dogs at a couple hundred yards, then no deer-sized target should be daunting. I usually go prairie-dogging at least once every summer, mostly with centerfires and sometimes with .17 HMR, amazingly effective, and offering post-graduate training in calling wind.

This June, I took one of Ruger's brand-new 10/22s in mirror-image left-hand action on our annual prairie dog outing. Aside from the southpaw-friendly action, the rifle was a heavy-barreled target version. I had to pick my shots and watch the wind, but I was amazed at how deadly it was. Of course, when close shots became scarce, I could always put the .22 aside and go to the .204 Ruger. Between the two, I figure it was one of the best training sessions I've had in years! ■