

RETURN TO KAIMAI

David Mamea, Whangārei Pistol Club

I don't often write begging emails. They're missives of desperation, an acknowledgement of weakness — a requirement to say 'please'.

When the new date for the postponed 2020 Kaimai Winter Warm Up was announced, I saw that it was on the same day as an important family occasion. I puckered up and emailed Match Director and Kaimai Pistol Club President Mike Feeney if I could *please* shoot the pre-match. He agreed, though he may have come to regret the decision; more about that later.

I'd never given much thought to pre-matches before. I assumed they were for the match officials to compete, as well as to road test the stages before the competition proper. The pre-match is more than just that, though.

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On arriving at Kaimai Pistol Club, I was struck by the strong smell of fresh cattle manure. I'd forgotten that about KPC: when it isn't ringing with gunfire, cattle have the run of the land around the club house and four ranges. The high walls enclosing the club facilities do more than comply with health and safety regulations — they prevent curious and bored livestock from playing with the range equipment.

I meet John and Graham from Alpha Pistol Club. John sees that I'm shooting Classic and quietly offers to arrange for Graham, also shooting Classic, to have an accident of some sort, in order to clear the way for me. I'm tempted but I politely demur.

As I walk around, I recognise most of the faces: they were the Range Officers at the nationals I'd attended the previous month. Host club member John recognises me from my 2018 Kaimai outing: he thought he had the grand spot prize sewn up when it was given to me; I apologise.

Everyone pitches in. There's the removal of retired stage equipment, destined for the tip. The ranges — hosting two stages each — are busy with final touches being applied. At each stage, sight lines are checked and double checked, charge lines reinforced and made obvious so there is no ambiguity, and Level III rules are referred to when necessary. There is the ever-present expectation of a competitor pushing the rules and their luck. *There's always one*, an RO mutters, fellow ROs nodding their heads, some of them naming names and adding colourful epithets.

It's late morning when each stage is finished and signed off by the Match Director. Everyone gears up in the club house. I notice Mike taking deep, calming breaths before he shoos everyone out for the briefing.

My squad includes father and son duo Dan and Daniel from New Plymouth, Dion from Hamilton, Gavin from Warkworth, Leigh from Awakeri, and host club members Chris, Gerry, Marty and Robbie. Dan and Gavin coordinate the squad and share the ROing between them. Dion and Robbie share an Open pistol that looks like something out of a *Flash Gordon* serial. Robbie is ribbed for being a gunsmith at a match without a gun.

He has the last laugh by placing fourth in Open class, right behind Dion.

Our first stage is a medium course of fire. I take my time and, remembering my lesson from the nationals, make sure I don't miss anything.

Due to some no-shows, there were last minute changes to squadding. This means our squad's score sheets are a little out of date. In between stages, I take the initiative of 'tidying up' our score sheets: crossing out names and writing in those who were present and shooting. I find out later that an extra couple of minutes of thought would have saved Mike and scorer Tanya Taylor the headache of tidying up after me.

On a later medium course, Daniel overruns a couple of targets in his haste to finish the stage. I notice a silence fall over the spectating squad as they see it happen. There may have been some gentle ribbing from a family member. But not long after, on another stage, his father Dan passes a target as he follows a long and winding chargeline. Some more gentle ribbing may have been returned.

I'd developed a pavlovian response to the word 'mike' by the end of the nationals. At the Kaimai Winter Warm Up I discover two favourite words: 'two alpha'. I finish one stage with 'two alpha's all the way through and I grin for so long, my face hurts.

As the day goes on, I realise the pre-match is also an opportunity for some team-building between the ROs. And there is some serious testing of the stages — knowledge that will be applied when they RO the competition the following day.

The final stage beckons but I have Auckland traffic to navigate and a flight to catch. I give my apologies and shake hands with squadmates. I see that Tanya is busy in the scoring tent and Mike is mid-stage, and so I make a quiet, guilty withdrawal from the Kaimai Range.

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In emails after the match, Mike describes the 2020 Kaimai as *a delight to have such beautiful weather when we're usually freezing for prize giving*. He goes on to thank those who made the Winter Warm Up a reality: *stage designs by Jonny Bares, Chris Hurley, John and Scott Langeveld, Tracy Ridley, and Mike himself; the whole club for tidying the range and making it presentable for the comp at their last working bee; and many thanks to Tanya Taylor for running the scoring in her bright, shiny tent.*

Ah yes, the score sheets. Sorry, Mike and Tanya; I'll do better next time.

954 words with accompanying pix