



Hitting the mark



Andrew Venables of WMS Firearms Training covers the basics of rifle use: how to stay safe with firearms and what to do if safety rules are breached

How can a sport that uses tools built to kill be so safe? The fact that shooting has become one of the safest sports in the world is no accident; the people involved understand the risks, take them seriously, pass them on – and call to task anyone who breaks them. My philosophy is that safety in shooting is an ongoing process that should be embraced as one of the rites of passage in a shooting life.

I was fortunate to start my shooting career at the age of eight under the guidance of my father. As an NRA member, he shot for Britain in the 1960s and was happy to supervise and help me with my shooting: with an airgun in the garden, with my first shotgun on family walked-up days, and with my Enfield No.4 when competing at school and at Bisley. It was at this young age, when listening was easy and obedience vital, that I learnt the foundations of safe shooting. On the occasions when my mind was elsewhere, the threat of being sent to sit in the car refocused me.

Learning to be safe and effective with firearms is a never-ending process. The best mindset to promote safety is an open one, free of assumptions. “I assumed it was unloaded,” “I assumed no one was behind the hedge,” “I assumed the range officer had it covered” all make

for poor excuses. You are only as safe as your next safety check makes you. The principle of checking your firearm is not loaded is vital. Check when you take it out of the cabinet, check when it goes into the slip or case, check when you take it out again, check when you pick it up from the bench/ground and so on.





Rifle shooting: Safety

As I consider my background in shooting and look to the future, I see more people coming into the sport at later stages in life. When a self-made professional of 40+ decides to take up shooting in whatever form, it can be much harder to drill in basic safety procedures. People used to giving orders may not be the best listeners, nor take criticism well. But shooting desperately needs these late converts. So how do we bring them under the safety umbrella?

Keep it simple, stupid! In my (not always humble) opinion, the KISS principle should be applied to all things attempted by all people at all times. I know of shooting organisations with rulebooks going into hundreds of pages, which only ensures they get put on the shelf and stay there unread. What we need are clear, simple, easy-to-remember rules, as this example from late, great Lt Colonel "Jeff" Cooper of Gunsite, Arizona, shows:

- All guns are always loaded. Even if they are not, treat them as if they are.
- Never let the muzzle cover anything you are not willing to destroy. For those who insist that this particular gun is unloaded, see rule one.
- Keep your finger off the trigger till your sights are on the target. This is the Golden Rule. Its violation is directly responsible for about 60 percent of inadvertent discharges.
- Identify your target and what is behind it. Never shoot at anything that you have not positively identified.

This American version of safety principles ties in beautifully with Mark Hanbury Beaufoy's



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well-known poem, "A Father's Advice," which starts, as many of you will remember, with: "Never, never let your gun pointed be at anyone, though it may unloaded be matters not the least to me..."

As a word of advice that comes from experience, be wary of firing off the action as a way of checking that a gun is unloaded. If it isn't, the consequences could be disastrous. It is much safer to 'deadbolt' rifles by pointing the firearm in a safe direction with the bolt open, then pressing the trigger while slowly moving the bolt forwards and down. This relieves the firing pin spring without any chance of a click or, God forbid, a bang. I am aware of holes in car doors, a bullet in a gearbox and horrific injuries caused by tired shooters thoughtlessly firing off the action without considering the consequences.

Unsafe gun handling and shooting is bad enough. The next worst thing is failing to remonstrate strongly when a gun is pointed at you, when someone swings through the line, or takes a shot you deem dangerous. If you see careless gun handling, it is vital to say something immediately. Point at the offending barrel, look straight into the owner's eyes and say, "Please point that somewhere safe." Once the danger has passed, it's time to consider factors such as why the safety code was breached, whether the gun was loaded or cocked, if the safety was on, or the finger near the trigger.

As shoot captain, I once took a soft approach to correcting the owner of a .375 Holland & Holland rifle who swung through me while we were shooting driven boar in Poland. He was a lovely chap and I liked him. The following year, the same man put a round within six feet of another fellow on the line. That time I spoke to him in front of the group and told him he needed to be more aware. He took no further part in shooting that day, but later thanked me for correcting him and we are still friends. It is not acceptable to think, "Oh well, he's a decent chap and we got away with it." Shooting requires us to learn a little and teach a little every day if we, and the sport, are to thrive.

Despite the safety measures that could and should take place, I note that British police constabularies' firearms departments recorded 110 negligent discharges (NDs) between 2007 and 2010. That is three times the number of NDs more than intended shots fired over the same period. A wise trainer once told me, "There are two types of shooter, ones who have had an ND and ones who will have one." Which are you?

I said earlier that assumptions were the real enemy of safety. Don't assume you are safe, check you are again and again, and don't let others get away with being unsafe. You're not being rude by speaking out; you could be saving a life. ■