

Coming Back

By Jerry Iliff, U.S. Palma Team 2024

Trying out for and being selected to the United States Palma Team was a goal I was determined to accomplish. Once I had considered it and made the decision to trying to become a shooter on this team, I committed my time, money and work to reach this goal. During the process and before the selection I had concerns about having the talent to make the Palma team because of the other very skilled shooters who were also trying out. The competition was indeed extraordinary. Those concerns made me even more determined. My thought was, if I could work hard enough, I had the ability to land somewhere in the middle of the sixteen who would shoot for the United States in South Africa. This was something I gave a lot of thought to and about which I finally made a definite decision to commit to the tryout process and to the training regimens that followed the tryout selection. I relate this because that decision was the primary motivation that kept me resolved to working through my performance issues that I would experience during the training leading up to the Target Rifle World Long Range Championship (TR WLRC) and the pinnacle of all, the Long Range Championship Team Match, the Palma match.

When the US Palma team squad selections were made, I was elated to be one of the twenty-five from whom the sixteen shooting team members would be chosen. I was glad to see that there would be several team training events along the journey to the Worlds. I believed that with all this training and shooting alongside all my talented teammates I could continue to hone my skills enough to make the final team. I was looking forward to a growth in skill level that would surely come as the training progressed. What ended up happening was something entirely different and nothing like what I had anticipated.

When my slump began, I noticed that I was having more off call shots than usual. I did not worry too much about it until these shots started having a real effect on my scores over the course of a several day aggregate match. I have always had an off call shot occasionally but the situation seemed to be getting worse. I certainly did not want this problem to affect my Palma Team training. Thinking through my shooting process, I could not find anything wrong. Nothing seemed different or incorrect about how I was shooting, but as the scores reflected something was awry.

Next, I started having problems at team practices. Whether I shot individually or with a coach I was having off-call shots. In the beginning of my issue, I had some very good strings and occasionally, I would have a bad shot. Then it gradually got worse. I was executing shots perfectly or what seemed to be perfect, but I was unable to put together a string of x-ring elevation shots (that is 10 inches at 1,000 yards). Frustration began to set in which undoubtedly made things worse. I continued to execute what I thought were good shots, but I was falling behind the other shooters at every practice.

The first thing I did was to go through all my equipment. I went over and over my rifle looking for any problem or damage. I looked at the receiver screws, the bedding block, the recoil lug, the cheek piece, the butt plate, the sight mounts, the aperture, the iris, the sights and anything else I could think of. I did have issue with two of my rear sights at one point, but they were not the cause of my problem. Next, I tested ammunition and barrels. I found that my barrels and ammunition shot as good as ever. Two new barrels that I had chambered with the 2019 Fullbore reamer shot even better than my previous barrels. I concluded that nothing was wrong with the equipment I was using. Thus, the source of my poor performance had to be something related to me physically.

Still, I did not in fact know what the source of my setback was. All I had was the observation that many of my shots were not on call. So, I began to change things hoping that some small change would be a solution. My position was the first thing I started working on. Following the golden rule of position adjustments, I began with small changes like sling tension and moving the butt plate and hand stop in incrementally small amounts. When these small changes did not provide a solution, I made bigger changes. I raised my position significantly by shortening the butt plate and moving the hand stop. I also began using a double glove. I liked the higher position, but it did not help with the off-call shots.

Next, I moved to my front sight. Which while it is categorized as equipment, I hoped it would address my vision as I was beginning to think that my eyesight might be the issue. I had always used a 30mm front sight, but several excellent shooters were using 22mm front sights and other shooters had gone back to a 22mm sight after using a 30mm sight and had success with the change. Thus, I too decided to change the front sight. After some time using the 22mm front sight, I recognized that it provided me with some definite advantages over the 30mm sight. Some factors that led me to stick with the change to a 22mm sight included ease of obtaining a full sight picture around the entire front sight; less buffeting in high winds than the 30mm sights; and ease of purchasing, not to mention less cost, of both the sight and apertures for it. The only difficulty I have with the smaller front sight was the number boards were harder to read. However, even though I liked the 22mm sight better, the equipment changes still did not resolve my off call shot issue.

In the meantime, a lot of time had gone by, and I continued to be very inconsistent with accurately calling my shots in relation to where they actually landed on the target and my scores were getting worse. My frustration level was very high, and I knew I was at the very bottom of the list of shooters on my team. Despite all the time and effort, I had put into finding the source of my off-called shots, I had not achieved success. While I continued to be committed to my team, I knew I was not in a good position to make the final cut of sixteen shooting members. Therefore, I made the decision to relax and not worry about the results. I continued to participate in every team practice and shot as well as I could. I went to South Africa, the host of the WLRC, in 2023 to get my international experience. When the time came, I purchased my plane ticket to go to the Worlds in March 2024.

After the last team practice in September 2023, I had a short conversation with our team's head coach. I explained I knew where I was in the standings. I told him I was going to keep working to resolve the problem, whatever it was. I asked him to keep an open mind about me. He said that he would.

A couple of months before leaving for South Africa I was at my local range practicing. I was on the rifle looking through the sights and I noticed something different about the appearance of the aiming black. The right side was normal looking, but the left side was a washed-out greyish color. I blinked, adjusted my glasses and rubbed my eye but the appearance did not change. Without a doubt there was something different about my vision.

I have always had an astigmatism which I always corrected with glasses while shooting. I did try to use a contact lens at one point in time but opted to go back to glasses due to environmental factors. Long days in the wind and sun coupled with long periods of intense focus led to difficulty for me with keeping the contacts pliable and led to difficulty in removal. Regardless of the correction type, the astigmatism never seemed to be an issue for me while shooting. I have consistently had my eyes examined on a routine basis. My ophthalmologist is also a competitive shooter and has been a big help with getting my vision corrected appropriately for the rifle sight focal distance.

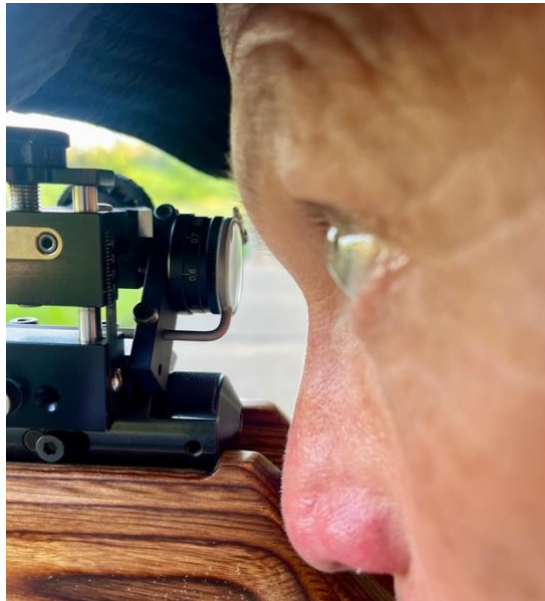
Since I had recently had an eye exam, I knew my prescription was correct. Therefore, I could not explain what I was seeing or why. Following my previous problem-solving thought process, I decided to change something to see if anything would work. I began by researching to determine what my next step would be. That led to my discovery of a lens holder that mounts a single lens to the rear sight. This positions the lens between the rear aperture and the shooter's eye. It was something I had never tried before so I ordered all the necessary parts.

Upon receiving the lens holder and lens with my prescription, I installed it to the rear sight and went to the range. Looking through this lens attached to the rear sight in this manner changed the sight picture. The aiming black was now completely black and round; there was no washed out grey blob. As I continued to shoot through the next few weeks my scores improved, my off-call shots were greatly reduced, and my elevation was better. I still was not convinced this lens solved my issue, but I was hopeful my improvements would be repeatable and sustained in South Africa. At the very least I was optimistic and less frustrated.



Once the competitions in South Africa began, my scores and the plot of my shot placements showed without a doubt that I was shooting at a high level. I would still have an occasional elevation shot but most of the time I was seeing and calling them. Only rarely would I have an off call shot, yet even those were still good scoring shots, no points lost.

My improvement was so noticeable and consistent that I was ultimately selected to be one of the sixteen firing member on the U.S. Palma Team. This was a one-in-a-lifetime goal for me, and I am very proud to have been a firing member of the team. My success was a direct result of my determination to resolve my issue, my confidence in my skill and shooting abilities, and my unwillingness to give up, not just for me, but for my team.



I still cannot say with 100% confidence that putting the lens on the rear sight has resolved my problem completely. However, it is the only thing that I implemented during this multi-year process that has led to my improved, sustained higher-level performance. While I do like and have retained the higher position changes and the use of the 22mm front sight, they in and of themselves, did not resolve the off call shot placement issues that started me on the road to making these changes.

Why did it take so long to come up with a solution that resulted in sustained improvement? The answer to that question is two-fold. First, I think the changes in my vision happened at such a slow rate that I just did not notice it especially since I have always kept my prescriptions up to date. Secondly, I think something was going on with my shooting eye that was not related to the vision prescription, but rather with the method of implementing the correction. Therefore, once I changed the way I was correcting my vision, the sight picture improved dramatically. This is the only explanation that makes sense to me. Whether this is true or not, I do not know.

To substantially shorten the time between my difficulties and the solution I should have been more critical of my vision from the onset. The fact is, I inspected my shooting jacket, sling, glove, rifle, sights and ammunition and found everything to be in perfect working order. My shooting position had not changed in quite some time so that was not an issue at all. After recognizing there were no problems with equipment or position, I should have immediately looked at my vision as the source of the problem instead of experimenting with things that may or may not have contributed to the problem. I spent a lot of time and money on ineffective solutions instead of concentrating on finding the actual source of the problem. Also, I think I could have been more willing to asked for help. I did talk to other shooters about my issue but not in a meaningful way that helped me analyze the problem.

I spent two years or more trying to sort out my shooting ability with a good deal of frustration and doubt. Ultimately things worked out for me, and I resolved my problem at least for the time being. However, I know the time I spent solving the problem could have been drastically reduced and I could have spent all that time improving my skills even more helping me to be a better U.S. Palma Team member.

The rear lens sight holder I used is the Anschutz monoframe lens holder. It can be found at [Champions Choice](#) and other competitive shooting product suppliers. The only difficulty I have experienced is finding someone to cut a prescription lens to an outer diameter of 24 mm. Finally, I would like to note that I still wear glasses while shooting, but for safety purposes only, not to correct my vision.

