

4-H Western Heritage Shooting Rules for 2026 National Conference

Upon consultation with other states, the classes and age divisions for the Invitational Shoot are modified in an attempt to provide a multi-state compatible structure to 4-H Western Heritage shooting events. States have differences in beginning 4-H age, different calendar dates for determining “4-H age”, different age divisions, etc. This is an attempt to provide classes and divisions that should be suitable for most states.

Three Age Divisions for competition:

We recognize the ages below according to your state age determination. Some states determine 4-H age as of October 1 of the current 4-H year (October 1).

Therefore, participating members must be 9 to 18 years old on January 1, 2026

- Junior (9-10) - will shoot rimfire rifle only (course will require 2 rifles)
- Intermediate (11-13 years old) – 4 guns: rimfire rifle, 2 rimfire revolvers, & shotgun (Preferably .410, but not required)
- Senior (14-18 years old) – 4 guns: 1 rifle, 2 revolvers & 1 shotgun (Two equipment classes)
 - Rimfire Class
 - Central-fire class

The National conference will be composed of 3 areas:

- Western Heritage Shooting
- Western Heritage Knowledge – Written Test and Gun Identification
- Persona Presentation/Interview

Every participant is expected to participate in all three sections. Participant will be ranked in each section and appropriate recognition given for each. The 4-H Western Heritage overall Top Hand will be decided by an aggregate score of all 3 sections. Shooting - 50%; Western Heritage Knowledge – 25%; Persona Interview – 25%.

Spirit of the Game

Members are to fully participate in what the project asks. Participants should not look for ways to create an advantage out of what is or is not stated as a rule or shooting procedure. It’s not about “gamesmanship” but rather sportsmanship. Good attitude, courtesy, honesty, demonstrating respect toward Participants and range officials, graciousness in winning or losing ... are all components of the Spirit of the Game. Remember the cowboy code. Character and integrity are remembered much longer than scores.

4-H WESTERN HERITAGE SHOOTING

Rifle and revolvers must all be either rimfire or central-fire. Participants' rifle and revolvers must be the same caliber, NO MIXING CALIBERS during the national conference.

FIREARMS

1. The Western Heritage shooting event requires participants to safely operate and fire as many as 3 different types of firearms: revolvers, rifle(s), and a shotgun, depending on age division.
2. The firearms must be original or reproductions of those used in the time period of 1860-1900 or near facsimiles. No modifications of firearm functions are allowed – they must function as they did when they left the factory.
3. Firearms similar to period guns may be allowed, these firearms may be modern reproductions or styled after period arms.

Rifle

4. Must be chambered in a traditional handgun caliber; and should be capable of firing 10 rounds.
5. May be lever action or slide action (pump action) with exposed hammers. Bolt action and semi-automatic rifles are not allowed.
6. May be .22 rimfire or central-fire depending on age division.
7. Sights must be open iron sights or tang sights. Scopes, optics, glowing or fiber-optic sights of any kind are not allowed.
8. Action smoothing jobs are permitted, but “short stroke” modifications (factory or custom) are not allowed.
9. Examples of Modern era firearms permitted include:
 - a. Lever - Henry (both Rimfire & central-fire), Winchester 9422, Marlin 39A.
 - b. Any pump action with exposed hammer in pistol caliber.
10. Modern era firearms **NOT** permitted include, but not limited to:
 - a. The Browning BL22 does not qualify due to the trigger travelling with the lever and a short stroke action.

Revolver

11. Any original or reproduction single action revolver or double action revolver that is capable of firing single-action; and having only six (6) chambers and is period correct is allowed.
12. .22 rimfire or traditional central-fire pistol caliber is permitted.
13. Open sights required. Fiber-optic or glowing sights are prohibited.
14. Modern era single-action revolvers with 6 chambers are permitted.

Shotgun

15. 12 gauge and smaller.
16. Shotguns should be capable of firing 2 shots.
17. Any side-by-side double barrel shotgun without automatic ejectors is allowed, single and double trigger shotguns with internal hammers are allowed. Safeties are not required, but if a gun has a safety, it must operate as it originally did from the factory – if it auto reset originally, it must still function that way. Over/under shotguns are not permissible.

18. Lever action shotguns (Winchester 1887 or replica) or pump shotguns with external hammers are permitted; but no more than 2 shells may be loaded at a single time.

Special Use

19. Other firearms, such as single-shot rifles, double-action pocket pistols, etc. may be used for “side” matches or special activities; but will not be part of the official conference.

AMMUNITION

The following ammunition will be provided by conference officials: .22LR, .38 Special, .45 Colt, 12 gauge, 20 gauge and .410 shotgun. Any other ammunition required must be provided by the Participant; and must meet the following guidelines. All ammo must be Factory loaded and remain unmodified in any way.

Rifle & Revolver:

1. Caliber – Traditional handgun calibers from .22 rimfire to .45 Colt.
2. Bullet - Lead or soft lead alloy bullets only.
3. Velocity -
Central-fire
 - a. Handgun – 1000 fps or less
 - b. Rifle – 1300 fps or lessRimfire:
 - a. Standard velocity (1150 fps or less)
 - b. 40 grain, lead round nose bullet

Shotgun:

Equivalent of 12 gauge “light target” loads or 20 gauge “target” loads

1. 2 ¾” only (2 ½” in .410)
2. Shot: 7 ½ or smaller; 1 1/8oz. maximum (12 gauge) - 7/8 oz. (20 gauge) – lead only
3. Velocity – 1200 fps or less

Other

- Powder – Smokeless or black powder in cartridge or shot shell is permitted.
- Only factory loaded ammunition is allowed in 4-H competition. No Reloads allowed in competition.
- Most major brands of ammunition have “Cowboy” loads available that meet these requirements.
- Any ammo provided by participant will be checked at check-in and is subject to random checks throughout the event.

Loading Blocks – For safety reasons, the use of a loading block or leather/canvas ammo strips for rifle/revolver ammo is required. PLEASE work with your leaders and bring loading blocks or strips. Load the exact number of cartridges needed when you come to the loading table. If using your own factory ammunition, please label the boxes with your name and close the box after loading.

COURSE OF FIRE - Western Heritage Shooting

- Generally, a minimum of 6 stages and maximum of 10 stages will be shot. Each stage will require the use of revolvers, rifle, and shotgun. (JUNIORS - Rifles only).
- Five shots for each revolver and 10 for rifle may be required.
- Reloading the shotgun may be necessary, depending upon the stage.

PROCEDURE

- Before competition begins, participants must submit to a central check-in with match officials for all firearms and ammunition. Firearms and ammunition will be inspected and approved.
- Course of fire will be explained to the group of participants (Posse) before each stage. Participants should ask questions then. Course of fire must be followed exactly, or the Participant will be penalized.
- Firearms will be loaded at the Loading Table under the supervision of the loading officer. Rounds must be counted out loud during loading.
- All firearms (rifle(s), revolvers, and shotgun) will be pre-staged at the designated area by the Participant and a range officer.
- Although range officials may assist the Participant in the pre-staging of the firearms, final positioning of the firearm is the responsibility of the Participant.
- Participant and the range officer/timer will advance to the beginning firing point.
- When Participant and range officer are both ready, Participant will “shout out” the designated phrase for that stage.
- After the phrase shout-out the timing mechanism will be activated. After a momentary delay, the timer will beep, indicating START.
- At the START beep, the Participant will pick up the first firearm and begin the course of fire.
- He/she then advances to each firing point at his/her own pace.
- Participant must follow and shoot the course as explained.
- At the final shot the time will be recorded.
- There is a 5 second time penalty for each “miss” and a 10 second penalty for minor safety violations or procedural errors. Only one procedural is counted per stage. All misses and safety violations are counted.
- Scorekeeper notes participant’s raw time, misses, procedural, and safety violations for the course of fire. Any warnings issued to the participant will be noted on the scoresheet. Participant signs scoresheet for the stage, indicating they are in agreement with what has been recorded.
- Firearms will be taken to the unloading table and will be un-loaded under supervision of a range officer until made safe.
- Times for each stage will be added together for a cumulative time.
- Shortest cumulative time through all stages is declared the winner.

CLOTHING

Each participant must dress in period appropriate clothing at all times during the conference. In addition to the western shooting match, there will be a Persona Interview where period clothing is worn. The Persona Interview contributes 25% of the score for the overall Top Hand of the conference. Participants are to be in their period outfit at the final awards presentation.

Minimum requirements:

- Some kind of “period” head cover; cowboy hat, bowlers, sombreros, civil war

type hat, bonnet, etc. Note: During the shooting competition, participants may compete without head cover.

- Long pants or period correct dress/skirt.
- Long-sleeved shirt or blouse; button-down or pullover “long John” style shirts are permissible. Sleeves must pass the elbow.
- Leather boot or period shoe. (lace-up boots are acceptable)
- No tee-shirts, no athletic shoes, no baseball caps, no camo.
- Failure to meet these minimums may result in penalty or disqualification.

Other Accouterments:

- Holsters & cartridge belts may be worn, but NO firearm or any facsimile of a firearm may be in the holster.
- Nylon or plastic belts and holsters are not permitted; nor is the use of Velcro.
- Every attempt should be made to use ammo boxes, carry bags, and other equipment that would be typical of the era of 1860-1900.

SAFETY

1. SAFETY IS ALWAYS THE PRIMARY CONSIDERATION. Any violations of accepted safety rules are grounds for immediate disqualification. NO WARNING REQUIRED!
2. Safety Meeting: All Participants and coaches must attend the mandatory safety meeting given by the Chief Range Officer before the day’s shooting begins. If not at the safety meeting, you will not be allowed to participate.
3. Eye Protection: Adequate eye protection (shooting glasses, safety glasses or safety goggles, or hardened prescription glasses) is required for all participants. All persons on the firing line or in the spectator area are required to have eye protection, including coaches, range personnel, audience members, and Participants. Eye protection must meet ANSI Z87.1 standards.
4. Ear Protection: Adequate ear protection carrying an **OSHA Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) of at least 25 dB** is required for all participants on or near the ranges and spectator area. **Noise Canceling devices without an OSHA NRR rating are not adequate as they are designed to make listening more enjoyable, not reducing the dB of sound entering the ear.** Coaches or spectators on or near firing lines are subject to the same requirements. Range Officers will be permitted to use electronic ear protection. In all disciplines, devices placed over, on, or into the ear are not allowed to receive wireless, communication, background noise or similar broadcasts that could interfere with range commands.
5. Cased Requirement: All firearms must remain cased at all times until the Range Officers have given the command to uncased.
6. Casing procedure between stages will be explained during the mandatory Safety Meeting.
7. Ammunition dummy rounds NO live ammunition or facsimile of ammunition may be in the belt or anywhere on the person.
8. Knives are permissible and may be carried as part of the period outfit. The knife must remain in the sheath at all times, or folded closed, unless requested by, or permission is granted by, a range official or judge.
9. Muzzle Control: Participants must maintain control of their muzzles at all times. Firearms must be carried in the muzzle up position whenever uncased on the range. Violation of this rule may result in a warning, disqualification from a stage, or disqualification from a match.
10. No fanning or twirling of a firearm at any time.
11. Firearms must remain unloaded at all times unless on the loading table, at

- firing line, or when being transported between the two areas.
12. Audio headphones or earpieces and cell phones are not permitted on the firing line or the field. Once an individual is called to compete, earpieces or headphones must be removed and remain off during the competition. Spectators should also be sensitive and turn off ringtones when near the competition.
 13. Range officials have the right to check all firearms, ammunition, accessories and other equipment prior to, or during, the competition to determine that it meets qualifications and/or if it is safe.

MATCH RULES & PROCEDURES

1. All loading, staging, and unloading of firearms, as detailed in other sections of these rules, will be under the supervision of range officials; and only at the designated loading and/or unloading tables. In some cases, the Range Officer may unload or load a firearm at the shooting area.
2. Those with special needs may request assistance and reasonable accommodations will be made.
3. To speed the process, range officer may assist in staging. If assisted, it is still the sole responsibility of the Participant to make sure firearms are staged as they desire.
4. All firearms will be staged with trigger over a solid surface when staged horizontal. Staging a firearm with the trigger off the surface is prohibited.
5. Rifles will be staged horizontally as directed, with muzzles pointed in a safe direction. The magazine is loaded, action closed, hammer down, and chamber empty.
6. Rifles are re-staged after completing the firing sequence, with the action open and empty, with barrels pointed safely down range.
7. Once a rifle is cocked, either the round under the hammer must be expended or the action opened in order for the rifle to be returned to a safe condition.
8. Rifles are carried with muzzles up and muzzles above head level.
9. Revolvers are staged lying on their side with muzzles pointed down range with 5 rounds in the cylinder and the hammer down on an empty chamber.
10. Revolvers are re-staged, after shooting, with hammer down on a spent case or empty chamber at the conclusion of the shooting string.
11. Once a revolver is cocked, the round under the hammer must be expended in order for it to be returned to a safe condition – except in the case of a cease fire.
12. Revolvers are carried for staging by grasping around the frame and cylinder with muzzle up and above head level. Revolvers are not carried by the grip or with a finger in the trigger guard.
13. Shotguns are staged with magazine and chamber(s) empty, action open with hammers down; and are loaded on the clock. Shells/hulls must be removed from the gun before restaging the firearm at the conclusion of the shotgun firing sequence. Any live shotgun shells must be removed from the gun and with no penalty.
14. Running on the range, is prohibited at all times. There is no running or walking with a loaded or unloaded firearm during the shooting phase of a stage. Shooting position adjustment is permitted with one pivot foot planted.
15. All shooting with a particular firearm must be completed and the firearm re-staged before the Participant moves on to the next part of the stage.
16. No cocked or loaded firearm is allowed to leave the Participants hand except in the case of a malfunction or ceasefire where it is transferred to the range officer with muzzle pointed down range/in a safe direction.

17. De-cocking a revolver, rifle, or external hammer shotgun may NOT be done with a live round under the hammer. De-cocking may not be done to avoid a penalty if cocked at the wrong time or position. The penalty for de-cocking is a Stage Disqualification. If hammer is cocked when a cease fire is called, the lever of the rifle must be opened, or the action of a shotgun must be opened or the range officer will assist in making the revolver safe.
18. Revolvers will be operated in single-action mode with a two-handed grip with neither hand in front of the cylinder. The Participant will grip with the strong hand and cock the revolver with their weak hand thumb. Failure to do this may result in a safety violation
19. The revolver is not cocked until pointed safely down range and the Participant is engaged in shooting the stage.
20. A dropped firearm – loaded or unloaded – ends the stage for that Participant (stage disqualification). An adult range officer or helper will recover the dropped gun, examine it, clear it, and take it to the unloading table. A second drop anytime during a match requires match disqualification.
21. Ammunition dropped off the table in the course of loading or reloading a shotgun, or ejected from any firearm during the course of fire is considered “dead” and may not be recovered until the Participant completes the stage and the firearms are delivered to the unloading table. Dropped shotgun rounds are replaced from the loading block, ammo box, or other area as allowed by the stage description and not counted as a miss. If a live round is ejected from a rifle, it is considered dead and is counted as a miss.
22. All knockdown targets (shotgun, rifle, and revolver) must fall over to be considered a hit. Special consideration may be allowed to participants using Lighter reduced loads – at the discretion of the range officer.
23. If a knock down target(s) falls before the Participant engages that target(s), the Participant must expend the designated round in the area the target occupied when standing, or on a dump plate as described by the Range Officer for the stage. It is not a miss.
24. All shotgun targets that a stage requires to be knocked down, must be re-engaged until down.

LOADING PROCEDURE

Revolvers: All revolvers will be loaded in the traditional manner, i.e. load 1, skip 1, load 4, fully cock hammer & then lower onto the empty chamber, regardless of model or brand. All rounds must be loaded from a loading block and counted out “Load 1, skip 1, load 2, 3, 4, 5” when loading revolvers at the loading table. Because of recessed chambers, .22 caliber revolvers are to have the 1st chamber loaded marked in some way as a visual indicator of proper loading procedure. When loading is completed, the marked chamber will be the first chamber exposed to the right of the top strap; helping assure the empty chamber is under the hammer. If a revolver is loaded with cartridges out of position, the loading table supervisor will correct the cylinder by rotating the empty chamber under the hammer.

- Intermediate Division - The loading table supervisor may help load revolvers.
- Senior Division - Seniors will load revolvers, taking care to not let the hammer slip when lowering onto the empty chamber. Keep muzzle pointed down range!

Rifles: Rifles are loaded with the action closed, chamber empty, and hammer down. All rounds must be loaded from a loading block and counted out “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10” when loading rifles at the loading table.

- Junior Division – The loading table supervisor may help load the rifle.

- Intermediate & Senior – Participants will load their own rifle.

Shotgun: Participants load the shotgun during the shooting sequence/stage without assistance. Shotguns are staged with hammer down (if external hammer), action open with chambers and magazine empty. External hammers on side-by-side shotguns are not cocked until breech is closed. Shotgun ammo will be placed near the staged shotgun in an ammo box, loading block, bucket, or other container. No ammo is loaded from the Participant’s person. Ammo may be loaded from the hand, but no more than two rounds can be in the participant's hand at a time.

UNLOADING PROCEDURE

- The unloading table supervisor must inspect all firearms before they can be declared safe and removed from the table.
- All rifles and pump or lever action shotguns must have their action cycled for the inspecting official and left open until cased.
- All revolvers will have cylinder rotated for inspection by the unloading table official and left open until cased.
- Shotguns may remain open and empty at the staging location once inspected by the Range Officer, but only if the next Participant is using the same shotgun.

CEASE FIRE PROCEDURE

- Whenever the command “cease fire” is given, all Participants will immediately place their firearms down in a safe position with actions open, chambers clear, and/or hammer down on an empty chamber or spent case. De-cocking a rifle or shotgun with a live round in the chamber is not allowed. The Range Officer or another adult will assist when necessary.
- If a revolver is cocked when the “cease fire” is called the Participant will keep their finger out of the trigger guard, keep the muzzle in a safe direction, and allow the Range Officer to assist them in making it safe by taking it from the hand of the Participant while positioning their thumb between the hammer and the frame of the pistol.

SCORING AND TIMING

4-H Western Heritage Shooting is a timed event and is scored in seconds beginning at the sound of the first beep from the range officer’s hand-held timer and ending at the sound of the last shot. A five (5) second penalty is added to the Participant’s time for each missed shot during any given stage. A ten (10) second penalty is added for unintentional mistakes termed “procedurals” and for minor safety violations. The recorded elapsed time, plus penalties, of each stage are added together for a final score. Final scores are used to rank participants from the quickest time to the longest time.

Misses – a miss is defined as the failure of the participant to strike their intended target plate with a bullet or pellet from the appropriate type of firearm or not knocking over a knockdown target. An example of this would be simply missing a rifle target while engaging with a rifle and failing to hit a knockdown type of target with enough force to knock it down (except if the stage does not require shooting until it falls). Each miss results in a five (5) second penalty.

- Ejecting a live round is considered a miss. See Reshoots section if the round is faulty.

Procedural Penalty – a procedural is an unintended mistake where a Participant fails to shoot the stage the way it was designed to be shot. Examples of procedurals would include firing at a pistol target with a rifle, not following the course pattern as the range officer described (firing a sweep in an improper sequence), or failure to complete any portion of the stage. Procedurals result in a ten (10) second penalty and only one (1) can be assessed per stage.

- *****Please Read Carefully***** If a Participant does not fully cycle a lever action rifle resulting in a live round being ejected from the firearm and re-engages the target intended for the ejected round, the Participant will not have a round available for the 10th target. In this case, both a miss and a procedural will be assessed due to a live round being ejected and not having ammunition left in the rifle to hit the last target in the sequence.
- Failure to place guns or ammunition at the designated position(s) is the fault of the Participant and scored as a procedural unless the Participant is able to correct the situation, unassisted, while in the process of completing the stage under time. No firearm can be relocated once the timer sounds to begin the stage.

Minor Safety Violation – A safety violation is considered minor when the incident does not put anyone in direct or immediate danger. Examples of minor safety violations include the failure to leave a rifle action open at the end of its use during a stage, the failure to restage a sidearm at the end of a shooting string, using the strong hand thumb to cock the hammer on a revolver, or a live round is left in a firearm. Minor Safety Violations result in a ten (10) second penalty per occurrence at each stage. A Range Officer may issue a warning in the place of a 10 second penalty at their discretion as long as this decision is consistent. Safety violations are permitted to be assessed after the participant has signed their scoresheet but before moving to the next stage – for instance, if a live round is found at the unloading table, it is a safety violation.

Major Safety Violation – A safety violation is considered major when the incident endangers any person at the event. Major Safety Violations include an accidental discharge that impacts anywhere other than downrange, breaking the 170-degree safety line, allowing the muzzle of the firearm to sweep anyone in the audience or on the range, dropping a gun, or any other occurrence that has the potential for personal injury. The penalty for a Major Safety Violation is disqualification from the stage or match at the discretion of the 4-H range officer present at that stage. With proper training and practice, major safety violations will be rare or nonexistent in 4-H Western Heritage Shooting. It is the responsibility of the adult range officer to shadow the 4-H member during the course of fire in order to be in a physical position to prevent any safety violations. Safety violations are permitted to be assessed after the participant has signed their scoresheet but before moving to the next stage.

Intentional Procedural – An Intentional Procedural occurs when a Participant purposely or intentionally disregards the stage instructions in order to obtain a competitive advantage. This may occur when a Participant feels they could take a penalty and still shoot a faster time than if they followed the proper procedure. This is considered a violation of the Spirit of the Game and 30 seconds is added to a Participant's time in addition to other penalties.

Appeals – If the competitor believes a ruling is in error, the 4-H member alone (not parent or leader) may politely appeal the decision to the range officer for that stage before they have signed the scoresheet and moved away from the stage. If necessary, the RO will consult with the loading/unloading supervisors and scorekeeper. The group's decision will be based solely on the rules. If there are still questions or disputes, the final decision will be made by the Chief Range Officer or match director. Any appeals made after moving away from the stage will not be considered valid.

Reshoots - This rule is in place because most 4-H programs share firearms and ammunition among many Participants. Therefore, equipment can become extremely fouled or worn. Reshoots may be awarded for ammunition or firearm malfunctions if the problem is out of the control of the Participant. Any misloaded firearm by the loading table supervisor will constitute a reshoot. If there is a range failure (failure of props, timer, or the range officers) beyond the Participant's control, a reshoot may also be granted. On a reshoot, the Participant starts over clean with no misses but carries accrued safety and procedural penalties forward. A decision to allow a reshoot is decided by the range officer after the Participant completes the stage.

A FINAL WORD

These rules are provided for consistency and fairness to all Participants. These rules do not vary drastically from the rules used throughout the year at your practice shoots or state contests. The strictness of firearm authenticity is about the only change some clubs may find different than their club rules. Some local clubs use non-period correct firearms to get a program started. National rules require a higher standard to maintain the historical component of the project at a multi-state level. This is not done to disqualify any 4-H member. There are state and nationally owned firearms available to Participants so that no Western Heritage 4-H member is turned away from the national contest.