



Dealing with *failure*



Andrew Venables looks into why shooters, himself included, sometimes miss – and what they should do to address the problem

A client recently asked me why he missed two muntjac from a high seat. I had to do some real soul searching to answer because, like everyone else, I sometimes miss too. After all, shooting live quarry is much harder than shooting targets. Moreover, the difference between amateurs and professionals is what happens in the moments after a shot that misses or wounds an animal.

When an amateur misses or wounds, the moments after the shot are often filled with paralysis, not analysis. The head comes off the stock, the bolt stays where it was, there is no immediate follow up and confused silence reigns. If a professional hunter accompanies the

novice they generally take the rifle from the client, or quickly use their own to sort out the problem.

When a professional misses or wounds an animal his or her head stays on the stock, the animal remains in the sights, the bolt cycles rapidly and what happens next depends on what our pro sees through the scope. A complete miss will see them check, watch for any sign of injury or unnatural behaviour and consider whether it is appropriate to fire again. If a definite strike resulted in a wounded animal, they will watch and plan for a safe opportunity to shoot again and to finish the job. This might take seconds or hours but the job must be done.

Understanding why we miss is the first step in correcting the problem, or problems. The reasons for missing are few and simple when we just consider the person shooting, and generally involve a failure in one or more of the following. The rifle must be in a stable, well-supported position and pointing naturally and steadily at the kill zone of the quarry. The sight picture must be clear, properly aligned and free from bullet-deflecting obstructions. The shot must be released and followed through without undue movement. Get one or more of these wrong and a miss is on the cards.

When we consider our equipment, surroundings and the quarry, there are more potential suspects in the story. Was the rifle properly zeroed? Are the scope mounts and the moderator properly fitted? What was the actual range, and was the wind a factor? Did the animal move at the moment of discharge, or did the bullet meet an obstruction along the way? In making these lists, I draw on my own experience and admit that over the past 40-odd years, everything on that list has at some time contributed to my mistakes, from which I have learned much.



Watching the shooter will tell you more about why a shot missed than watching the result



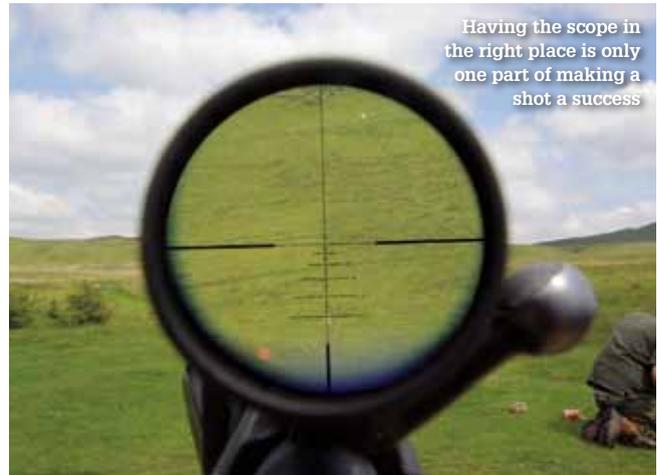
Rifles: Missing



When I was asked recently if a 22.250 is a good rifle for roe stalking I was able to say no and give my reasons immediately. However, a question asking why quarry X was missed on such and such a day inevitably raises even more questions and presents a maze of assumptions and maybes. As an instructor and in order to pass comment on how someone is shooting I have to watch the person instead of what they are shooting at, as the answers are on the firing point, not on the target.

Readers can help each other answer the question of why they missed by watching the actual firing process and comparing it to best practice. The holes will still be in the board for analysis later, but the really important information is in the vital seconds of the setting up and delivery of the shot.

Creating a firm position, breathing correctly, firing within two to five seconds of breathing



out, squeezing the trigger using the pad of the finger, not blinking, following through and reloading in the shoulder while looking through the scope are all indications of measured success. Many people who could help friends analyse shooting issues simply stare at the target, spot the fall of the shot and then speculate as to how the wind blew the shot down and left five inches at 100 yards. In truth, if they had seen the shooter flinch and snatch the trigger they would have had the answer to the drop in a moment.

In this age of easy video access, mobile phones, digital compacts and GoPro cameras, recording the actual shooting process and then studying the results at both ends is simple and achievable. The answer for the client who asked why he missed the muntjac would most likely be answered by my Contour video camera clamped to the rail of the high seat and clicked on as the rifle was mounted. A combination of buck fever, lack of rear support, shallow breathing, over-enthusiastic trigger release, flinch and raising the head to see what happened might well have been captured on film.

Whenever possible, I go through a little ritual between deciding to make the shot and actually firing. I look at the quarry over the top of the rifle before mounting, breathe deeply a few times, open and stretch my shoulders and focus as I decide to make the shot. Then I take up the final stage of my chosen position, shoulder the rifle, achieve correct 'cheek weld' and sight picture, acquire the target and breathe in and out. As I breathe out I acquire the trigger, take first pressure and check cross hair alignment.

By now I am fully committed and ready to make the shot. As the final pressure releases the sear I consciously take a picture in my mind of the sight picture. This tells me where the cross hair was as the shot broke. I follow through, listen for the impact then reload as smoothly and quickly as possible, keeping my head on the stock while recovering the sight picture if disturbed by recoil.

I know this process works as I can generally 'call the shot' as good, left, right, up or down – before confirmation is received. It is how I instantly knew I had shot a very large beech tree, not the roe doe it half obscured on a recent stalking trip, confirmed by the big chunk blown off the trunk. I was using a smaller tree for support, bringing the cross hair in from left to right and my timing was off. Note to self: don't forget to take the quad sticks next time.

We all miss from time to time, but preparation, practice and honest self-analysis will minimise failure and maximise understanding and success. ■

For more information about WMS Firearms Training, contact Andrew Venables on 01974 831869 or visit www.wmsfirearmstraining.com

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Learning how and why you miss is the first step towards getting it right