

Rifle Association’s executive vice president from 1977 to 1985. His badge and pistol are on display at the NRA’s National Firearms Museum in Fairfax, Virginia.

In 1966, the Border Patrol’s pistol team switched to a new format: Police Pistol Combat, or PPC. Developed by the NRA and FBI, PPC is a fast-paced, timed course mimicking law enforcement action where contestants shoot from barricades and from different positions.

Local, state and regional tournaments and the NRA’s annual National Police Shooting Championships in Albuquerque, New Mexico, use this standard format. Competitions are open only to civilian and military law enforcers. As with the earlier bull’s-eye events, the Border Patrol’s national pistol team has dominated the contests. Since 1966, 10 agents won the national championships—one agent won three times, another won twice and Vadasz won the title eight times.

Aiming for the top

Becoming a title holder begins at a local contest usually sponsored by a sheriff’s office, police department, state police or other law enforcement agency. A Border Patrol sector typically fields a team where agents score individually and as a group, explained Art Velez, the national pistol team’s captain. Agents who score the most points up to 1,500 move on to the NRA-sponsored regional matches to vie against

the best shooters from several counties or an entire state. They may also qualify to join the Border Patrol’s national team during its annual recruiting.

The team travels to five NRA national tournaments, challenging the nation’s best law enforcement shooters. Agents winning national awards can enter shooting’s pinnacle event—the Bianchi Cup, the NRA’s Action Pistol Championship. Named for police officer John Bianchi, this three-day event held every two years is not just for law enforcers but open to all qualifying shooters striving to be the world’s ultimate pistol

shooter. Like the Olympics, the competition is held at different international locations.

Using the PPC format, local, regional or national bouts are the same—five matches where contestants earn points firing at a paper target from different distances. About 2 feet in length, the oval black target has four white rings and a bull’s-eye, positioned within a large human torso outline. Advancing toward the target’s center, the space between each ring is worth seven, eight and nine points respectively. The bull’s-eye, 10 points.

Velez described the demanding requirements.

- Match one—20 seconds to fire 12 rounds at the target from 7 yards, then again at 15 yards.
- Match two—90 seconds to fire six shots from each position: kneeling and firing with the right and left hand while standing behind a barricade from 25 yards. (The barricade is a wood plank about a foot wide and several feet high.)
- Match three—2 minutes and 45 seconds to fire six rounds from each position: sitting, prone and firing with the right and left hand while standing behind a barricade from 50 yards.
- Match four—35 seconds to fire 12 rounds from 25 yards while standing, performed twice.
- Match five—60 rounds fired in four stages:



At the 2016 Rocky Mountain Nationals in Raton, New Mexico, shooters fire while sitting, kneeling, prone and standing. Photo by Edgar Ramos

Stage A—20 seconds to fire 12 rounds from 7 yards.

Stage B—90 seconds to fire 18 rounds kneeling behind a barricade and also standing and firing from the left and right side of a barricade from 25 yards.

Stage C—2 minutes and 45 seconds to fire 24 rounds while sitting, prone and from the left and right side of a barricade from 50 yards.

Stage D—12 seconds to fire six rounds without any support to steady the pistol from 25 yards.

Matches must be accomplished with different pistols, all adding up to 150 rounds to earn a potential 1,500 points, Velez said. They vary from the service weapon to revolvers to semi-automatics. Some are “stock” pistols, meaning right out of the box while others are modified as per NRA rules.

Two- and four-shooter teams compete as well. “One fires while the other coaches,” Velez said. “Then the one firing becomes the coach.” Coaches will point out shortcomings to assist the shooter, such as aiming too high or too low or using too much pressure to steady the pistol against the barricade. Four-shooter teams perform the same task except with two coaches and two shooters.

“Imagine trying to hit a 1 1/2-inch circle at 50 yards,” said Velez, describing the toughest bull’s-eye shot of all.



Lilia Maite-Ferrer gets some advice from team captain Art Velez after firing in the four-shooter squad semi-automatic pistol match at the 2016 Rocky Mountain Nationals in Raton, New Mexico. Photo by Edgar Ramos

The right stuff

So what does it take to be the best?

Accuracy, alignment and trigger control are the pillars of competitive shooting, Velez pointed out. Accuracy is the skill to have the round go exactly where you want it. Alignment means the pistol’s aiming sights are properly set. Trigger control separates the winners from everyone else. “Ninety percent is trigger control,” Velez insisted. “You’re not pulling. It’s a steady pressure in all one movement. And you don’t stop.” Uneven pressure can lift the pistol’s barrel just enough to miss the mark, he said.

“Once the shot is made, don’t dwell on it,” advised Shawn Becker, a team member and supervisory Border Patrol agent who enjoys mentoring new shooters. “Look to the next shot.” Thinking about it is a distraction and wastes valuable seconds, he explained. “Concentrate on what to do next,” Becker said. “Don’t dwell on the score.”

Top shooters not only have good vision, they also visualize, said world record holder Robert Vadasz. “They see wind, humidity, elevation,” factors that affect a bullet’s path. “Some days, I can see the bullet traveling down range.” Muscle memory, to precisely perform mechanical tasks such as aiming or trigger-pulling



Rebecca Brudnok fires from 7-yard line and Araceli Woods coaches during the four-shooter revolver match at the 2016 National Police Shooting Championships in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Photo by Edgar Ramos