

FEATURE INTERVIEW · LONG RANGE

The Boy Who Doesn't Miss

Three weeks after a half-MOA group at the National Long Range Open, a nineteen-year-old shooter from the hills sits for his first interview. He cleans his rifle while he answers.

BY THE EDITORS



Set in the world of *The Marksman* by S. Ulliel.

Editor's note: This is bonus content set before the events of The Marksman. Caleb is nineteen. He has lived in the hills since he was eleven, raised and trained by Luna Jones — a woman whose name carries weight in the hills and in circles that don't advertise themselves. Caleb calls her his grandmother. He has just won the National Long Range Open, shooting steel at 1,000 yards with a group the range master logged as "anomalous." Three days later, a Marine Corps recruiter called the compound's land line and left a message. Caleb has not returned it.

The following interview was conducted by Precision Rifle Magazine at the compound. Caleb met the journalist in the gun room. He was cleaning a rifle when she arrived and did not stop until it was finished.

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The gun room used to be a barn. You can still see the old bones of it if you look past the concrete they poured on the floor and the steel racks bolted to the far wall. Ceiling beams black with age. Dust in the corners that nobody disturbs. The room smells of cold metal and bore solvent, both smells that have been accumulating for long enough that they've become the same smell.

Caleb sits at the end of the long workbench where the light is cleanest. His spot, he'll say later, in the only moment of the interview that sounds remotely personal. He's nineteen, with a stillness about him that reads older. His hands, working through the stripped bolt assembly without looking down, are precise and economical. Nothing wasted. He sets each cleaned component in a specific position on the cloth in front of him before reaching for the next one.

The rifle in front of him is the same custom .308 he shot at the National Long Range Open twelve days ago. He will have it back together and on the wall rack before the first question is fully asked.

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Walk me through the setup. What were you shooting at nationals?

Custom .308. Remington 700 action. McMillan A5 stock, Bartlein barrel, 24 inches, 1-in-10 twist. 175-grain Sierra MatchKings over a load I worked up over about two years. Nightforce ATACR 7-35 on top. I've had that setup long enough that it doesn't surprise me.

Doesn't surprise you?

When a rifle surprises you, it's because you don't know it well enough yet, or conditions changed and you weren't paying attention to them. Either way that's the shooter's problem. I know where that rifle hits at every distance I've shot it. I know what a 10-mile-per-hour crosswind does at 800 yards and how that changes at 1,000. I know how the powder responds to temperature. There aren't many surprises left.

The group that got attention at the 1,000-yard stage. The range master called it anomalous in his report. Four rounds inside a half-MOA cluster. How?

Consistent execution. Same position every shot. Same cheek weld, same trigger pull weight, same breathing pattern. The variables inside the rifle you eliminate by knowing your load and your zero cold. The variables outside the rifle you read and account for before you press the trigger.

It is not complicated. It is repetitive. Most people confuse those two things.

Most competitive shooters at this distance are 30 or older. You're 19. When did you start shooting long range specifically?

I started shooting at twelve. My grandmother had me on a .22 bolt at close range first, working fundamentals before distance. By fourteen I was consistent at 600. She pushed the distance out as the fundamentals got cleaner. She never let me move further until I was hitting what I was supposed to hit at the current distance, every time.

What did the training look like? Daily?

Every day. Dry fire in the mornings. Mostly. Live rounds when conditions weren't ideal, because she didn't believe in practicing in good weather if you planned to work in all weather. She said if you can only hit when conditions are perfect, you can't hit.

The 1,000-yard stage at nationals. Wind was running variable that day. Walk me through the decision-making on the line.

Wind was 8 to 12 miles per hour from the left, gusting. Reading variable. Most shooters on the line were holding for an average. I watched the mirage and the grass near the muzzle and waited for the lull. When the wind dropped, I pressed. You have maybe half a second between when you recognize the condition and when it shifts again. You wait for it or you don't.

And if you miss the lull?

Then you wait for the next one. There is always another one. Patience is a mechanical skill, not a personality trait. Either you have the trigger discipline to wait or you don't. Rushing a shot is a decision. Missing because you rushed is a consequence of that decision. I don't find it complicated.

Some shooters at this level talk about a mental routine before the shot. Visualization, a specific thought sequence.

I don't do that. What I do before the shot is eliminate distraction. I'm not thinking about the last shot or the next one. I'm reading the current conditions and waiting for the right moment in them. Thinking about anything else is noise. I don't want noise in that window.

Your grandmother trained you. What's her background in long-range shooting?

She grew up in these hills. She's been shooting her whole life and she's been teaching a long time. She has her own way of doing things and she's right about most of it.

Is she here today?

He sets the barrel section down and reaches for a clean patch. His hands find the cleaning rod without his eyes leaving the question.

She's around.

Would she be willing to speak with the magazine?

No.

What does she think about the competition result?

He looks up.

She expects me to hit what I aim at. That's not a result she'd comment on.

The Marine Corps recruiter called three days after nationals. You haven't called back.

No.

Why not?

I'm not done here yet.

What does that mean?

It means what it means.

Are you considering it?

I consider most things.

What would it take to make the decision?

He racks the rifle and crosses to the wall. He squares its position on the rack before he turns.

Understanding what I'd be going toward and what I'd be leaving. I don't make decisions without knowing both sides of what I'm trading.

What would you be leaving?

This range. These hills. The training Luna gave me and what I still want to learn from it. You don't walk away from a system that produced those results without understanding it completely first. I'm not there yet.

The Precision Rifle Series is gaining ground as the major competitive circuit right now. Some shooters are moving toward 6.5 Creedmoor as the dominant long-range cartridge. Where do you land on that?

The Creedmoor is a better long-range round than the .308 in most respects. Better ballistic coefficient, less wind drift at distance, easier on barrels in sustained use. I've shot it. It's accurate and forgiving and the factory ammunition has gotten good. If I were setting up a new rifle purely for competition past 800 yards, I'd consider it seriously.

But you're staying with the .308 for now.

For now. I know what that rifle does. Switching is a conversation I haven't needed to have yet.

Are you shooting anything at extreme range? There's a trend toward 1,500 and 2,000-yard engagements in some competition formats.

I know what those distances require. At extreme range you are fighting atmospheric variables that you cannot fully read from the firing position. Humidity, Coriolis effect, density altitude: all of it compounds. The margin for a precise reading of conditions gets much smaller and the consequence of a misread gets much larger. I'm more interested in certainty than distance.

Certainty.

If I press the trigger, I want to know what's going to happen. Distance is one variable in that equation. Conditions are another. The quality of your read on both of them determines what you actually hit. I'd rather be certain at 600 than guessing at 1,500.

That sounds like a philosophy that extends beyond marksmanship.

He looks at her. Something in it makes her conscious of her notebook, her posture, the space between them.

Maybe.

Last question. What makes someone a great long-range shooter?

Patience first. Then mechanics. Then knowledge. Most people reverse that order. They want the ballistics data and the expensive glass before they've learned how to stay still. The body has to be a reliable platform before any of the other variables matter. A shooter who can't control their position and their breath and their trigger break will miss regardless of how good their load is or what scope they're running.

The fundamentals are boring to learn and they're everything. Luna understood that from the beginning. She made me boring for years before she let me be interesting.

He straightens the equipment on the bench. Nothing needs straightening.

That's enough.

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The journalist drove three hours back without stopping. She wrote in her notes afterward that she couldn't locate the moment in the interview when she had started speaking more quietly than usual. By the time she noticed it, she'd been doing it for thirty minutes.

The recruiter called again two weeks later. Caleb was on the range when it came in. He finished the drill before he went inside. The message sat on the kitchen counter for another ten days.

Luna read it once, set it back down, and didn't mention it.

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