



Photo by Bill Wilson/The Anniston Star

The grand opening of the Civilian Marksmanship Program Shooting Range is today in Anniston. The building will host the National Junior Olympic Three Position Air Rifle Championship. Standing in the range is Hunter James, age 12, from Maryland. His sister will compete, as well.

SHOT AT GLORY

National Junior Olympic rifle competition begins in Anniston today

BY NICK BIRDSONG

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James Hall has been exactly where more than 400 junior marksmen will be today when the 2008 Junior Olympic Three Position Air Rifle National Championships begin at the newly constructed Civilian Marksmanship Program Competition Center off Greenbrier-Deer Road.

Hall, who now works full-time as a competition support/project manager while working on his MBA at Jacksonville State, won the event in 2002. He knows what it will take for the competitors to win — and what it will mean if they do.

Hall was recruited from his hometown of Orlando, Fla., to JSU's rifle team and was part of four consecutive Ohio Valley Conference squads under coaches Gary DeBoy and current Gamecocks coach Ron Frost.

"You do a lot of mental preparation," Hall said of the mindset the day before a competition of this magnitude. "You have to put yourself in a bubble and begin to get in the zone and say, 'Tomorrow, I have to buckle down. This is what I've trained for for so long.'"

Shooters ranging in age from 10 to 18 — along with parents, coaches and spectators — from more than 40

states, including Alaska and Hawaii, will descend upon the CMP complex for the scheduled 10-day event. It will also serve as the grand opening for the 30,000 square-foot competition center, which completed construction Tuesday — just in time for the competition, save for a few minor touch ups, according to the CMP's Chief Operation Officer Orest Michaels.

Construction on the facility began a year ahead of its scheduled April start once the CMP learned of the opportunity to host the Junior Olympics. The range itself is 120x180 feet. The center will also include classrooms and break rooms. It was designed by local architect David Christian and is the largest facility of its kind in the state.

"The staff is really excited," said Michaels, who's in his 11th year with the CMP. "We went from dirty greasy rifles to nice clean rifles."

The Championships consist of three different events -- 10-12 year olds will participate in the precision rifle competition, 13-15 year olds will compete in the sporter class and precision rifle event, and the 16-18s will comprise the air pistol competition.

A stellar performance in the Junior Olympics could lead to a spot on the USA National Developmental squad, international competitions and the summer

Olympics in the future.

While Hall has already stood where today's competitors are standing, Bob Foth tasted the very thing they all are likely hungering for. Foth represented the USA in shooting at the 1988, 1992 and 1996 Olympic games; he medaled in '92. He now serves as USA Shooting's National Director of Youth Programs and Coach Development and has been involved in the sport in some way for 25 years. He said the sport has grown significantly over the years.

"It's been doing very well," Foth said. "We use air pistols, so it's relatively safe and you don't need a full-blown range to get into it. It's a very intense personal challenge and is a lot like golf in many ways in that all the action occurs in a very short period of time. You have to be amazingly precise with what you do. The bull's eye is smaller than a period on a typewriter."

Organizers are hoping that hosting the competition and having the range nearby will spark an interest in shooting sports in and around Calhoun County. Currently, no high schools in the area have rifle teams.

"Anniston is one of the dead spots," Foth said. "We're hoping to use the 'if-you-build-it-they-will-come model.'"

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