

National Standards for Scoring ARA Targets *by Macky Locklin*



I see blue, but is it in?

What follows is an excursion that may tread on some toes. It shouldn't, but it probably will. It has to do with the proper, accurate and fair method of scoring an ARA target. It is a delicate matter, but accurate and consistent scoring is absolutely essential to our sport.

Please understand that this, in no way, is meant to point the finger of guilt at any one individual, any particular Club nor any region of the country. This is simply a wake-up call for anyone that serves on an ARA target scoring team and competitors who accept less than hard-nosed, down-and-dirty, tough-as-nails scoring.



As one of the Record Target Certification Committee members, I've reviewed numerous targets that have been sent in to the Business Office for review as potential record targets. In addition, I've scored many thousands of targets in the field, and traveled to numerous clubs over the years as a competitor where I've seen many different concepts of scoring applied. As a result, I've come to one obvious conclusion: it is abundantly clear that a wide variation exists in the scoring of ARA targets.

The only way we might have absolute consistency in scoring is to have the same person score ALL the targets shot in ALL events staged from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Obviously, this is neither possible nor practical. Therefore, we will always be left with participants of ARA scoring targets at each event. There's nothing wrong with that, in fact, that's the way it should be. Consequently, some minor variations in scoring will always exist. However, the idea is to keep that variation to an absolute minimum so we can be assured of having a fair comparison of scoring from one club to another and from one region of the country to another.

In theory and reality, as well as fairness to all, a target shot in one part of the country should be scored exactly the same as an identical target might be scored by another scoring team, 1,000 miles away. That's more than a dream, fellow ARA competitors, that's the way it should be. We all have that expectation, and what's more, we deserve that kind of consistency in scoring.

I would love to be able to travel to each and every Club that competes under the ARA umbrella and personally meet each competitor whose name I see on our list. However, unless I win the lottery, I won't be able to quit my job, buy a half-million dollar customized bus, spending my entire year traveling from Club to Club shooting and giving personalized instruction on the proper method of scoring an ARA target to every competitor and Match Director. But, my more realistic hope is that the inconsistencies I've seen in scoring can be remedied so we don't have to implement a scoring-check system for targets that score over a certain point level.

The crux of the matter is this: If a club consistently scores their targets strictly, plugging ALL close shots, it's a sure bet that their average scores will be LOWER than a club that refuses to plug those same close shots. And, with that same certainty, all competitors at a club that score targets less strictly will show HIGHER aggregates than the competitors at these clubs deserve. Therefore, competitors who frequent the clubs that score less critically will have artificially higher aggregates than competitors shooting at clubs that score properly. Of course, I'm speaking here about the scoring of targets ONLY, not weather related differences that might cause the aggregate difference.

In general, our ARA Rules are very simple. That's one of the appeals of our sport. However, if you've noticed our Rule Book, the Rules regarding scoring are quite detailed. In fact, "Paragraph 12 -- Scoring of Targets", covers almost four pages. This should give you some indication of how important it is in the overall scheme of the sport.

The pertinent part of the Rules regarding scoring is contained in the second paragraph just below the target-scoring example on page 7. It states:

"Preliminary scoring of targets should be done to determine values in each separate scoring box. Values for all obvious shots shall be written in each box, while all close shots must be marked with a colored marker to alert the "plugger" which shots to examine and plug. The plugger shall then plug and score those shots with the regulation plug using a magnifier. If after close examination, the shot is too close to call alone, the plugger shall call upon the scoring team members to review the bullet hole. All three scoring team members shall vote upon its value. A majority vote shall determine the value of the plugged shot."

In reality, this rule is being ignored by many Match Directors and their respective scoring teams. It goes beyond a simple matter of interpretation of the paragraph. The key phrase in the rule, and the one that causes us the greatest departure from a standardized method of scoring, is contained in this paragraph. It centers on the determination of "close shots".

In scoring a target, the scoring team will look at a bullet hole, which usually leaves a dark, ragged-edged smudge as the bullet passes through the target. If it is significantly inside the scoring ring, it can easily be scored to the higher value. But, all too often, the scoring team will look at such "close shots" and leave far too many of them unplugged. In the phrase that I've repeatedly heard many Match Directors say, "if I see blue, I don't plug it." On truly close shots, this is the heart of the problem. Those shots MUST be plugged, even if they DO show blue, and here's why.

If you fire a few shots on the white portion of any target, you will note that not all the shots are perfectly round. More often, those shots are oblong shaped. The reasons are many, but usually it is because the target is rippled a little, not perfectly flat against the backing material or the backing material is shot away behind the hole, or all of these.

So, using the "if I see blue, I don't plug it" philosophy, it is easy to see that if the flattened portion of the oblong shape falls VERY close to the edge of the blue scoring ring, it's entirely possible for the hole to show blue next to the smudge, and still be OUT if plugged!

In other words, the oblong shape, if checked with the round plug will show the full diameter of the plug as if it were the bullet, and quickly show whether the shot is IN or OUT.

In the two photos that accompany this article, you'll notice a perfect example of this situation. The first photo shows a very close shot that could easily be scored 100 using the "if I see blue, I don't plug it" method, since the hole IS oblong, and gives the impression at first glance to be IN. There IS blue showing between the bullet hole smudge and the 100 ring. The second photo, showing the plug in place, takes any doubt out of the question. The shot is not just OUT when plugged, it's WAY OUT! Now, how many shots like this have slipped past scoring teams all over the country?

When marked for plugging, sometime shots may be in, sometime out. But, under these circumstances, not only SHOULD these shots be plugged, they MUST be plugged. And, whether they are in OR out, simply taking the extra few seconds to plug the bullet hole to make the determination is good for ALL competitors. The phrase "leveling the playing field" can't possibly be used in a more appropriate place than here, as it applies to a standardized, consistent national scoring method.

My suggestion is this: during this slow time of the winter while few shooting activities are taking place, pull out a pile of your old targets. Look them over critically. Look honestly at the close shots. Check out the shape of the holes. Look at the shots that were scored 100 and NOT plugged. I can assure you that if you take the time to plug them and view them with a strong magnifier, a significant number of them will turn out to be a 50 instead of the marked value of 100.

Think about that next time you proudly retrieve your 2400 target as it is passed out at the conclusion of an event. Having the score posted on your target as 2400 is one thing, but EARNING it is an entirely different matter.

If you DO shoot a big score, congratulations! I've seen some of the targets as they've come across my desk for review as potential record targets. Some of them are beautiful with clean, easily scored holes. Dream targets! But, all too often, there are several on the target that went unplugged that should have been plugged. So, if you truly want to be proud of what might be your highest scoring ARA target, be honest with yourself and insist that the scoring team at the Club where you're competing, wherever it might be, score the targets accurately.

Let's face it guys, shooting big scores is everyone's dream. But, I doubt that any serious ARA competitor would want to take credit for something that he didn't truly earn. If I'm wrong, and bragging rights for big scores are all that is important to you, then continue to allow scoring with this "if I see blue, I don't plug it" philosophy. However, your target won't be scored fairly, and in allowing this to happen, you not only cheat yourself, but you also cheat the competitors in the rest of the country that DO score critically.

Personally, I hope this "if I see blue, I don't plug it" concept disappears, and we can all be sure that the score that is written in the upper right portion of our targets IS our score, our EARNED score.

Good luck to all, and may each of us see a 2400 target that we can be proud of!