

BEST TARGETS

BEST Targets Shooting Team After Action Report (AAR)

Event: 2022 Vortex Team Sniper Challenge
Date: February 24-27, 2022
Location: Coleman's Creek, Ellerbe, NC
Websites: <https://www.facebook.com/VortexTeamSniperChallenge/>

Shooter: Scott Whitehead
Rifle: Mausingfield Action, Hawk Hill Barrel, KRG X-Ray Chassis in 6mm GT by Pendergraft Gunworks
Ammo: 6mm GT Handloads. 115gr DTACs, 35.3gr H4350, CCI primers, Lot R2a
Gear: Vortex Razor Gen III 6-36x scope, Vortex Precision Rings, Kahntrol Solutions brake, Ckye-Pod bipod, Vortex Fury 5000 Laser Rangefinding Binoculars, Vortex Radian Tripod, Cole-Tac rear-bag CZ75 Phantom by Cajun Gunworks, Vortex Venom red-dot, Safariland holster, CCI Blazer 9mm ammo Sierra Designs Pack, Custom gear by Sunrise tactical, RS3 rifle cover Clothes by Exoficio, Wild Things, Patagonia & Arc'Teryx. Altra Lone-Peak 4 shoes.

Shooter: Brandon Zielinski
Rifle: Impact Action, Krieger Barrel, Foundation Genesis Stock in 308 Win chambered by Jason Nixon
Ammo: 308 Win Handloads: 185gr Juggernauts, 44.0gr Varget, CCI BR4 primers, .060" jump
Gear: Vortex Razor Gen III 6-36x scope, SPUHR mount, APA Fat Bastard brake, Ckye-Pod double pull bipod, Vortex Fury 5000 AB Laser Rangefinding Binoculars, RRS Ultralight tripod, Anvil 30 ballhead, Armageddon Gear (AG) Schmedium heavy-fill gamechanger, AG Fat Bag, HK-VP9 pistol, Vortex red-dot, Safariland holster, G2 9mm ammo, Eberlestock LoDrag pack, Clothes by Patagonia & Ascend, Salomon SpeedCross 4 shoes.

Event Format

The Vortex Team Sniper Challenge is a five match nationwide series, with events held in North Carolina, Missouri, Colorado, Utah, and Texas. Each of the matches is a three-day two-person team endeavor. All events are open to military, law enforcement, and civilian teams. The first four of the five matches are qualifier matches with the last being a season championship. At each event, sixty teams will compete on stages inspired by historical events, sponsor products, stages that mimic training iterations from sniper schools around the world, and real-life sniper scenarios. Each competition includes both pistol and rifle shooting, putting both speed and precision to the test. Some of the stages will contain combat simulations, cranking the intensity up to eleven. All stages are "blind stages" meaning the competitors will need to be good at target acquisition and problem solving under a time constraint. This, with the added physical and mental fatigue of a three-day match where most competitors will ruck over thirty miles, makes this a once in a lifetime experience for many who show up to put their body, skills, and mind to the test.

The first event on the Vortex Team Sniper calendar was held at Coleman's Creek in Ellerbe NC, and is divided into three classes – LRRP, Trooper, and Mechanized. LRRP (Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol) competitors hike all the movements against an 18 min/mile time limit, and camp out each night of the event. The Trooper competitors have all the same hikes and time limits, but can leave the facility at night. The Mechanized class gets moved from stage to stage by truck, and has no rucking or camping requirements. Brandon and Scott competed in the Trooper class.

Background

With 2250 miles separating Scott's home in Mooresville, NC, and Brandon's home in Pahrump, NV, preparation would be a little non-traditional. We spent a lot of time on the phone planning, shipped lots of stuff back and forth, and made sure we had everything we needed in Mooresville when Brandon stepped off the plane from Nevada. We discussed stage planning, communications, packing, and preparations of all sorts.

Without having the convenience of location proximity or the advantage of being continuous, longstanding partners (which is ideal for team match preparation), our goal was to place well enough to secure us a spot in the Vortex Team Sniper Championship. Going into this match, we both knew that enduring the physical challenges wouldn't be much of an issue for us. This resulted in the "pack it in case it will benefit us" ideology, quickly adding to our overall weight. There were no

worries when it came to pistol and rifle marksmanship for each of us; Scott and Brandon both had their fair share of podium finishes in the past. This left our main challenge as communication, which fortunately can be worked on over the phone. With a competition filled with so many unknowns, it was more beneficial to us than ever to ensure we were both on the same page. In other words, we wanted to speak the same language, think the same way and identify a systematic logic in our approach. We spent some time on the phone discussing prior matches and stages, hypothetical scenarios, what ifs and general dialogue.

DAY 0

On Thursday morning, we headed out to Coleman's Creek. The registration area was set up with a huge VORTEX tent, with several retailers showing off new stuff. Short seminars ranging from range-finder usage to proper application of a tourniquet were available, and there was a lot of comradery and smack-talk as everyone had a relaxing afternoon. But before we enjoyed too much downtime, we had some work to do.

Our trip to the zero range could not have gone smoother. It was uneventful – just the way we want it. It took us no more than 5 rounds each to confirm zero at 100yds both rifles were shooting incredibly well. We did not chronograph our rifles, as both of us had recently done so with the same exact lots of ammo. Adjacent to the rifle targets were two small IPSC pistol targets at 25yds and 50yds. Scott took a few shots at the 50yd target and hit every single time – that was the end of pistol for him. Brandon, having just taken his red-dot off to replace the battery, required a little adjustment to confirm zero. Once adjusted, he too made consecutive hits on the 50yd IPSC. At this point we were both extremely confident with all our weapons. There was not one single issue and we couldn't have asked for better precision from any of them.

With plenty of time between confirming zero and the mandatory shooter's brief later that evening, we made best use of our time by practicing what we could utilizing the surrounding terrain. Scott would identify a random object or feature and talk Brandon onto it as quickly and concisely as possible, and vice-versa. When that talk-on was not quite as efficient as it could be, we identified why and continued practicing. Before long, our communication was fluid and we were on the same page.

We also took the time to ensure our Vortex Fury binoculars were programmed properly. Scott's 6mm GT ballistics were under profile A on each Bino and Brandon's .308 Win ballistics were under profile B on each Bino. We ranged the same object with both profiles to ensure we achieved the same solution.

Timed rucks started and ended each day. The mornings would start with a timed ruck of around 4 miles out to the stage areas, and the days would end with a ruck back. All rucks had to be completed in an 18:00 min per mile pace, and that time requirement meant we needed to pay attention to gear weight carefully, but we were easily able to meet that time standard on every ruck all weekend. Some of the hills, and especially the cold rain on Sunday morning, made the rucks miserable at times, but the par time was generous enough that we always felt in control.

DAY 1

Due to some fog on day 1, all the stages were shortened from 6 minutes to only 3 minutes. This was a necessary decision by MD Joe Burdick – it was the only way teams were going to finish with the late start time necessitated by mother nature's behavior. That means most of the stage were nearly unfinishable in the 3-minute par time, but we would need to be efficient and shoot fast to get it all done and bank as many points as possible.

Stage "The Bank is Closed"

This stage started with the Primary shooter engaging all pistol targets, and then both shooters move to a position of their choice to locate, range and engage only the grey targets on 4 separate banks. Each bank included grey targets and red targets acting as "hostage" targets. Any impact on a red target would subtract a point and make that bank off-limits to any further points.

Scott hit the pistol targets quickly and got the team into position, and Brandon was already building his position. Brandon worked through the banks and put some great points on the board, and Scott took over with the remaining time, and scored 4 more hits before the time ran out. This felt like an average start for us, but it was great to get out the morning jitters and start putting effective rounds downrange.



Stage “The Duece”

At the buzzer, teams start with all gear in hand, board the truck and establish shooting positions, shooting out the side of the bed with the secondary nearest the cab. Given rough lateral limits of the range, shooters had to locate up to 4 torso targets for primary and 6 circle targets for secondary; either shooter can engage first.

Brandon nearly instantly located two of his Secondary targets and got behind the rifle to start shooting, putting points on the board. Scott spent his time locating, ranging, and talking Brandon onto his remaining targets as quickly as possible, and Brandon kept impacting targets in the very short stage time. We never got to the Primary rifle on this stage, but we were okay with that – the goal of these matches is to score maximum TEAM points, and as a team we make decisions to support that goal.



Stage “Talk to Me”

Within a lane of about 60+ targets, are 10 uniquely shaped targets. Shooters begin in isolated positions that don't allow for any audio or visual communication between team members. Each team member is given a target card for their partner that provides the shape and range to their 4 targets – information which must be communicated over a walkie-talkie.

Since the two shooters were free to be shooting simultaneously, rather than lose time going back and forth to the radios, we thought it was best to invest the time right up front to communicate all the targets and ranges to each other and then we could each shoot independently. This might have been a good strategy for a 6-minute stage, but it was the wrong choice for a 3-minute stage. We simply wasted too much time giving information on targets that we didn't have a hope of getting to in the short time

limits. We spent too much time on the radios, and not enough time shooting and came away with very few points. This was a planning mistake – we had a good plan, and executed it, but it was the wrong plan for this time limit.

Stage “Abandon The Hide”

This was a simple stage brief - Shooters are to move into a pre-constructed hide site, locate, range and engage 5 torso targets for the primary and 5 diamonds for the secondary. Either may shoot first, but all targets must be engaged before the other shooter is allowed to engage.

“The Hide” was a rather tight space with a challenging position to shoot from. The bipod had to be high enough to get over the logs in front, and the back had to be even higher so you could make the “downhill” shots – our Ckye-pods certainly proved their worth on this stage. Scott shot first while the secondary gave an average range to the small convoy the torsos were located around. After Scott connected with 11 of his 13 shots, Brandon got behind the rifle and put 5 more hits on steel in 9 shots before time ran out. We were really happy with this performance – another strong stage with good shooting and great communications.



Stage “Golfballs”

This stage had the feel of a 3-gun stage. Shooters had to run from position to position, alternating between standing off-hand rifle shooting and pistol shooting. It would have been easy to get so caught up in the rifle shooting, that shooters may never reach their pistol shooting. Given the points available, that would have been a mistake. Since we were able to hear shooters ahead of us go, we understood the pace of the stage, and did an excellent job of maximizing the points by making sure we got off all our pistol shots.

DAY 2

Stage “Duece II”

The first stage of Day II brought us back to the Duece. After each shooter engaged 4 pistol targets, the team needed to move into the truck and establish prone positions with the secondary on the left, and the primary shooter on the right.

We both cleaned the pistol targets quickly and when we got into the truck, we again quickly found lots of secondary targets, but the primary targets were tough to locate. We got to work on the secondary targets, with Brandon shooting, and Scott alternating between locating and talking Brandon onto his targets, and trying to locate his own targets. To make things even tougher, with the primary on the right side, Scott basically needed to be laying on top of Brandon to get an angle on some of his targets (or shoot them all weak side if he could locate them), so we stayed with the Secondary targets, and Brandon racked up a very strong score.



Stage “Pallets”

For this stage, the team approached a “wall of pallets” and the primary had to engage 5 pistol targets while the secondary began to locate 10 rifle targets – 5 diamonds for primary and 5 IPSCs for secondary. Either shooter could shoot rifle first, but they must shoot through or over the positioned pallets. After rifle shooting was called complete by the team, the team’s secondary shooter could engage 5 pistol targets.

Scott quickly cleaned his 5 pistol targets as Brandon was building a position and finding targets. When the pistol shooting was done, Brandon had already located targets and was ready to start shooting from a barricade position. He scored quite a few impacts on the four targets we could find, and we switched to Primary but did not have time to get a shot off at a Primary target

our timer hit 30 seconds remaining – the time at which we had planned to abandon the rifles and secure our last 5 pistol points.

Perhaps our largest mental error in the entire match was made here when we had planned to set our timer to beep 30 seconds prior to the actual allotted time for the stage. Normally we set the timer to match the total allotted time. However, our plan was to shoot rifle targets until we got the beep, leaving us 30 seconds to get all the remaining pistol targets. When Brandon looked at the watch while under the stressors induced by the stage and saw 30 seconds, his mind automatically turned to how we normally run stages, so the call was made to abandon rifle targets and get to the pistol. All pistol targets were successfully engaged before the beep – the team then realizing they STILL had 30 more seconds they could have used to get more rifle hits. We soon found that many other teams had a similar strategy and made the same mistake.



Stage “Wounded”

Each Vortex Team Sniper Challenge match has one stage which includes some type of trauma care. In this stage, shooters started in a box where primary will engage 5 pistol targets with one hit each, left to right, and then secondary did the same. The shooters then move behind a vehicle to find and treat a “wounded” dummy and successfully apply 1 tourniquet each, to standard. Finally, they will load the dummy into the back of the truck and proceed to locate, range and engage 5 vertical rectangles for the secondary and 4 sniper heads, 2 diamonds for the primary. Both shooters could engage simultaneously.

The pistol shooting went well for us, and we didn’t have an issue getting the tourniquets on properly to save our “dummy”. We lifted the dummy into the back of the truck, climbed in, and set up shooting positions. As a team, it’s important to work to your strengths, and we do that pretty well. For that reason, Brandon built a barricade position, while Scott elected to shoot from a tripod. We each racked up quite a few hits as we worked together to locate and engage targets. Our communications were good on this stage, and we worked smoothly and quickly.



Stage “Tahoe”

Both shooters had to enter the vehicle and build a position from within the Tahoe, to engage targets within a 180° fan. The primary shooter had to get in the passenger side door, with all his gear, and build a position shooting out the open passenger side window. The secondary entered through the rear open hatch and shot out the back of the vehicle. Within the very generous lateral limits, there were 5 primary IPSC targets and 5 secondary diamond targets to locate, range and engage.

Both positions were not nearly as comfortable as they might seem. Scott was folded up, sitting in the driver’s side footwell, and Brandon had his legs folded up, and was shooting at a rather sharp angle – the opposite of natural point of aim. But in field matches, positions like this are the norm, and you need to

learn to make the best of whatever position you have. Practicing shooting in awkward and uncomfortable positions is definitely important.

We started with the primary locating and ranging targets while secondary engaged. We quickly worked through the secondary targets, and then Brandon began to help Scott engage his targets, with some overlap in shooting. Once again, we talked well and shot well.

Stage “Hi Low Pistol”

The last stage of Day 2 had some of the most challenging pistol shooting in the match. Shooters moved to the pistol box where primary would engage 4 pistol targets with 1 hit each, then secondary would do the same. Pistols were safely abandoned and teams ran together to the rifle box where both shooters had rifle targets available.

The pistol targets were certainly a bit tougher, but we took advantage of what we had. Scott shot off the pistol dump bucket, and Brandon braced off his knee in a seated position. Scott shot first, while Brandon was moving all the team gear into the rifle shooting box, and while Brandon shot, Scott started locating and ranging targets. As we always remind each other – “Always be working”. With a few misses here and there, we cleaned the pistol targets and started shooting rifle targets. We scored reasonably well on the rifle targets, but had quite a few misses here as well as we struggled to get the wind right.



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DAY 3

Sunday morning was cold and wet. The 40° weather and rain combined for tough conditions. It's hard to stay warm when you're wet, but rucking with rain gear that doesn't breath is just a terrible option as well. We toughed out the ruck and were gifted with a covered awning at the end – which allowed us to ditch the wet clothes, and switch to some dry clothes and rain gear. Had we not had that option, it might have been a really cold, miserable day.

Stage “Sniper Eye”

For this quick stage, each shooter is allotted 20 seconds to engage a sniper head at 191yds. Hitting the 2” diameter eye is worth 3 points, the head is worth 1. Each shooter had to start standing with mag in and bolt to the rear and shoot from the prone. We were both able to get 3-point impacts in the eye in this test of prone shooting skill.

Stage “Pistol Sniper”

In the next quick stage, each shooter is allotted 20 seconds to engage a torso pistol target with a cut-out of a body-armor chest plate. The target is the body armor cut out placed behind the target. Because we had the time, we utilized a tripod support. Brandon got an easy hit, but Scott made a big mistake, leaning his pistol mag on the shooting bag instead of using it for arm support, and his shot missed the mark despite being stable.



Stage “Skills”

This was primarily a stage which tested unsupported shooting – something that's tough with heavy rifles! With only one shooter engaging at a time, shooters are allowed to shoot up to 3 rounds from each unsupported position at their respective targets: standing (100yd cut-out torso), kneeling (200yd coyote), sitting (300yd shamrock) and prone (400yd IPSC). We both skipped the standing target and utilized hold-overs to maximize time efficiency. We did a good job overall, helping each other manage time, and we scored some pretty good points here, but Scott dropped one shot shooting prone due to forgetting his hold-over – a costly mental mistake.

Stage “Range Card”

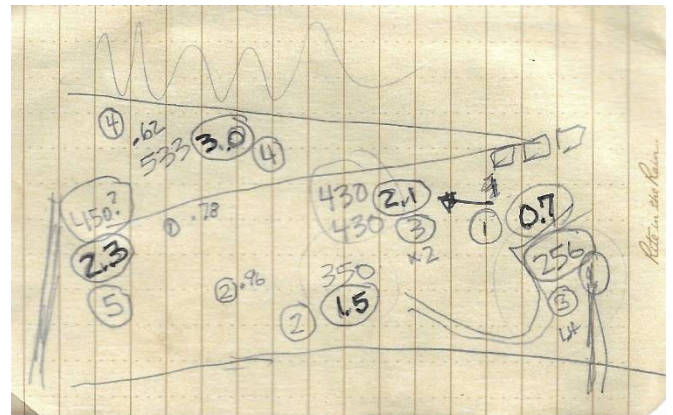
At the buzzer, we were given a single range card to share that provided ranges to man-made features within the lateral limits. Teams had to locate IPSCs (Primary) and Diamonds (Secondary) that were nearby known distance references on the card. Primary had to shoot from an unstable tank trap and the secondary had to shoot from a rock pile.

On this stage, the Secondary targets were easier to locate and were going to be easier shots, so we stuck to those and Brandon made quick work of nearly every one of his targets, getting a very solid score on this stage. This was a strength for us on the last day.

Stage “Mil Range Madness”

Before this stage began, teams were allotted 2 minutes to utilize ONE optic to locate and mil targets on the range. We elected to utilize our Vortex Razor Gen III scopes, and their powerful 36x magnification and crystal-clear glass. To keep us both working, Brandon would range the targets from a rock, and Scott would draw a range card and calculate ranges. We had the option to either range 5 closer 12” circles, or “at least” 2 10” squares that were farther but worth more points. We decided to take the more conservative route, and ranged the 5 circles.

When our shooting clock began, and we could both shoot simultaneously, it must have sounded like a blur, because we sent 5 shots, all hits, within seconds, and cleaned the stage, indicating that our ranging and calculations had also been spot-on. We later learned that nearly everyone also chose the conservative route of the circles, and in hindsight, we do think it was the right choice. But decisions like that are tough to make during a match, and the temptation of going for the “long-shot” for a few more points is always a temptation.



The ruck back was still timed, but like most of the evening rucks, we really took our time. There was no need to go fast – we just needed to finish in the allotted time, which we did easily.

Results, Lessons Learned and Things Done Well

Things Done Right

- **We had a great weekend, which ended in a 1st place in class finish!**
- We did a good job of maximizing team points throughout the match. That meant sometimes only one shooter shot targets on a short stage, or other decisions were made that might not seem “fair”. But the goal is a trophy at the end of the match, and we made smart decisions to make the most of the stages as they were designed.
- During preparation for this match, we built a 10-item reminder list – things we failed at in the past and need to keep in mind. Just making that list helped us, and using it helped us even more. You can hear more about this list on “The Shooters Mindset”, Episode 368.
- Our gear was generally excellent. For the most part, we brought the right things, and used them well.
- Stage planning is certainly one of our strengths. We plan logical approaches, contingencies, “what if’s”, time management, responsibilities and communications.

Things to do better

- We definitely could have shot better. We shot well enough to win our class, but we both came away knowing we could have done better.
- As a team, we’re still growing. We’re communicating better, and working together better. We need to keep that growth in mind, and keep getting better.
- We need to better formulate strategies as it relates to the time allotted for each stage. When stages are shortened for one reason or another, we can’t expect to have enough time to hit every target. Therefore, our strategy should reflect a more minimalistic approach.
- Time management is still a bit of a struggle for us. Sometimes our hands are too full to start the watch; other times we forget to start the watch. There is no doubt that we could have benefitted in some stages by keeping better track of time.
- Refine talk-on process to more quickly locate targets. The initial reference points should be more bold, especially when we have an enormous field of fire. The shooter should zoom out with his optic to have a wider field of view, allowing for a much higher probability of seeing a target.

Summary

We absolutely love the Vortex Team Sniper Challenge matches – they provide a wide range of challenges, and Joe Burdick (MD) has a creative vision and puts together a really fun competition. It’s really fun to hear guys who have only shot PRS-style matches show up at a match like this and say “It’s the most fun I’ve had with a rifle in a LONG time!”

When the score sheets came out, we were thrilled to be in 1st place in the Trooper class, which guaranteed us an invite to the National Championship match in Texas in December. We’ll be there for sure! SEE YOU IN TEXAS!



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