

NATURAL POINT OF AIM:

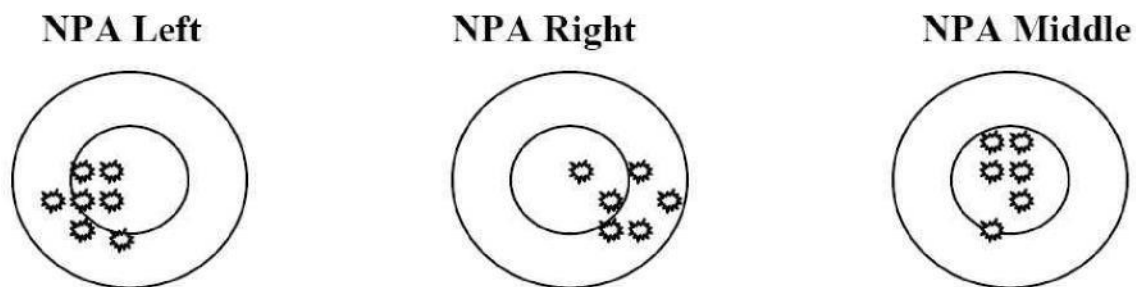
By Anthony Finn

The good news is that Natural Point of Aim (NPA) is something that everybody already has; all you need to do is recognise it and learn to use it to your advantage. So, what is it? Put simply, NPA is the Point the rifle will Naturally Aim at when you assume your stance, mount the rifle and look through the scope. For example, imagine you are called to the firing line, identify your target (e.g. Bank-2 Pigs), mount your rifle and look through the scope to see the crosshair hovering around the 9th Pig in the bank; this is most likely your NPA. You now have two choices, you can:

- a) Drag the rifle back across until it points at the first pig, try to hold it on, or around, the animal and take the shot or;
- b) Maintain your stance and hold but move your feet a little until your NPA places the crosshair on the first pig then take the shot.

I would recommend 'B' moving your feet because, even though it is possible to hold across, against your NPA and still hit targets, it won't last and you are making it harder than it needs to be. Generally what will happen is, as you decide in your mind to take the shot, you will subconsciously relax as you actuate the trigger and the rifle will move off the target back towards your NPA.

You can experiment on paper if you wish and I recommend you do. Try setting up 3 targets at 25 or 50 metres and when you shoot at the first one purposely move your feet so that your NPA is out to the left (2 feet is enough). Do the same for the next target but with your NPA out to the right. On the 3rd target, spend some time making sure your NPA is in the middle. Shooting 15 or 20 shots into these targets should be enough to see a pattern develop, which will probably appear like the examples below.



The whole idea of discovering all this is to use this knowledge to avoid making mistakes and hit more targets, shoot more 10.1s instead of 9s or occasional 10s and enjoy better results with no more effort than standing in the right place.

NPA works exactly the same way for elevation too and you can control this by adjusting (raise or lower) the position of the butt pad in your shoulder or the position of your front hand on the stock can be moved forward or back. It's a personal thing and you may even use

both depending on the range setup. For example, two ranges that have vastly different target positions are Brisbane and Batemans Bay in NSW; at Brisbane the animals are above the firing position with Rams about 25 – 30 metres above the shooter (maybe more). At Batemans Bay the animals are below the firing position, possibly by up to 20 metres (from memory).

Because you have no control over these things, you will need to be flexible in your stance and hold and be able to adapt to the range quickly to perform well.

A word of advice here, don't be drawn into any negative discussions about issues like this or other range differences (like colour of targets, backstops and shooting detail setups etc.). It is better to accept how it is, work out your own strategy to adapt and practice till it feels ok or at least less strange. While you are doing this, others are reinforcing the negatives in their own mind and convincing themselves they can't shoot well here. Who do you think will be in front when the match starts?

The simple rule to remember is this:

Check your NPA each time you fire a shot, and move your feet or change the elevation if it is not naturally pointing at the target you are about to shoot.

SOME TIPS FOR PERFORMANCE AT BIG

SHOOTS *Before the Match:*

Get a good night's sleep

Rise early and eat at least an hour before you shoot

Dry fire or practice your hold with your rifle in the motel room before you go to the range to get the muscles warmed up and used to the position.

- Be well prepared with your equipment and arrive early at the range so you are not rushing and getting worked up needlessly. Some people have a check-list to make sure nothing is forgotten (ever got to the range only to find the bolt for your rifle is at home?).
- Sight in early at each range from a stable position like sitting or standing post (I prefer not to sight in off the bench because I believe my rifles will shoot to a different point offhand to off the bench). Once you are sighted in sitting, check the setting thoroughly in the offhand position. By thoroughly, I don't mean 50 rounds at each range (unless you are shooting Finn Bullets then sure, go for your life) but enough to be sure the setting's right.
- About 10 minutes before the competitors' briefing, go back to the line and shoot a few shots at each animal, finish on the animal you will start the match on. It may help to consider these last shots as the start of the match (time a five shot string if it helps). The philosophy is that you can use these last shots to get the nervous shots out of the way and then, when the match really starts, you are just going back to shoot the next detail.

If you are nervous:

- It is normal to be nervous and it can help you by making you more alert and hence quicker on the trigger when the sight picture is right. Being nervous is natural and shows you care about the result so it is best to accept that you will be nervous and keep up the self-talk eg. "It's normal to be nervous", "Everybody else feels nervous too", "My hold will improve (stabilise, shake less) as the shoot progresses."
- Another useful tip if you have got the shakes is to stretch your muscles. This works because, generally speaking, you have tensed up your muscles and they start to tremor. After you stretch them, they will be relaxed and therefore not tremor (as much).

Be Prepared:

- Make sure you have all your gear ready for when you are called to the line.
- Ear-muffs, spare ear plugs, pen and ammo, your settings book, score card and spotting scope ready to go and somewhere near your firing point so you don't have to fight your way through 50 people to get to the line.
- Make sure you know the rules of the discipline you are shooting, especially what to do when something goes wrong (alibis etc.).

Spotting / Scoring

Organise who your spotter will be (and who you will spot for) as early as possible and discuss how you will spot for each other and what you want the spotter to do/say etc. Some examples are to;

- 1 Call every fall of shot (only possible with Spotting Scope).
- 2 Call time remaining, count down last 15-10 seconds.
- 3 Just mark score sheet and keep quiet.
4. Reinforce positive images/techniques like "Natural Point of Aim", "Pick a Spot" (on the animal to shoot at), "Follow Through" and "Smooth on the Trigger"
5. Remind you to adjust setting, which animal and bank you will be shooting on (eg. Turkey Setting, ok, Turkeys 7 - Bank 1)

For Centrefire, spotting is easier and quicker if the spotter has an animal shape and just points to the spot where the shot went. This saves a lot of time and shouting to each other, gives the shooter fast accurate feed back of the actual hit versus his/her mental image of the sight picture so adjustments can be made if required.

This is the same for Rimfire but in Rimfire the shooter who is following through on every shot will see where it went anyway so the spotter is just confirming what the shooter sees. This is more useful in windy or rainy conditions where the fall of shot is occasionally difficult to see.

Eating and Drinking

It is important to keep well hydrated because it assists the brain to function and allows the body to combat heat and fatigue (and the occasional hangover). This will pay off in those multiple day shoots especially if it is very hot conditions or long days with shooting into the late evening. In some cases, I have been to shoots (eg. 1998 & 2002 World Championships) that required my presence at the range at about 7.30am, shoot through the day and leave the range at 8 or 9pm still in daylight! This is sometimes in 35-40 degree heat and goes on for several days. In itself, you may think that is not so bad but if you are trying to make every shot count as the best shot of the day, it takes its toll so you must be prepared.

It is equally important to eat nutritional foods that will allow your body to perform at its top level. I am not a nutritionist so can only say eat a mixture of food groups that you believe will keep you balanced, eg. Meats, carbohydrates, fruit (bananas are very good), grains & cereals (corn chips, cheese and beer also aids relaxation, but only after the match).

Drink lots of water and, if need be, some fruit juice. A 50/ 50 water to juice ratio is good and delivers slow release sugars to keep you going. Don't drink caffeine or fizzy soft drinks or other sugary treats because you get big ups and downs from the sugar (I believe it's called the "Elvis Effect"). Apologies to Elvis fans.

If however, you are a heavy-duty coffee/tea drinker, it may be best to just lighten your intake a bit rather than stop altogether so you don't get withdrawal symptoms.

During the shoot, try to eat smaller amounts often, rather than one big meal in the middle of the day. A big meal needs a lot of blood and body energy to digest and this will (as I understand it) take away from the resources available to the brain. Remember, you shoot with your mind; the body knows what to do from all the training and practice and will do what the mind tells it.

Dry Firing and Mental Rehearsal

Where possible, and if it's agreeable to the Match Director, some dry firing or simply holding the rifle (in position) and visualising the shot will help to prepare your muscles and mind for your next turn at the firing line. I have used this technique at World Championships (away from the range on a closed service road) and found it a tremendous benefit so that when I was called to the line I was already in the groove, less nervous, and the first shot was a 'business' shot not a 'warm-up' shot. Remember, one more target means you won't have to shoot off for that position.

If physical dry firing is not possible, just sitting quietly and rehearsing the shot or five shot string in your head will help. You will be able to imagine standing at the line, mounting the rifle, seeing the cross-hair float onto the target, feeling the rifle fire and seeing the target falling over. Try reading that sequence again and put the pictures into your mind as you go.well, how did it look?

You can also do this in the ready call if it helps calm you down. It reinforces positive feelings and images and keeps your mind busy so negative stuff is pushed out.

Attention and Focus

When it is time to shoot the match, give it your full attention. There is plenty of time to talk and joke around in between details or after the shoot (remember the beer and corn chips for relaxation mentioned earlier).

Think of the work you have put in to get to the match with training, shooting, reloading, travelling and hard earned cash (or future inheritance, for Juniors).

I hope you can use some of these ideas to get the best from yourself and enjoy better or more consistent results in the future. Some things may work for you, some may be more effort than you want to put in and that's fine too. It's sport and it should be fun and if you shoot to the best of your current ability then you have won anyway.

The next article will be a surprise because I haven't got a clue what to write about yet so until then, good luck and good shooting.