

SMA rifle team aims, fires and learns

Four girls among members getting ready for competition.

Giving firearms to a bunch of high school kids might not seem like the best idea.

But to members of the Sarasota Military Academy's rifle team, it makes perfect sense.

Now in its fifth year, the team has nearly triple the members than when it was created and double the amount of girls on the team.

The club's main objective is not to show students the proper way to fire a rifle, but to teach the importance of precision, strength, confidence and control.

"There is no other sport that focuses on perfecting all of those skills at once," said SMA Sgt. Reiss Pellegrino, the rifle team's coach.

He applies his 22 years of military experience with his passion for academics to teach the team's members the skills necessary for rifling.

"What they learn here should also flow into the classroom and vice-versa," he said. "There are expected guidelines on this team, just as there are with academics."

The team has 15 members. Seven are veteran members; eight are newcomers, including four girls.

The team practices twice a week after school and one Saturday a month.

Each member is equipped with a Daisy .177-caliber 753-model pump air rifle, an adjustable scope, a floor mat and a rifle glove.

In competition, they fire pellets at targets 10 meters away under a certain time limit.

They are required to fire from three stances - lying chest down on a mat, kneeling and standing.

"Standing is the most difficult position for most because you are required to hold the weight of the gun steady for a long period of time," Pellegrino said. "Girls actually have an easier time with this position than the guys."

Each shooter has as many as 20 shots in each position. But before they shoot at their targets, the members are allowed to fire sighter shots, which are sort of practice shots, to make sure they are lined up correctly with their target.

They do this by looking through their scope after each shot. "The shooters don't actually move their rifles to hit each target," Pellegrino said. "They try and fire at the same exact spot every time, and adjust their rifles to hit each target."

In a competition, points are awarded to the shooters based on how close they fire to the center of each of their targets.

"It takes a lot more control than it might seem," Pellegrino said. "They learn control of themselves, both physically and mentally, and a great deal of confidence in what they can do."

The most challenging part of the sport is being able to keep the rifle steady for a long period of time and hit the same spot more than a dozen times.

"If they breathe incorrectly, it could completely mess up their aim," he said.

This is why Pellegrino instructs the members not to eat a lot of sugar before coming to practice and not to drink any type of energy drink that would cause them to shake,



Tammy Roberts

SMA freshman **Katie Wilhite**, 14, aims and fires at her target.

FIRE-ARMED FEMALES

What made you join the SMA Rifle Team?

Katie Wilhite, age 14, freshman

"I grew up in Lake Placid and my dad was really big on hunting. I figured, 'Hey, I've fired a BB gun, how hard could it be to shoot a rifle?'"

Ashley Loudon, age 14, freshman

"I wanted to do something different. I figured rifling would help improve my eye-hand coordination."

Katelyn Chase, age 14, freshman

"I'd never held a gun before, let alone fired one. It wasn't as loud as I expected when I fired it. Getting your breathing right is the most difficult part."

Arielle Mouhot, age 14, freshman

"I'm actually a lot better than I expected to be. There's nothing like the adrenaline rush you get when you're out there."

interfering with their shooting.

The rifle team will compete at a state high school match in March, then the Army ROTC eastern region finals competition and the National JROTC competition.

But the team's biggest competition is in October at the Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville, Tenn. The team will face teams from 50 schools across the nation. Last year, SMA finished second out of 52 teams in the tournament.

"It's a big deal for us," Pellegrino said. "I pick the team based on skill level, improvement level and achievement in the classroom."

He usually chooses four teammates for the tournament, one precision shooter and a few others for exposure of the competition.

SMA junior Christian Urrea, 15, is focused on reserving a spot to compete in October. A second-year shooter, Urrea is pleased with how far he has come with his shooting skills and is only looking to improve further.

"The competition would be an amazing opportunity to be head-to-head with the best shooters from all across the nation," he said.