



# Striving for Perfection

The cadet rifle team takes aim at becoming the best in the world

Written and Photographed by Lewis Carlyle

*Focus. Believe. Trust. Pull. Win.*

Sharp shooter's mantra inscribed at the Falcon Rifle Range

C1C Tom Chandler balances the rifle on his left hand, the stock tucked neatly into his right shoulder. He clears his mind, lowers his head and peers through the sights at the target, a small black ring standing 50 feet down range. Chandler slows his pulse and the entire world dissolves, leaving only his objective. He waits for the right moment, holding out for the split second lag between heart beats to squeeze the trigger. His focus sharp, his breathing even, he takes the shot, sending a round through a hole the size of the period at the end of this sentence. The electronic targeting system sends the results back to the video console at his left: one millimeter left of center. Chandler closes his eyes and recomposes. Only nine more shots to a perfect score.

The members of the Air Force Academy's rifle team are among the most focused athletes on the campus. They thrive amid one of the world's most demanding sports. Baseball players get three strikes to connect with a pitch; football teams get four downs to travel ten yards; and soccer teams have ninety minutes to put the ball into the back of the net. Yet all challenges are relative, and while each of the aforementioned sports are demanding, none require the absolute perfection of shooting.

Launi Meili is the head coach for the Falcon rifle team. A member of the U.S. Shooting Team for ten years, she has participated in two Olympics, two Pan American Games and a World Championship. She is also the only American woman to ever win gold in small-bore (Barcelona 1992). The assistant coach, Michael Anti, is an Olympic silver medalist. ▷



C4C Alexis Todaro takes aim on the Falcon Rifle Range

“For the NCAA Rifle,” Meili explains, “there are two different events. First, you have air rifle, which is a .177 caliber, and then there’s smallbore, or .22 caliber rifle.” While the air rifle competitions require shooters to be in standing position, the smallbore events require three positions: prone, in which the shooter is laying on the ground, and also kneeling, and standing.

“This sport deals with a lot of concentration and endurance,” Meili continues. “It’s very mental, much like golf. Everything has to be exact. A shooter may lay his or her rifle down two or three times before taking a shot. This is done in order to be as precise as possible.” Meili explains that to be competitive, an athlete must be able to perform in each of the prone, standing and kneeling positions. “We shoot five days a week, normally two to three hours a day, because the physical and mental demands of these competitions require perfect performance on each shot.”

There are approximately 100,000 junior ROTC shooters in the nation, a group which makes up a very competitive recruitment pool for NCAA coaches to draw from. “The Junior ROTC National Championships are something that we look at very closely for our recruiting needs here at the Academy,” says Meili.

At the varsity rifle range in the north end of the cadet gym, shooters line up with their smallbores and air rifles, taking careful aim at the targets in the distance. Each athlete uses a state of the art gun and wears special stiff clothing to help keep involuntary body motion to a minimum.

In recent years, electronic targeting systems have replaced the traditional paper bulls eyes. The system uses an array of microphones which detect the sound waves created by the bullet or pellet hitting the target. The accuracy of each shot is then electronically triangulated down to a fraction of a millimeter; the results are then sent back to the display by the shooter’s position. During competition, each shot is recorded and scored in real time, turning up the pressure to strive for perfection with each shot.

C1C Tom Chandler is the rifle team captain. Having been competitively involved in the sport for ten years now, he plays a strong mentorship role to the junior shooters. Chandler reflects, “When those of us on the team ask ourselves what it is we love about this sport, it all comes down to passion. We get to come down here day after day and shoot for hours on end. You can easily get pretty tired of it if you’re not addicted to it.”

Chandler, like the others on the team, finds that the discipline they strive for on the range is a natural segue into their lives on the terrazzo. “Taking the aspects of this sport up to the hill have helped me to place that same passion into the academic world,” Chandler says. “With my major, political science, I try to invest myself in order to get as much as possible out of it. One of the greatest aspects of this discipline is patience. That translates nicely into taking tests. Everyone else in the classroom may be just as well prepared, but when the heart rate starts going, and the blood starts pumping, controlling those anxieties is something that shooters



Falcon shooters practice five days a week and up to three hours a day.



Rifle Team captain C1C Tom Chandler re-establishes focus in between shots.

have an upper hand in. And you can apply that mentality anywhere in life.”

C4C Alexis Todaro echoes Chandler’s sentiments on patience as one of the sport’s most vital character traits. “When you’re standing there with the rifle,” she says, “it’s easy to become frustrated in a hurry. You have to have the patience to put the gun down and start over. You have to recognize when things are not going well, and it’s time to stop and regroup. A lot of this applies to cadet life as well, because things can get pretty stressful here. We get a lot of things piled on us all at once, between briefings and class and formations.”

“Shooting teaches these kids to be absolutely perfect,” Coach Meili says. “Performing under pressure is what they do every time they enter a match.” She explains that this level of concentration translates onto the battlefield, the cockpit, and virtually any other challenge that they may face as officers. “This is a sport you can take all the way to Olympics. Going through the Academy can be a tough road to the Olympics though, because of the academic demands and the years of service required for commission.”

Yet despite the rigors of constantly striving for perfection, the members of the cadet rifle team all find great enjoyment in their chosen sport. Todaro explains, “I love being able to go to the range, hold my rifle, and not have to think about anything except for the shot that I’m about to take. It’s a wonderful stress reliever in my day to day life. If I have something on my mind, or if something is bothering me, I can go shooting and it releases all that tension.”

Training the body and mind to block out the rest of the world and to bring one’s focus down to such a finite level is not something these cadets take lightly. Learning to control stress and deal with pressure are among the chief lessons that these young shooters must master. Their efforts give them not only mental fortitude, but also a strong clarity for the future of their careers. “I have my pilot’s slot right now,” says Chandler, “and I’m hoping to go down to Pensacola, because I grew up as a Navy brat. My goal is to start cross-training with the Navy and get the best of both worlds in

joint command. My long term goal within my political science major is to aim for a masters, and maybe even a Ph. D, then come back and be a part of the faculty here at USAFA.” A fan of heavy lifters, Chandler recalls that his father was raised with the air crew mentality in the Navy. He was around surveillance aircraft, where they revered a strong team effort.

The rifle team’s unity is among its strongest assets. As team leaders excel in the national rankings, their younger, less experienced counterparts are driven to do better. The phenomenon promotes a ring of challengers, constantly nipping at their teammates’ heels. “Last year,” Coach Meili recalls, “we had one cadet, Mike Sirie, make the Junior World Prone Team. They won bronze in Munich Germany, and Mike had the highest score on the team. So we’re starting to move up in the national ranks.”

“Shooting is a major component of why I came to the Academy,” cadet Todaro says. “The coaches are gold and silver medalists, and that’s not something you’re going to find anywhere else. I definitely hope to take shooting somewhere in the future.”

Cadet captain Chandler points out that the Olympic Training Center is right downtown. “I’m very motivated to get involved with the Air Force’s World Class Athlete Program.” Chandler’s stature as an All American, along with his rank among the top three on the national collegiate scene, is sure to play a part in his bid for the program. Having a shot at the Olympics is a dream that every athlete aspires to; with the arsenal of character traits instilled by the Falcon shooting program, Chandler is setting his sights high.

“Every shooter deals with an internal struggle to be the best that he or she can be,” Coach Meili concludes thoughtfully. “At the highest level, shooting is really more of an art form than a practice of war. The sport teaches these cadets to trust in themselves and to build the confidence that they can use to handle any situation which comes their way.”