

RIDICULOUS EXTREMES

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Range Safety is vital, but some of it's enforcers go overboard.

IMAGINE STANDING UP AT THE CLUB WHEN NEW BUSINESS IS ADDRESSED AND HEARING yourself suggesting, "I'd like to propose that we have a less safe range policy." Older members might pass out.

But some places actually need it. Every shooter is a range safety officer, and for most of us, the habitual practice of safe shooting is as much a part of us as table manners or driving a car. On those truly rare occasions when a fellow shooter's judgment lapses, a gentle word almost always suffices, and the harmony of the range is preserved.

Enter the Safety Nazi (*Rangeregius absurdum*). If you've been shooting long enough, you know the guy I'm referring to. This is the self-important blowhard who loves nothing more than hollering across three ranges for someone unpacking his range box to put on his safety glasses or he'll be kicked off the range.

These types continuously push for the club to pass ever more restrictive range regs, usually with the type of fervor associated with religious crusades. I've found that these self-appointed confrontationalists are usually retired from some position of authority and seem to have a deep need to boss people around.

What is frustrating is that none of us wants to shoot on a careless range, especially a public one where you don't know if the next bench is being warmed by a complete tyro or gang member. The most common refrain from the safety bully is, unassailably, "It's for the good of the club. We can't afford a lawsuit."

The fact is that many shooting clubs fail because of internal politics. Basically, the club becomes so unpleasant that folks stop shooting there. Who wants to be bullied when you're enjoying a morning with friends and the gentle scent of nitrocellulose is wafting on the breeze?

The most unpleasant range I've ever suffered is near Peoria, Illinois. A giant sign covers one wall of each of the ranges. It has about 20 rules, and at

the bottom it sneeringly threatens: "If you don't want to follow these rules, then leave. You are not welcome!"

I didn't, so I did.

One senior club officer slides around the gravel each weekend, jumping out of his truck to yell at shooters about earplugs, etc. It was an unpleasant atmosphere.

By contrast, the Peoria Trap and Skeet club a few miles away doesn't have giant, threatening warnings or overzealous, self-appointed enforcers. Amazingly, everyone enjoys safely shooting in the genial atmosphere.

Many safety fanatics mean well. They really do. And you can't criticize their ostensible motivation. It's the manner in which they go about it. They tend to forget they're dealing with other sportsmen who, in many cases, have far more range and instructor time. The result? Bossy posturing often becomes more important than real safety.

The ranges at Gunsite Academy are among the most safely run in the world, yet one of the veteran instructors there lamented about his home range. He'd become the victim of a member who enforced ludicrous rules far in excess of the club regs. The cagey instructor found a copy of his club charter and now keeps it in his truck like a cross and garlic, hoping to be confronted by the oppressor.

Sadly, my old club range in California was afflicted with a member bent on fixing what wasn't broken. He demanded to be placed in charge of all safety instruction for the five clubs who share the range. His restrictions are to the point of idiocy. Yep, the warning signs went up and closed-circuit TVs now monitor behavior. Hallelujah, Big Brother ...

Is the range any safer? The old club's been around since 1947--without a single injury due to negligent discharge. But this is probably due to the care taken in selecting new members who are true sportsmen and responsible shooters.