

SHOOTING THE BREEZE

Field marksmanship skills

By Dale Valade

For the Blue Mountain Eagle

Everyone likes shooting nice tight little groups, and I must admit that is really fun. Lord knows I've spent and will yet spend many an hour doing just that. But from a practical point of view, shooting groups from a bench rest, although a good way to test out new guns or new loads, is basically a useless exercise for hunters once their smoke-pole has been zeroed. Don't get me wrong, it's a valuable tool for range work as it eliminates most of the human error from the equation. Other products like the Caldwell Lead Sled go even further to do so, especially with larger caliber, hard-kicking magnum rifles. But when it comes to useful practice, the field positions are where it's at.

The four field positions are off-hand, kneeling, sitting and prone. Of course any improvised rests encountered in the field can be very successfully used as well, though they usually go in tandem with one of the other positions, but we will tentatively add that as a fifth category.

Offhand is generally understood to be the least steady position and is typically only used for shooting at shorter distances or at moving game where there is no time to locate or use an improvised rest. In some instances, merely taking the time to lean against a tree will steady you right up to make the shot. Offhand is the most difficult to master but is a necessary skill. When I was a budding rookie, my grandfather taught me how to wrap my rifle sling around my supporting arm in what is known as a "hasty sling." To this day, the reason I (and Grampa Duane) prefer the old military style of leather sling on my rifles is because it can be used to add additional stability to my aim offhand or any of the other field positions if adjusted properly.

Hasty sling is simple. While holding your rifle by your shooting hand, the supporting arm is thrust between the rifle and the sling, twisted back around the sling (wrapping it around your supporting arm), and then you just grab the forend like normal. If the sling is cinched properly it should be a snug fit once the rifle is shouldered. If it's too tight or too loose, adjust accordingly. For me this is best achieved with leather or nylon slings as the neoprene or padded slings typically have too much give to ever get snug. They are designed more with a comfortable carry in mind than as a shooting aid. Even on my .22s, where possible, I use a hasty sling whether plinking or hunting small game. You



Columnist Dale Valade, left, and Zaron Bruce shot these bucks on the last day of the 2018 season.



Dale Valade

never know when it will come in handy. Kneeling is more steady than offhand, and unless you're hunting in tall brush, it's a quick position to assume. In this position, your supporting arm is braced upon the top of your knee while kneeling. My very first year hunting deer I struggled mightily, missing a few deer taking wild, offhand shots. It wasn't until Dad taught me the kneeling position that I started getting confidence and making shots. I shot my very first buck in 1997 from the kneeling position at about 50 yards. I believe my second buck was also taken with a similar shot from the kneeling position.

When taking a shot from sitting, I like to dig the heels of my boots into the ground to provide a slip-resistant grip. I angle myself to provide not only a sufficient rest for my supporting arm on one knee, but I also rest the elbow of my shooting arm on the other knee or my thigh. Where possible, if you can find something to sit against, such as a stump or a bush this will result in an even more steady aim. This is much steadier than either offhand or kneeling as you are providing bone to bone support for both arms. I mostly use this position when shooting in open country and there are no improvised rests to be had or there is too much brush or rocks blocking a shot from prone. If you carry shooting sticks, it's likely that you also frequently utilize the sitting position. Sticks are a great tool as occasionally it's not possible to properly arrange yourself as I described because of physical or terrain limitations. In 2009 I took a 6x3 buck in Murderers Creek unit, with a 175 yard shot from the sitting

position. It was the only rest to be had.

Prone is rock steady. Whether shooting with a sling, improvised rest or a bipod, prone is the closest thing to benchrest shooting that there is in the field. Your entire body is at rest and being supported. Alas, high grass, brush or the lay of the land sometimes don't permit it. Some of my very best shots have been made from this position. Years ago I was elk hunt-

ing and came upon a group of four coyotes about 150 yards off. Before me on the trail was a giant flat rock. So, laying down flat on the rock and assuming a prone position with a hasty sling, I took aim. I got three of them before the fourth decided that, whatever I was selling, he didn't want any. When using a bipod attachment, make sure and sight in your rifle with that in place. It may surprise you, but your gun might shoot different with a bipod attached to the front of it.

Lastly, improvised rests are just exactly that, improvised. Over the years I've used trees and stumps, rocks, brush, the breaks of hills and my hunting pack for a rest. Make whatever you have work for you. Last year, I had a damage control cow elk tag to fill. From where I took the shot, there was no really good way to lay prone or sit due to the terrain.

So I kind of sat, and kind of lay prone and rested the forend of my rifle on the bottom wire of a four-strand barbed wire fence and held it against the T-post with my supporting hand. It was steady as could be, and when I squeezed off my shot, I knew I had my elk.

Steadying your aim before letting fly is a principle of fundamental marksmanship. Whatever tools you can carry along with you to help make the shot are well worth the fuss. By practicing getting into and shooting from field positions you'll be much better prepared for any shot opportunities that are presented. The quicker you abandon the bench once its purpose has been served, the quicker your field marksmanship will develop. Your freezer will thank you!

What's your favorite position? Email us at shootingthebreezebme@gmail.com!

Dale Valade is a local country gent with a deep love for handloading, hunting and shooting.

Contributed photo