



USA Clay Target League Transforms Coach and Athlete Education

Summary:

From 2001 onward, competitive clay target shooting has been one of the fastest-growing activities in the United States, effectively creating demand for new coaches and appealing to young participants who drive expansion, stability, and dynamism. Maintaining that dynamism, however, requires a culture and training curriculum that is engaging and modern—like the content young people see every day on their cell phones and computers. USA Clay Target League entrusted AllenComm with creating a scalable education program that prepared new coaches to lead, held the attention of new student athletes, and put a priority on the safety of all involved in sport shooting.

**Reading
Time:**
10 min

Topics:

- Sports Education
- Coach Training
- Leadership Training
- Safety Training
- Learning Experience Design
- Learning Journeys
- Personalized Learning

Related Content:

- [Experiential Learning](#)
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An informal 2001 survey of shooting clubs by the Minnesota Division of Natural Resources sounded the alarm. The results of that survey told Minnesota DNR that the average age of a club member was 57 years. Clearly, if the organizers of target shooting clubs could not lure younger participants into the sport, the clubs and the pastime itself might just fade into obscurity.

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The first year, acting as a mentor in public schools, the youth program director for the local shooting club recruited six kids to shoot trap and skeet. The following year a few more joined, and then a few more the year after that.

By 2008, the word-of-mouth recruiting campaign became the Minnesota State High School Clay Target League (MNSHSCTL) with three teams and thirty student athletes.

As an official organization, the MNSHSCTL doubled the number of teams and student athletes every year for five years. By 2014 the MNHSCTL Championship was the world’s largest shooting event - with more than 3,800 competitors.

Initiating a Viral Transformation

Other states noticed what was happening in Minnesota and asked to join an expanded league, which in 2012 was incorporated as the USA High School Clay Target League (USA Clay). Despite its modest beginnings as three Minnesota-only teams and thirty participants in 2008, by 2023 USA Clay had grown to 1,625 teams with 49,337 participants across 37 states. Target shooting became the fastest-growing extracurricular activity among high-school-age students in the country.

While this growth was celebrated, it also created additional challenges. In recent years, USA Clay identified several changing dynamics within both the sport and the organization that required attention. The certification program for both coaches and student athletes had many inefficiencies including outdated content, not mobile-friendly, few interactive components, and insufficient

learner tracking. USA Clay needed to engage in a rebrand that included an updated website and new aesthetic. The organization also looked at its scoring system, changing student athlete demographics, and the particular shooting sports that it offers and saw the need for change.



Combined, these challenges convinced USA Clay that external expertise and a fresh pair of eyes would provide long-term organizational benefit. An extensive search led USA Clay to AllenComm, which they chose due to its compelling track record and philosophy of creating leaders throughout organizations.

Letting the Data Drive the Training Program

AllenComm provides robust, personalized training programs that meet the specific needs of your team, not generic programs that hopefully impart a few worthwhile strategies. To enable such training initiatives, AllenComm begins client relationships by conducting a performance mapping process that identifies the existing and necessary behaviors and skills among team members, then connects those behaviors to objectives and skills acquisition goals to create the tailored training program.

With those insights in hand, the rest of the

performance mapping process entailed establishing business goals, in this case organizational goals for USA Clay; identifying desired behaviors with safety at the top of the list; and determining the best approach to enhancing critical thinking, encouraging skill mastery, and identifying sources of motivation.

For USA Clay, AllenComm used this approach to develop an engaging program that prepared learners for their respective roles while also building the confidence and knowledge essential to building a leadership culture.

Updating Training for Modern Coaches and Youth

The values that USA Clay embraces and embodies are **safety, fun, and marksmanship**—importantly, *in that order*. The importance of safety to the organization made it essential to retain a partner like AllenComm with an extensive background in leadership training

and a history of creating nuanced, engaging programs that both retain the attention of trainees and maintain a focus on core objectives. The goal for USA Clay was

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to move from inconsistent, presentational, and topical curriculum to a more captivating program that builds the learner from the ground up and creates safe and confident coaches and student athletes.



Reviewing USA Clay Leadership Structure

Given the use of firearms in USA Clay activities, the importance of safety and creating a zero-incident culture cannot be overstated. The training program for both coaches and students creates vigilance across the organization without sacrificing enjoyment.

USA Clay leaders are divided into head coaches, assistant coaches, and range safety officers, who are primarily responsible for safety at shooting events. Before they can participate in an event, coaches must complete the Coach Leadership and Safety Support (CLASS) certification and the Student Athlete Firearm Education (SAFE) training program required of student athletes. In addition to SAFE, student athletes must complete a skills assessment at the end of every training section. Finally, the student athlete must learn and demonstrate firearm safety with a coach during SAFE Range Day.

Understanding Audience, Goals, and Learner Progression

AllenComm and USA Clay worked closely in the initial phases of program redevelopment to determine necessary topics and lessons. What was clear to AllenComm was that the top priority for USA Clay was safety borne of confidence, so they created a structure that starts at a base level and strategically builds from there.

From their first interaction with the league, both coaches and athletes follow a progression borne of the performance mapping process that is designed by AllenComm to build leadership and competence.

Coaching Progression	
<i>Prepare the Program</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be a coach • Create your team handbook • Develop team communication • Recognize achievements
<i>Reach Out to Key Stakeholders</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquire coaches and volunteers • Recruit student athletes • Partner with local shooting ranges • Obtain resources and ammunition
<i>Prepare for Safe Shooting Events</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare for an event • Create a safety plan • Plan for emergencies • Get CLASS certification and conduct a SAFE range day
<i>Facilitate Safe Shooting Events</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive ongoing safety education • Utilize safety procedures • Monitor safety behind the firing line • Monitor safety on the firing line • Teach shooting fundamentals

Athlete Progression	
<i>Participate in the League</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in the league • Understand policies and procedures • Understand the safe sport policy • Understand legal issues • Know your team personnel
<i>Safely Handle a Firearm</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know your firearms • Know your ammunition • Know your gear and accessories • Know your safety procedures • Clean your firearm • Transport and store your firearms and ammunition
<i>Participate in a Shooting Event</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know your shooting range • Practice your shooting fundamentals • Know your clay target procedures • Shoot skeet • Shoot trap • Shoot 5-stand • Shoot sporting clays

Beyond the individual development of coaches and athletes, USA Clay’s overarching goals focused on expanding the reach and appeal of target shooting as a sport and streamlining the training process.

In designing the program, AllenComm also focused on increasing the number of new coaches and making sure they are prepared by providing comprehensive information.

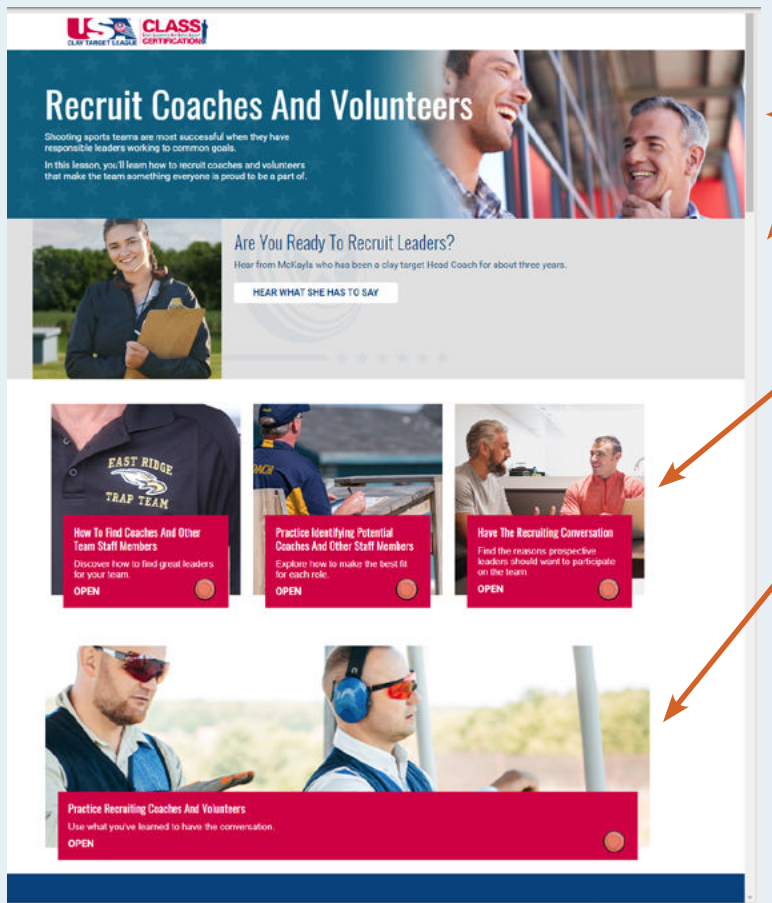
Designing an Engaging, Impactful Structure and Curriculum

USA Clay wanted to move away from the traditional training approach of asking learners to listen to recorded information and quizzing them on the content. So AllenComm created USA Clay training lessons that draw learners in through activities that review information and foundational principles using a variety of interactive approaches.

“We selected AllenComm because of their relationships and past work in the shooting sports community. Because of their experience, they had access to valuable content and graphic resources. Also, and this was exceptional, they facilitated connections with partners in the community. Together, we reimagined the possibilities of our training programs. Their expertise in strategy took us beyond simple communication. Our learner experiences are now designed to incrementally build skills and to support success and growth in our organization.”

John Nelson, President, USA Clay Target League

AllenComm organized learning experiences in a sequence called Engage, Explore, Apply that holds the learner’s attention through relevance; teaches information, principles, and ideas through engaging activities; and reinforces contextual understanding by providing real-world scenarios and outcomes.



New Instructional Sequence

Engage

Overview text, and/or the first activity hooks the learner's attention by establishing relevance through compelling language and reflection on the lesson topic.

Explore

Batch of supporting activities gives the learner chances to review info and engage with key principles or ideas.

Apply

Short scenario, action planning, or comprehension activity reinforces contextual understanding.

The result is 216 minutes of web-based training for USA Clay that includes around 36 micro-modules. The training is an interactive program that shares meaningful statistics and asks learners to gather information by responding to scenarios.

In the landing page example below (Figure 2), notice the introductory videos for each section and the modules focused on aspects of that section. Learners can follow the modular sequence as it is presented or choose to jump to a specific module. This is in keeping with AllenComm's flexible approach to training, particularly in that it enables learners to return to the content and access exactly what they are looking for without having to track through prior information.

Figure 1. AllenComm used an Engage, Explore, Apply approach that holds the learner's attention, teaches through engaging activities, and reinforces through real-world scenarios.

COACH LEADERSHIP AND SAFETY SUPPORT (CLASS)

The coach is the glue that builds and maintains a high-quality team in the USA Clay Target League.

This certification will help you start up and grow your shooting program, giving you the confidence, tools, and momentum to succeed.

What do I need to do to receive my certification?
To receive your certification, complete each of the sections below:

Figure 2. The CLASS training includes introductory videos with modules focused on different aspects. Learners can choose their own sequence.

Where previous USA Clay training programs focused on imparting particular information in micro-presentations, the AllenComm program teaches behaviors based on context. Instead of lessons based on topics, learners encounter relatively short sections oriented around a learning goal with a few appropriate lessons in each section. Sections scaffold information and scenarios to gradually build knowledge and confidence.

Figure 3. Rather than just giving participants a paragraph to read, the AllenComm training approach uses visual devices to improve both learning and retention.

Have the Recruiting Conversation

Once you've identified good prospective coaches and volunteers, the next step is to actually invite them to participate on the team and to help them feel confident and excited about accepting the invitation. Consider some of the elements you might include in that conversation:

- 1 Explain the Need**
- 2
- 3
- 4

Make sure that they understand why coaches and volunteers are essential to the program, and how they will contribute to helping the team run successfully. This might include some of the following topics:

- The number of athletes who can participate is determined by the number of coaches available.
- Additional qualified coaches promote safety, help athletes focus on the fun, and contributes to their growing marksmanship abilities.
- Engaged volunteers make events possible by providing management, transportation, and additional safety oversight.

NEXT →

Practice Identifying Potential Coaches and Other Staff Members

Read the profiles below and match each potential leader to the role that would best fit their qualities and experience.

Coach

Erica is a gun club member who has coached her daughter's soccer team.

Walter says that he is unwilling to submit to a background check.

Neither

Angelo doesn't have shooting experience but is excited for his son to be an athlete.

How To Find Coaches and Other Team Staff Members

Coaching provides the atmosphere to create a program that is safe, fun, and competitive. The more coaches and volunteers you have, the better your program can be.

Take a minute to consider how you might find good candidates to be coaches and volunteers for your program.

NEXT

Figure 4. These three examples of learning modules in the AllenComm training curriculum demonstrate how trainees work through scenarios they will probably encounter later as coaches.

In essence, the entire AllenComm training program is an exercise in storytelling that evolves from the presentational to the behavioral. Both coaching and athlete modules use a named persona with a decision to make so that learners can see the application of what they are learning.

The target in the bottom right of the entry to the module breaks and a check mark appears when learners finish the module, which both helps learners see what they have completed and provides a bit of a reward for their efforts.

See The Field
Explore a high-level view of a 5-Stand field and learn how it works.
EXPAND

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Under the hood, AllenComm made sure that the USA Clay training program has a smooth, responsive user interface that works well on all major platforms and browsers, including mobile. Importantly, AllenComm built the training infrastructure so it is scalable and can easily be updated without another wholesale rebuild.

Prioritizing Safety and Training Efficacy

The importance of safety and training cannot be overemphasized in the USA Clay program, which AllenComm fully embraced from the first meeting of the two organizations. AllenComm also knew that a focus on safety need not come at the expense of training efficacy and learner attention, nor did it have to be overly repetitive or dramatic.



The USA Clay coach and athlete training programs succeed because they start from a baseline, successively build on learner knowledge and confidence, and consistently work fundamental objectives into a compelling program. This is a proven structure, applicable to any number of scenarios, that AllenComm brings to training and leadership efforts. The focus on leadership as an embedded component of skills training is a hallmark of the AllenComm approach and benefits any organization. USA Clay, as we've seen, had a complex mix of training and communications needs for which AllenComm's unique philosophy was ideally suited.

Particularly in a situation like that of USA Clay, a culture of responsibility and respect yields high-functioning teams that meet organizational goals while having lots of fun. In organizations that primarily serve young people, it's crucial to have early experience with success borne of hard work. Seeing what it takes to be good at something yields benefits that last a lifetime. The AllenComm leadership training program creates an environment of success for learners of all ages.

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