

FT is not an easy sport, but here are a few tips that will help to improve your scores.

Use quality dome headed pellets. Flat, pointed and hollow head pellets are not aerodynamically stable at the distances we shoot. Always look at the pellet before you load it and if it's deformed in any way use another. Note that if you've loaded a pellet into the breech and you notice it's deformed, you can discharge it into the ground as long as you tell your partner/marshal that you intend to do so and they confirm. You can then load another and take your shot. Check the skirt for any flash from the die or for uneven wall thickness and do take care of your pellets whilst on course as they are made from very soft lead and banging them about will squash them slightly making them unstable and inaccurate. Pellets are really cheap, make sure you only use good ones or you'll miss the target for the sake of 1p worth of lead. Apart from the shooter, the pellet is the weakest link in the equation. Whenever you buy new pellets it's always worth firing a dozen or so from each tin to ensure they're OK and that each tin is consistent if you intend to use them in competition then resealing them and storing them somewhere safe. You can weigh, size and lube them but it's quite a work up although a slightly duff pellet could cause you to miss a target.

When bringing the rifle to your shoulder, close your eyes as you put your head to the scope. Once in position, open them and if the target isn't on your cross hair move your body to bring it onto the target and not the rifle. This is called acquiring the natural zero and is the position it takes least effort to hold. If you have to move the rifle to acquire the target your body will try to return it to your natural zero a split second before the pellet leaves the barrel and could result in a miss. Never try to use muscular strength to take the shot, you should be completely relaxed when you squeeze the trigger, even on standing shots. This is probably the most important thing you can do to improve your scores and is especially important on standing and kneeling shots.

Trigger control and follow through are critical, so squeeze the trigger really gently and watch the pellet hit the target through the scope with your cross hair still on target whilst holding the trigger back. Only when you've seen it hit the target should you release the trigger and move. Snatching the trigger (pulling it with a jerk) will move the rifle slightly before the pellet has left the barrel and it'll go to the right of where you're aiming, potentially enough to miss. You should be using the pad of your trigger finger as the contact point with the trigger or the tip, but never use the first joint of your finger. Also, don't grip the rifle tightly, use just enough pressure to maintain a consistent contact patch and let the rifle 'float'. If you hold too tightly the group size will increase substantially, especially with spring guns. It helps if you visualise where the pellet will hit before squeezing the trigger. If your trigger is very heavy or is so light as to be unpredictable think about adjusting it. It should be a very clean break that requires very little pressure but at the same time there should be a definite stop just before the second stage releases the shot. In winter you'll find that your trigger finger becomes less sensitive and you may release the second stage without realising it so it helps to add a little more weight in cold months.

Most people hold their breath just before they pull the trigger, usually with their lungs empty and relaxed. Don't hold it for more than 5 seconds, especially on standing

shots. If you do, put the rifle down, take a few deep breaths, relax and start again. Under competition conditions 2 minutes seems like a very short time, but there's no point in taking both shots in 1 minute if you miss both of them.

If you're dialling your top turret for very long or very close shots, make sure you return it to the zero position. It's very easy to be a complete turn out which makes your pellets hit the target very high. If the last few shots have gone high, check that you've not 'over dialled' by one complete turn of the top turret as this is a very common mistake that everyone makes at least once a season. It's also worth checking your range finding periodically against measured distances to ensure your scope is ranging correctly. Very hot or cold weather can make the optics behave differently causing you to think a target is closer or further than it actually is. If you shoot wearing spectacles always wear the same ones as they will have an effect on range finding even if the prescription is the same.

If the target is wobbling around when you look through your scope, turn the magnification down on your scope when you come to shoot as you only need the highest setting to range find. On closer targets you only need a relatively low setting anyway. A lower magnification will give you a much bigger field of view so you'll be able to see the wind blowing through grass or trees that will help you with the shot. It takes practice to get rid of the wobbles, so persevere. Most people shoot standing shots and kneelers on a much lower magnification for this reason. You need to find what works for you personally, but 12 should be ample for standing and kneeling and 20 for sitters (although 35 is very common), but there's no reason why you shouldn't go much lower. Once you get a really steady technique you can move the magnification up to find what's best for you, but just because you've got a high mag scope doesn't mean you have to use it. When you zero your scope do it at the magnification you take most of your shots with. Cheaper scopes can change the point of impact when you change magnification.

Always check the number of the target you're about to shoot is the one you're supposed to be shooting at. It's very easy to shoot them out of sequence, trust me, I've done it (more than once)! If in doubt, use the reset cord to locate it before your time starts and during the shot. Shooting a target out of sequence counts as a miss, even if it goes down and you will not be permitted to retake the shot. The other thing is to remember if a shot is to be taken standing or kneeling. It's permitted to rangefind from a seated position on these shots, but every so often someone forgets to stand up and takes a standing shot seated!

Wind is the hardest thing to learn and there's no golden rule. If you're missing the target a 9 or 3 o'clock think about what the wind is doing and learn to compensate. Use the string to help see the direction and strength, remember that it's not just for resetting the target. The further the pellet has to go, the more it slows down and the more the wind has an effect on it. Out to 30 yards even a fairly brisk cross wind won't have much of an impact on where the pellet hits the target, but beyond that it starts to have quite a significant effect. On a 55 yard target, even a slight breeze can move the pellet 2 or 3 inches sideways which is enough to miss and a strong wind can move it well over 12 inches. There's no chart or formula to refer to for windage, it just takes experience and good awareness of what's actually happening all the way to the target. If it's windy try using a lower magnification than usual and find something (such as the reset cord or nearby grass or bushes) to give

you clues and don't worry if you miss, use it as a learning experience. You're going to miss lots more over your life so don't let a few close misses phase you or disrupt your concentration. Even the top shooters miss targets, but they learn to use a miss to gain information about the wind and apply it to the next target. Although your scope has a windage turret, never use it to compensate for a cross wind, aim off and allow the pellet to be blown into the yellow. There are different techniques for adjusting for wind but the most popular way is to pick your aim point and then to wait for the wind to be just right rather than trying to adjust your aim point to match what the wind is doing in real time. This is also a good way of gaining experience as you can see exactly what happened given the circumstances.

Never go to a competition with a rifle or scope you know or suspect isn't set up correctly or has a problem. You do get some time prior to the start of a competition to 'zero' your rifle, but don't expect to make major adjustments. For the best part this time should be used to settle into your style, see what the wind is doing and not to make adjustments. Chances are it'll be windy and you won't stand a chance of getting it set up correctly anyway. If you detect a problem whilst on course, adapt your shooting to compensate rather than fiddling with your equipment unless it's a major problem. Sometimes a perceived problem can be down to canting your rifle, very unusual wind or shooting over a stream and the 'problem' disappears a couple of targets later. If you've decided to take your rifle apart you'll find it difficult to get it back to where it was and you could blow the rest of the course. Some competitors, myself included, will not use the zero range but prefer to go straight onto the course. Sometimes you start to find problems that don't exist on the plinking range and then spend the whole competition worrying. I know my equipment works and is set up correctly so why worry about going on the zero range? Also, don't be tempted to load up your rifle with aftermarket add ons such as splitters and silencers (moderators) as these will not help your accuracy, in fact they can make the rifle less accurate. Manufacturers strive to make their own rifles the best they can, if there was a £50 product that made them much better they would have done it already, or at least be selling it as an accessory.

There are other non shooting things to contemplate as well. Shooting a 50 target course can take well over 3 hours to complete so in summer make sure you've got plenty of water with you on course to prevent dehydration. If you get even slightly dehydrated your shooting will suffer and carry something with sugar in it as low blood sugar levels can make you slightly shaky. Avoid excessive coffee consumption as this will get you dehydrated and also slightly hyper. In winter ensure you've got warm clothing and ideally shooting gloves or a hand warmer to keep your trigger finger warm as often it's below zero and you need to maintain the sensitivity of the finger pad. Remember to adjust your stock to take into account the thickness of the clothes you're wearing and it's common for experienced shooters to always wear the same clothes regardless of the weather to ensure a consistent fit and feel. Tee shirts can be more comfortable to wear in a hot summer, but you may pick up a pulse point in your arm with the butt of the rifle which is not helpful. The night before a competition assemble your kit and make sure you've got it all in one place (but not in your car). Finding out as you arrive at a competition that a critical item is missing will get you stressed before you start and always take at least 2 tins of pellets to ensure it's not a tin that's been dropped or banged about in the car. Even at the big competitions, most of the other competitors will do their best to help out a fellow

shooter that's having equipment problems, so all is not lost if you run out of air or pellets although don't expect to be able to borrow a rifle.

How you approach a competition will have a significant effect on the outcome. If you've prepared well and have a positive mental attitude you will always do better than if it's a last minute rush, you don't know if your rifle is zeroed and anticipate having a bad day. Field target is not a physical sport, and whilst much is down to pure technique a large part is about concentration and attitude. Set yourself goals, not necessarily to win outright but incremental ones such as getting at least half of your positional shots or over 60% of the targets, or even a 2.5% improvement each time you compete and move your goals gradually upwards so whilst they should be challenging you will be able to achieve them over time. Remember that the one thing that separates the champions from the also rans is not equipment or even natural ability (although it helps) but the amount of practice they do and the fact that they expect to win. If you're on the plinking field don't just shoot the same 2 or 3 targets as that doesn't really constitute practice. Start at the furthest left hand target you can see and take one shot at every target to the one on the far right. How many did you miss? Keep doing it and see if you can get a better score on each pass. To improve your trigger technique shoot a paper target and see how tight a group you can get at 25 yards. Everyone at the club has equipment that's easily capable of getting single hole groups at that distance so practice until you can and then move the target out to 40 and then 55 yards. At 55 yards expect to get a spread as even a slight breeze will move them sideways but you should still be able to get a reasonably tight group even if it's in a horizontal line.