

Making The Grade

By Grant Ubl, 1999 & 2003 Palma Team Member

Introduction

The tryouts for the 2003 US Palma Team are rapidly approaching. Undoubtedly, this will be a very hard fought contest between the best prone shooters this country has to offer. The 1999 Palma Team tryouts were tough, but this tryout should prove to be harder. More people have interest in the sport today and the level of competition seems to have increased dramatically over the past 2-3 years as well.

Here is a little bit of insight as to what the 1999 tryouts were like:

Stage 1 Tryout

Approximately 120 shooters fired on both days of the initial Stage 1 Palma Tryouts at Camp Perry in August of 1997. A Palma Match was fired on day one as part of the regular LR Nat'l Match Aggregate (Tompkins Agg). The following day, shooters once again stood in line at dawn to receive their squadding tickets for yet another Palma Match plus an additional 20-shot 1000 yard match. The aggregate score from both days of shooting (110 shots) would determine the 30 shooters fortunate enough to go onto the 2nd stage Qualifier. These people would be firing against the 24 people from the 1995 Palma team in Stage 2 of the tryouts in San Antonio, Texas.

The conditions that the Stage 1 matches were fired under at Camp Perry were actually quite mundane compared to what everyone had fired in during the entire week of the LR National Matches. 1997 was particularly brutal regarding rain, wind and light conditions. As it was, conditions lightened up a bit for the tryout matches and some very impressive scores were turned in.

Stage 2 tryout

The 54 tryout shooters assembled in San Antonio during October of 1997 for the second stage of the tryouts and were greeted to some very unfriendly weather. A large, high pressure system had been parked over the Atlantic ocean for days and the rotation of the winds were such that moisture was packing into Texas on a wholesale basis. A hurricane traveling along the Mexican peninsula at the time did not help matters either. Fortunately for the shooters, the rain was just ending as they assembled on the range at Camp Bullis. However, the winds that followed the rain were very unkind and the conditions during most of the tryout week could be best described as torturous.

This was actually good in a way because the coaches were involved in their final tryout during this stage. Each shooter had to fire 10 record shots for each prospective coach. The coaches were highly graded on their ability to keep the shots centered in the bullseye for windage. The coaches were also graded by each shooter while anonymity was respected.

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The slate had been wiped clean for Stage 2 of the tryouts and scores fired in the previous stage were eliminated. The shooters were now in head-to-head competition, firing on 4 separate relays. Relay firing order was rotated on a daily basis and shooters were rotated on firing points. This gave everyone equal opportunity to crossfire and equalized the early/late firing conditions. (8) 20-shot, 1000 yard matches were fired using team-issued ammunition. Because of variances in chambers, they were a few rifles that didn't digest this ammo real well. However, there were some very high scores turned in when conditions allowed. It was determined that shooters would be allowed to throw out their low score for the week because conditions were so brutal on certain days. As it was, 140 shots went into the aggregate for each shooter. It would now be a long, 12 month wait for the final stage of the tryouts.

Let me tell you, a year is one heck of a long time to think things over...

Stage 3 Tryout

After a very long and mentally grueling wait, the shooters once again assembled to do battle during the final tryout held at Phoenix in late October of 1998. Although everyone had hoped for the bunny conditions that usually occur at the Ben Avery range during the month of October, it was not to be. The winds were such that at one point the range was forced to shut down entirely because target frames were breaking.

The competition in Phoenix involved a firing a full Palma Match on the first three days. The final day involved firing (3) 20-shot matches at 1000 yards. Adding to the pressure of this final tryout was the fact that a running tabulation of the aggregate score for Stages 2 & 3 were posted daily on the Wailing Wall. The top 18 shooters were going and most knew exactly where they stood at the end of each day. A few were smart enough to steer well clear of that wall until the tryouts were over. The pressure going into that final day was intense! The tryouts for the last 10 positions on the team were extremely close. One mistake and someone else was ready to take your place.

The tryouts in Phoenix were very fair in that each shooter drew their squadding ticket from the hat on a daily basis. The issued ammunition for the tryout was of very good quality and there were some very impressive scores turned in from some relays.

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As it was on that final day of the Phoenix tryout, the scores were tabulated to determine the final results and it seemed to take a lifetime. There were 335 record shots fired in the final two stages and each shooter was required to lay on the mat 19 different times. (add an additional 120 shots and 7 times on the mat if you fired the Stage 1 tryout). After the tabulation was made, the Palma team Captain began to read the names aloud in the order of finish. 14 months of tryouts in 3 locations across the country had now come to an end and everyone was listening intently. As the very last name of the shooter making the 18-man team was called, the man fell to his knees. It is a vision that shall remain imprinted

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on my mind for a long time and pretty well sums up how everyone felt when they realized they had made the grade.

Special Thanks

I'd like to give a special thanks to Mid Tompkins and Ken Erdman for the fairness that was given to all during the 1999 Palma tryouts. These folks put their thinking caps on and came up with a game plan that favored those willing to put in the effort to succeed.