

THE ROAD TO THE 2015 NORTH ISLAND ACTION CHAMPS

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1387–63x. That's what I scored at the Thames Valley Super League in February 2015. With a maximum possible score of 1920–192x, statistically, my accuracy is 72% in hitting the 30-by-18-inch cardboard target *anywhere*, and 33% in finding the 4-inch x-ring at the target's centre. I'm officially graded as a Marksman, something I brag loudly to friends and family about without telling them that this is the lowest grade.

The North Island champs are a mere eight weeks away. I plan to use the intervening shoots as stepping stones to my triumphal debut on the North Island stage.

Far North Pistol Club Super League, Kaitia — 8 March

The Far North Pistol Club (FNPC) shoot is a regional legend: facilities for pistol as well as shotgun and rifle, friendly and generous locals, and a seafood feed that can't be beaten. I travel north with the Auckland Pistol Club (APC) contingent and the six-hour drive flies by with colourful and sometimes salty tales of earlier shoots in Northland and abroad.

Club president Bob Banks greets us on arrival, and club secretary Bill Bice proudly shows us around; the mover and plates ranges are world-class, and the practical range is easier on the knees and stomach than previous years.

My preparation for this shoot has been minimal: I enter the competition with the mantra of Be The Bullet. On the first string of the practical match my thumb slips on the safety catch and I lose precious seconds by: pulling the trigger; thumbing the safety then pulling the trigger; and remembering the front sight then pulling the trigger — by which time the targets have turned away. My mantra to Be The Bullet is replaced by Thumb The Safety. In the mover match I remember everything except rack the slide: the target travels thirty feet before I rack it and loose three shots into the backstop.

As the scores are tallied and lunch is readied, Bill runs a side match: a jungle run for shotgun. I watch the course in action — targets include airborne clays, and popper-initiated cans of dirt — and I know I must return next year to have a go.

The scores come in: I shot 1078–35x. I hide my disappointment by tucking into the excellent spread that our hosts put on. Afterwards, Bob hands out the awards with the assistance of Bill: the High Master grade is headlined by Tiffany Piper (APC) and her father Karl Piper (APC), only four points and one x separating them; the Expert grade is owned by Rob Scott (FNPC); top of the Marksman grade is Graeme Leggatt (FNPC), followed by Marna Williams (FNPC); and the ungraded shooters are led by Tom Barlow and Chris Paterson, visitors from south of the Mangamukas.

The return drive southwards is subdued. My fellow travellers are likely analysing their performances and thinking ahead to their next match. I begin to wonder if Thames Valley was sheer beginner's

luck.

Kiwi Cup Production Action Match, Hamilton — 29 March

The Hamilton Pistol Club (HPC) clubrooms overlook seven ranges on one side (I find out later there's a whole other bunch of ranges behind the clubrooms as well) and the club has been running for almost forty years.

Action section director Peter Hansen welcomes and briefs everyone. I'm squadded with fellow Aucklander Roger Parris, and Hamiltonians Marty Theobald and Dean Blake. We start the day with the side match: a multigun course with pistol, shotgun, and rifle which my squadmates fly through while I find it to be the longest three minutes of my shooting career. Awesome fun, though. The rest of the matches are straightforward as I concentrate on my basics.

At day's end, Peter hands out the awards. The host club shooters sweep the top three places — that's Peter, Jay Bellamy and Dean, respectively — followed by the Royal New Zealand Navy Pistol Club's (RNZNPC) Sheng Wong, APC's Brent Millard and Ray Salter, and Thames Valley Pistol Club's (TVPC) Ian Coates. I shoot 1261–39x and convince myself that my Far North score was an anomaly and that I'm ready for the upcoming North Island champs in three weeks.

North Island Championships, Hamilton — 18–19 April

The one day I attend (Saturday) it buckets down with three inches of rain. Only a half-dozen-or-so shooters brave the weather — Peter gleefully informs us that the remainder of the 27 registered competitors have opted for Sunday which is forecast for clear skies. I'm squadded with Marty, Harry Hoover and Hilary Hoover, all of them Hamilton members.

The first match is the barricade and I distinguish myself by shooting the air pressure hose on my first string. Competing in the rain is novel at first and I have come prepared with polyprops and goretex. What I haven't counted on is the physical and mental stamina required for a shoot on a cold and wet day: my attire may retain heat and repel water, but the hand I draw my pistol with is still slick with rainwater — caution is the best and only policy. By the time of my final match at the plates, I'm soaked through and shivering: I count myself lucky to have dropped any plates at all. My final score is 1087–27x.

(I obviously didn't attend the prizegiving but the top three placings for each division had familiar names: Open — Tiffany, Paul Loftus [Whangarei Pistol Club], Coatesy; Metallic — Karl, Peter, Brent; and Production — Sheng, Dean, John Taylor [HPC].)

Epilogue

1087–27x. I have room to improve. A stadium-sized room.

Beginner's luck and affirmations will only carry me so far — I obviously need heaps more practice. This sport requires more commitment than I imagined. I'm not a competitive type but I do like to improve. Improvement requires practice. Practice requires commitment.

There's nationals at Whangarei Pistol Club later in the year.

See you at the range.

991 words including title and byline (or 952 without the North Island placings)