

She aimed to be better ... and was

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Another shooting medal for province as Emma Meulenkamp wins silver in air pistol event

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Emma Meulenkamp

Sackville, N.S. — When Emma Meulenkamp walked through the doors of Memorial University's shooting range last February, Dave Woolridge knew he'd hit the bullseye.

Just 15 at the time, and tagging along with her older sister, Meulenkamp of Portugal Cove-St. Philip's picked up an air rifle for the first time and proceeded to knock down the targets.

"I said, 'Hey, why don't you come back tomorrow night?' I wanted to try her with the pistol because I thought we might have had something here," said Woolridge, a coach at the MUN Shooting Club.

If he were a hockey scout, it could be said Woolridge found himself a sniper.

Meulenkamp won Newfoundland and Labrador's third medal of the 2011 Canada Winter Games, taking silver in the women's individual air pistol at the Sackville High School.

The other two medals — both bronze — were also won by shooters. Ben Taylor of St. John's finished third in men's air rifle competition, and teamed with Mount Pearl's Jason Harnum to win bronze in team air rifle competition.

Meulenkamp's accomplishment is all the more impressive given the fact she just started shooting a year ago.

A cross-country skier, Meulenkamp found herself at the range with her sister, who was competing in biathlon, the sports that encompasses both cross-country skiing and shooting. The older Meulenkamp was looking to work on the marksmanship aspect of her game.

"I didn't know I had a knack for it," Emma Meulenkamp said.

Woolridge recognized the natural ability from the get-go, and the improvement in the young shooter was rapid. In a matter of four months, she was registering "half-decent" scores, enough so that the provincial shooting association thought she was worth giving a — pardon the pun — shot, and naming her to the Canada Games team.

"In the next six months, she improved tremendously," Woolridge said. "We didn't think we were taking any risk with her. After we put her on the team, she fired a score in a provincial competition four points below the Canada Games record.

"We knew in the fall that we had a contender."

After Thursday morning's preliminary competition, the Prince of Wales Collegiate student sat in second place, between a Yukon and Ontario shooter.

That's exactly the way it panned out after finals.

Strangely enough, Meulenkamp only realized she was second after preliminaries after hearing it from coaches and teammates.

That's because she refused to look at the leaderboard.

"I didn't want to see how many points I was ahead or behind," she said. "I didn't want to calculate it up and start thinking about it.

"When I came off the range this morning, first thing I said was, 'I'm pretty sure that was a personal best.' I didn't know how anyone else did, but I felt really good.

"That was my expectation, a personal best. I hadn't considered a medal, to be honest."

Meulenkamp, Calgary-born and Newfoundland-raised, has the mental and personality attributes good for a shooter, Woolridge said. She's quick to learn, very calm, and certainly very focused.

"She's not easily distracted with things around her," he said. "In a shooter, these are ideal qualities."

Shooting has quietly become one of Newfoundland and Labrador's most successful sports in the Canada Winter Games.

At the 1999 Corner Brook Games, the shooters registered top-half finishes. In 2003, at the Bathurst-Campbellton Games, Newfoundland won a pair of medals. In 2007, in the Yukon, the province fell just shy of the medal podium, but one shooter, Chad Gosse, shot an all-time Canada Games record score.

Problem is, it was accomplished in team competition and isn't recognized in the books.

"This year," said Woolridge, "we knew we were going to have shooters in every final (Newfoundland's Rene De Haitre was fifth in men's air pistol Thursday).

"We set out in 1999 a plan to get better. And we plan a minimum of four years in advance of each Games. Most of our rifle shooters now, we knew who they were four years ago.

"And we now have a new batch under development for the 2015 (Prince George, B.C.) Games. We even have some shooters good for 2019. We don't just don't look a year or two ahead. We look four, sometimes eight years down the road.

"That's our function. That's how we operate."

Aiming for the prize.

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