Stats Shack Review

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Having helped score a number of major matches, I'd like to offer a few suggestions that you might want to consider if you're planning one.

Yes, I'm the Jane Fleming who sells IDPA scoring software. But this is not going to be a pitch for my fabulous product… LOL… I hope you'll also find these thoughts relevant whether you're using one of the free software packages available from various people (including from IDPA itself) or using your own Excel spreadsheet.

Throughout what follows, I'm going to make a number of references to fatigue. It is a factor that you need to keep in mind during your planning. What you (or your staff) might be able to get by with for a relatively small match may not be adequate for the marathon.

I've separated my comments into sections relating to procedures, score sheets, people, and equipment.

Procedures

Error checking

It was probably 2003 when I talked with Dru Nichols at IDPA headquarters to get information about running an ad in the Tactical Journal. I had written some software to use scoring the 2003 California state match, and a few people had expressed interest so I was thinking of selling it. One of her first questions to me was, "What are you doing for error checking?" Seems at Nationals, she had a computer system set up whereby each score sheet was entered on one system by one person and on another system by another person. A comparison between the two systems would then flag any entry errors – something vaguely analogous to double-entry accounting systems.

To be honest, this seemed to me to be a huge amount of extra work. So when I scored the 2004 California state match the next year, I did it all by my little self. 175 shooters times 9 stages. Say… 1575 score sheets. Per-

haps 15,000 keystrokes in all. But… I made one error that I know of. And three days after the match, a shooter called the match director and said I'd typed a 4 instead of a 1 on one of his times. I'd screwed the poor guy out of a medal. I felt bad about it, but there's a reason the rule book has a 1-hour protest period.

But aside from the error, by the end of that match I was talking to myself – coaching and cajoling myself: "Read the score sheet, Jane. Now look at the screen. Now check them again…" Having the full burden of accuracy on me definitely contributed to my growing fatigue… and my eyes were having trouble focusing.

Since that match, I've refused to participate in scoring any sanctioned match that doesn't use a double-entry system. Period. The concept can be a hard sell when people ask what configuration of my software I recommend. But I've not heard of a single match scorekeeper who afterwards expressed that it hadn't been worthwhile to do so. A friend who helped at one state match a few years ago told me they'd caught more than 100 errors on the first "compare".

If you're using your own software, see if you can find a way to implement something similar. If you're using Excel, I'd suggest setting up identical spreadsheets on two computers. Have different people entering all scores on each. Print out the results from each computer when there's a lull, at lunch time, at the end of the day (if it's more than a single-day match) and compare the two printouts to find and fix your errors.

Filing

You're going to need a way to pull the original score sheet efficiently when your comparison reveals an error or if a shooter raises a challenge. I've tried several systems, but prefer what they use at Nationals – a file folder for each shooter's

score sheets, organized by shooter number. This year, we had two boxes with hanging file folders (see Figure 2). Each hanging folder contained 5 or 6 manila folders, each for an individual shooter's sheets. As in 2006, there was an optional BUG match. Anybody registered for the match who shot the BUG stages had a separate BUG shooter number, 500 higher than his regular shooter number. So an ESP/SS whose shooter number was 126 would have a BUG shooter number of 626, and all his score sheets for both divisions would be filed in the 126 folder. (The relatively few BUG walk-ons went into a separate folder.)

Marking

If you're entering scores twice (and if you aren't going to do so after my rant, there's no hope for you!!… LOL…) you're going to need to be sure each sheet has been entered by each person or team. At Nationals, we set the score entry screens on two computers to be green and on the other two to be red. People entering on the "red" team used a red marker on the score sheet. People on the green side used a green marker. Mike Critser, who's done a number of East Coast matches, recently told me he has a different rubber stamp for each score entry person, which I think is a good idea. That, combined with red and green ink pads, could be a little faster than actually marking with a pen.

The competition

Well… maybe not exactly a competition. But this year, I wanted to know whether I was making an unacceptable number of entry errors and suggested that we start keeping track each time we ran a Compare. It wasn't absolute, of course… in that Jennifer Wilson does ten-key faster than any two of the rest of us put together (your other score entry folks this year having been Dru Nichols and Sandra Tumbleson from IDPA

HQ). Sandra and Jennifer made dots with their markers and Dru and I made check marks, so we could assign contumely accordingly. But the rubber stamp idea would work well in this regard also.

Data backup

A friend who worked the Texas state match a few years ago told me of a scary moment. One of the main computers was an HP laptop. Its power connector was soldered to the motherboard, but not attached to the computer's case. Needless to say, the computer decided that the state match was when it would develop a hairline fracture near the power connector and die. My friend wrote that the scorekeeper was trying to keep holding the power connector "just so" long enough that he could get his data files copied off onto a flash drive.

If your software provides a means for automatically backing up your data while you're entering scores, USE IT! If not, take the time at least every half hour to copy your data onto a thumb drive or to burn it onto a CD.

Daily equipment setup/breakdown

We used four laptops for this year's Nationals. One had XP Pro, two ran XP home, and one ran 64-bit Vista. Each morning we needed to turn off firewalls and reconfigure the fixed IP addresses we were using. Each evening, people took their respective computers back to use the Internet connection at the hotel, so each one needed to have its firewall turned back on and to be set to get an address from the hotel's system. Plan to allow time and a reasonably knowledgeable person to do this.

Score sheets

By bay or by stage?

Are you going to have one score sheet per stage or one per bay? This was a concept I hadn't encountered before I helped with the 2006 Nationals. That match had 18 stages, plus an optional 4-stage BUG match. We got by with 9 labels for each shooter – 8 for the regular division

stages plus one for the BUG stages. Likewise, 8 regular score sheets plus the one BUG score sheet. A few score sheets (such as the Standards) had just one stage. Other sheets had two or three stages, depending on how the bays were set up. When you have hundreds of shooters, that brings a certain economy to the costs of having NCR score sheets printed and of purchasing and printing labels (we got 3 shooters from each page of Avery labels). Also, if your software makes it easy to go from stage

Figure 1.
Score sheet for 3 stages on one bay.

to stage this can significantly speed score entry – for example, instead of having to look up a shooter's stage records three times for three stages you just look him up once and then PageDown to go to his next stages in sequence. Figure 1 shows a "per-bay" score sheet from the 2008 Nationals.

Customized score sheets or generic?

Some matches print one large batch of a generic score sheet and have

shooters write the stage number on each. I think this significantly ups the chances that someone's info will get entered into the wrong stage. Sheets that show the stage number, number of strings and targets for that stage, etc., help keep everybody in line.

Distributing score sheets

Do you hand a packet of score sheets to your shooters at sign-in? Again, try what Nationals does. A plastic bucket on each bay contains the appropriate sheets for that bay. Each shooter takes a sheet from the bucket when his squad arrives at the bay. This cuts down on collating before the match (somebody has to make those packets that get handed to shooters at registration) and on shooter error.

Labels

Do you print generic labels for each shooter (name, shooter number, division/classification, etc.) , or labels with individual stage or bay numbers? The latter is most useful if you're using barcodes.

Barcodes

OK, are you going to barcode your score sheet labels? When I'm "on", I can key in shooter number/stage number almost as fast as scanning the label with a barcode reader. But as fatigue sets in, the barcodes are one more way of cutting down on errors by making sure you're entering scores for the right guy and the right stage. Of course, this means shooters MUST use the correct label each time.

Sorting score sheets before data entry

Depending on how your software is set up, you may need to have somebody sort score sheets by stage before the computer people enter them. If you're using barcodes or a direct system by which you key in the shooter number and stage, this won't be necessary.

Rain

"It never rains in Southern California," of course. But for the rest of the world – what are your plans in case

of rain? A large clear plastic bag that can go around a clipboard can make it possible for an SO to write even if it's raining. Additional plastic bags at the bays can protect the sheets until the fetch-person picks them up.

Transport

Speaking of the score sheet fetch-person… this is a critical job. Some matches may have one person with a golf cart who does both the sheet fetching and cold drink distribution. Larger matches may prefer to separate those duties. It helps if the score fetcher glances at the sheets when s/he picks them up, to make sure all are complete. At SO meetings, the MD needs to encourage SOs not to hoard score sheets – there's usually no reason to wait until an entire squad has finished before giving the sheets to the fetch-person.

Shooter numbers

Nationals assigns shooter numbers based on squad. So if you're limiting your squad size to, say, 12 shooters each, squad 1 will have shooters 1 through 12, squad 2 will have 13 through 24, etc. This is a handy way that you can tell what squad a shooter is in without having to go to the computer or finding a list.

Tracking shooter infractions

At the Nationals matches I've worked, there has been an announced policy that shooters are expected to have compliant equipment. The second time an SO has to tell a shooter to adjust his equipment, the shooter earns a procedural. If the shooter uses more than a single capacity of magazine during the match, he earns a procedural. If you're planning something similar, keep that in mind when you're laying out your score sheets and provide a place to enter the information.

Mistakes

Yes, they happen. At this year's Nationals, we actually made one in the score shack (spoiling Dru's record of a number of years). An SO wrote one stage's scores in another stage's area, then drew arrows to indicate where they were supposed to go. Both our red team and green team got it wrong, and the shooter pointed out the error after interim scores were posted one night. With the thousands of stage records we entered, I would have been much happier if the SO would have ripped up the incorrect sheet and rewritten the info correctly onto a new score sheet. I'd suggest this be discussed at the SO meeting before the match.

People

Safety Officers

You're surprised I mention them first as far as scoring? But really, it's essential that they write legibly. I know it can be difficult just getting enough SOs to put on a sanctioned match, but I would like to see the SO application have a section where the applicant needs to write maybe a dozen numbers – half as times, half as target points. Even if you're in a situation where you need to accept every certified SO who applies, this may help remind the guys and gals how critical this part of their job is to an efficient match. If you have the luxury to pick and choose, this can be another factor in your selection process.

The Score-Fetch Person

This needs to be somebody reliable. Friendly helps, of course, but the person needs to balance sociability with efficiency of getting the job done.

Filing person

As mentioned earlier, your system may require somebody to sort sheets prior to entry (which Nationals does not). And you're going to need to file sheets after they've been entered. We had four people entering scores at this year's Nationals and traded off filing duties quite comfortably without needing a separate person.

Stats entry people

A prime consideration is that somebody is actually willing to do the job. Having somebody tell you he hates 10-key two hours into a match isn't productive. You also need to be reasonably sure these folks aren't dyslexic.

When I started doing a significant amount of club match scoring (for both IDPA and USPSA), I bought a teach-yourself-tenkey book from Amazon. A couple of hours practice with such a book can really help with entry speed. But people need to be mature enough to balance speed with accuracy – much as we need to strike that balance while shooting a match. Even with Compare, it takes less time to enter scores correctly the first time than to find and fix an error.

When I'm asked for advice as to how many people and/or computers to use, my first question is the size of the match. Take the number of shooters you expect, multiply by the number of stages, then figure how many score sheets each person is expected to enter each hour (or each minute). If that number seems unreasonable or you're not allowing for any meal or break or down-time, you're probably not planning well.

Network guru

If you're hooking computers together, you need somebody who knows what he's doing. I spent close to two hours at this year's Nationals trying to get an Me laptop to talk to two XP machines. Share and NTFS permissions were set appropriately. Both XP machines could PING the Me machine; it could PING one of the XP machines, but it couldn't PING the other XP machine either by name or by IP address, even after I'd added appropriate entries to HOSTS and LMHOSTS, turned off firewalls, and refreshed the NetBIOS name cache.

If the preceding paragraph is gibberish to you, you need somebody available to whom it won't be!

By far the support calls I've most dreaded have come from people on a cell phone in a score shack during a match who are realizing that they don't know how to hook their computers together and to make them talk. This is a make-or-break issue!

Shooters

Your shooters are part of this process, whether they have to write stage numbers on their score sheets, use the correct barcode label, or just check over their score sheets before initialing them. At the Texas state match I shot a couple of years ago,

the match director announced that anybody sticking the wrong barcode label on his score sheet would get a procedural. We had very few such errors. If a shooter does make such an error, he should be encouraged to mark through the incorrect barcode so the stats staff will notice and deal with it.

Equipment

Computers

Duh. Preferably not running Windows Me… LOL…

Score shacks can be harsh environments in which computers love to develop new problems. Having a spare computer available can be a comfort.

I create a user account for the match. I use the same user name and password on each machine (some computers get cranky with blank passwords).

When you create any shares, be sure you set both Share and NTFS permissions to permit writing to the data.

Keyboards

Bring a "real" keyboard for each machine.

My 17-inch laptop has a separate number pad on its built-in keyboard. But I'd never DREAM of using it to score a match. I don't like the separate USB number pads either, as they usually don't have enough keys. My software lets you go from stage to stage by pressing PageUp or Page-Down, so those keys need to be near the number pad the way they are on a "real" keyboard.

At one match that used CCD barcode scanners, one of the barcode scanners appeared to be interfering with an iR keyboard. Just to be safe, use wired keyboards.

Printer

Be sure you've figured beforehand what operating systems your computers are running and have the ap-

propriate printer driver(s) on hand. I had to drive back to my motel at the start of one match to download a printer driver. An extra ink or toner cartridge is a good safeguard. If you can possibly have a backup printer (with its drivers) sitting somewhere (or available without too long a drive), that can be of value also. And a second printer cable just in case.

Network stuff

If you're able to set up a network you'll need at least a switch and cables.

Barcode scanners (readers)

I've tried the cheaper CCD scanners, but highly recommend that you use laser scanners instead. You can often find some reasonably priced on eBay.
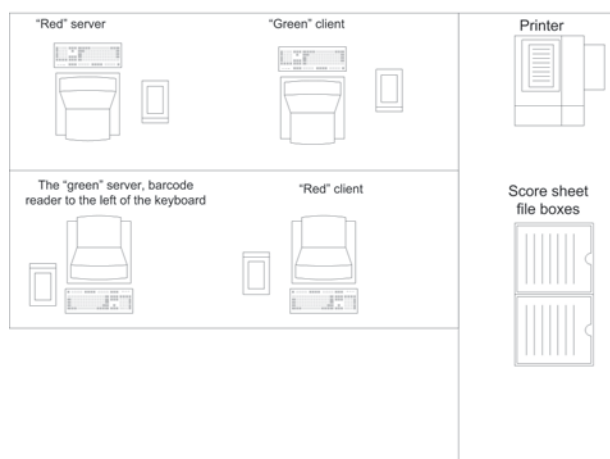
Figure 2.
2008 Nationals score shack layout.

Scanners that are always-on are more efficient than ones you need to pick up and point and trigger.

For the 2007 and 2008 Nationals, I brought some "presentation" scanners that use a pattern that will read a barcode pretty much regardless of its orientation (the scanners look a bit like R2-D2), and a couple of LS47-hundred series scanners that have a brighter single beam. The latter sit in a stand so they are always on and don't need to be triggered. The computers located directly below the fluorescent light fixtures in the score shack seemed to do better with the brighter scanners. Issues with room lighting are something you might want to check for before

your match.

Miscellaneous

You may need a USB hub for some or all of your machines, depending on how many ports they have and what equipment you're using. If you're using a USB barcode scanner, it may need to be plugged directly into the computer or else used with a USB hub that has a power supply.

Bring something for backing up your data during score entry – a flash drive, writeable CDs, etc.

Bring enough AC power strips and extension cords. If the score shack has 2-prong outlets, you'll probably need adapters.

Room layout

Obviously, you need to make the best of what you have.

Try to figure where glare will be worst and orient computer screens appropriately.

We were lucky- to have a spacious room in Allentown. As Figure 2 shows, we pushed three 10-foot tables together into an "L" shape. Power strips, the Ethernet hub, etc., went down the center of the table between the rows of computers. We were able to pass score sheets side-to-side or across the table, depending on who was available. Scanners to the left of the keyboard allow you to use the left hand for score sheets and the right hand on the numeric keypad.

The stats system is like the tires or transmission on your car – not particularly exciting, but the car won't run without them. Stats certainly isn't the glamorous part of a match, and too often it's the last thing that's thought of and one on which people scrimp on resources. Men prefer to focus on the cool stages and shooting challenges… but by golly they want to know their scores!

I hope you can get a few pointers from this to help your next match be a success.

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