

Tuning the Rifle Barrel and Load Together

James A. Boatright

Jim@BBLLC.INFO

1. Why Tune for Bullet Launch with Zero Yaw?

If the rifle bullet is given a non-zero aeroballistic yaw and yaw-rate as it clears the muzzle, those attitude errors can only be amplified in their magnitudes by passage of the bullet through the muzzle-blast zone prior to commencing its ballistic flight. These amplified attitude errors are quite variable from one shot to the next. Even when firing through a wind-free atmosphere, any initial aeroballistic yaw results in an aerodynamic jump deflection of the entire remaining ballistic trajectory and in increased yaw-drag during the critical highest-drag beginning portion of the bullet's ballistic flight. This higher initial air-drag then causes increased sensitivity to any ambient crosswinds immediately in front of the firing point. Another odd effect of non-zero initial yaw which has been observed is a different response to crosswinds of opposite directions depending upon the sense of the rifling twist (right-hand or left-hand twist). Non-zero initial aeroballistic yaw-rate is an even worse offender than initial yaw itself in each of these aspects.

Because the CG of the typical rifle bullet is well forward of its point of last contact with the muzzle during its exit process, the bullet can exit without acquiring any non-zero yaw and yaw-rate only when the muzzle is stationary in inertial space during bullet exit. If the muzzle of the rifle barrel is in motion during bullet exit, it will tip the nose of the fired bullet in the direction opposite to that of the muzzle motion and impart a yaw-rate which works to increase that non-zero attitude of the bullet's spin-axis orientation relative to its forward velocity direction. Subsequent passage of the bullet through the muzzle-blast zone amplifies both the mechanically imparted yaw and yaw-rate errors by significantly variable amounts. The result of these initial attitude errors in ballistic flight are random spreads in target impact points and random variations in effective Ballistic Coefficient (BC).

2. Recoil Effects on Rifle Barrel

Rifle recoil occurs only in reaction to the forward acceleration of the rifle bullet during the firing of the rifle. Thus, the line-of-action of this rearward recoil force is coaxial with the bore of the rifle barrel. This recoil force acting on the rifle can be quantified at any time during the firing process as the base-pressure driving the bullet forward multiplied by the cross-sectional area of the bore being obturated by that bullet. After initial engraving of the rifle bullet by the rifling lands, the forward-acting force of barrel friction is less than 2-percent of the bullet's driving force and is considered negligible here. This rearward recoil force on the rifle can be thought of as being applied to the rifle at the center of its breech face as a portion of the thrust of the cartridge case head against it plus whatever rearward frictional force might obtain between the case walls and the chamber walls.

The CG of most shoulder-fired rifles being fired upright is located several millimeters (dCG) vertically below the axis of its bore. Thus, the recoil force briefly creates a vertically upward bending torque at the front face of the receiver acting upon the rear of the (assumed) free-floating rifle barrel. Here, we are analytically treating this upward torque as being impulsive, occurring at the instant of peak base-pressure driving the bullet forward in the rifle barrel. This treatment allows the rather precise timing of the barrel's dynamic response at its muzzle to this torque impulse being applied at its receiver end. We are not concerned here with the muzzle of the barrel being dragged straight rearward during recoil. Good rifle design and firing technique should eliminate any disturbance of the rifle barrel in the horizontal plane during firing.

The recoil torque impulse imparts a transverse shear-wave in a vertical plane into the material of the rifle barrel at its junction with the receiver face. The driving recoil torque actually looks like the first half of a sine wave having a frequency which we term the "peak excitation frequency." More closely inspecting the base-pressure curve plotted against time in a good interior ballistics application such as QuickLOAD®, we see that it appears distinctly Gaussian in its excitation profile, having a "standard deviation," **sigma(seconds)**, given by its rise time from 60.65-percent to 100-percent of peak base-pressure. The excitation spectrum in the frequency domain is given by the Fourier transform of this time-domain

base-pressure curve. We know that this excitation spectrum must then also be a Gaussian function of frequency centered at the peak excitation frequency mentioned earlier and having a spread function **sigma(hertz)** inversely related to that of its Gaussian time-domain driving function **sigma(seconds)**:

$$\text{Sigma(hertz)} = 1/[(\pi^2)*\text{Sigma(seconds)}]$$

If we model the rifle barrel mechanically as a “long, slender rod” of an isotropic material (steel) having a uniform cross-section, we can use engineering handbook data to calculate its response to this forced shear-wave initial distortion. Specifically, the rifle barrel is modelled as a uniform cantilever beam having a clamped end at its receiver junction and a free end at its muzzle.

The interior ballistics program gives us the time of peak base-pressure and the time of bullet exit from the muzzle of our rifle barrel. We can calculate rather precisely the “signaling delay” between the time the shear-wave is introduced at the receiver/barrel junction and the earliest time when the muzzle of the barrel begins to react to this recoil-driven torque impulse:

$$\text{Signaling Delay} = \text{Barrel Length/Shear-Wave Propagation Speed}$$

Here we need the input Barrel Length (**L**”) as measured externally from receiver face to muzzle. We calculate the shear-wave propagation rate along the barrel as a “long, slender rod” from the properties of the steel barrel material. This speed is about **3050 meters per second** for 416R stainless steel rifle barrels.

The muzzle begins to vibrate sinusoidally in a transverse vertical plane as soon as the upward bending torque (shear-wave) signal reaches it. These vibrations are of multiple modes, all starting simultaneously, with each mode continuing at its own specific mode frequency which we calculate from handbook data for the barrel as a cantilever beam. The actual muzzle motion is then the algebraic sum of the sinusoidal vibration modes at their respective excitation amplitudes evaluated at the muzzle.

We seek to tune the muzzle exit times of our fired bullets to match a reversal time (halt) in vertical muzzle motion when the muzzle is

momentarily stationary relative to the earth as a quasi-inertial space. We can achieve partial “compensation” for long-range gravity-drop variations with variations in bullet launch velocities by tuning our mean bullet exit times to occur just earlier than an upward-to-downward muzzle halt, or just after a downward-to-upward muzzle reversal. This partial gravity-drop compensation is based upon a likely strong inverse correlation between variations in bullet launch velocities and variations in muzzle exit times for groups of shots fired sequentially.

3. Barrel Transverse Vibration Modes

For a uniform cantilever beam, its natural transverse shear-wave vibration **Mode(n)** frequencies are determined primarily by its beam length **L** and secondarily by its flexural rigidity **E*I** and its mass per unit length **A*p**, where **L** is the barrel’s “vibrational length,” **E** is Young’s Modulus of Elasticity for the barrel steel, **I** is the second moment of cross-sectional area (**A**), and **p** is the density (mass per unit volume) of the barrel steel.

For a rifle barrel of uniform outside diameter **D** and caliber **d**, the second moment of area **I** is given by

$$I = (\pi/32)*(D^4 - d^4)$$

and the uniform cross-sectional area **A** is given by

$$A = (\pi/4)*(D^2 - d^2)$$

The attached **Sheet 1** shows an image of a **Data Input** spreadsheet complete with units conversion utilities to allow inputs in British Engineering units to be converted conveniently into metric SI (MKS) units for these calculations.

The transverse vibration modes are numbered according to the count (**n**) of the vibration nodes (locations of zero vibrational amplitude) occurring over the beam length **L** for that vibrational mode shape. The (clamped) barrel/receiver joint is always considered to be a vibration node, while the (free) muzzle end is always a vibrational anti-node. Each segment of rifle barrel material vibrates independently at each mode frequency in a sinusoidal motion with amplitudes constrained within the

mode shape envelopes. In particular, the muzzle end segment of the barrel vibrates transversely in a vertical plane according to the instantaneous sum of all of the first seven, or so, sinusoidal vibration modes, so that the muzzle vertical position $y(t)$ is given at any time t after excitation time t_0 by:

$$y(t) = \sum_{(n=1, 7)} \{A(n) * \text{SIN}[2 * \pi * f(n) * (t - t_0)]\}$$

The mode frequencies $f(n)$ are given in hertz by:

$$f(n) = [1/(2 * \pi)] * [a(n)/L^2] * \text{SQRT}[E * I / (A * \rho)]$$

The mode n frequency constants $a(n)$ are taken from the handbook by Blevins, *Formulas for Natural Frequencies and Mode Shapes*, 1979, for a cantilever beam with clamped and free ends.

The mode frequency calculations are shown for a worked example in the attached **Sheet 2**. The mode vibration Amplitudes $A(n)$ are found by multiplying an overall excitation amplitude by the relative amplitudes from the excitation spectrum for each mode frequency. The overall excitation amplitude is calculated using basic physics, and the Relative Excitation Amplitudes $REA(n)$ are found from the Gaussian function:

$$REA(n) = \text{EXP}\{-0.5 * [(f(n) - f(\text{peak}))/\text{sigma}(\text{hz})]^2\}$$

The mode shapes are also shown graphically in **Sheet 2** of the worked example. Note that with an upward driving torque applied at the receiver end of the barrel, the muzzle end is initially moved *upward* by each odd-numbered vibration mode and *downward* by each even-numbered vibration mode.

4. Barrel Taper and Muzzle Attachments

The calculations of muzzle position as a function of ongoing time $y(t)$ are quite accurate for rifle barrels of constant outside diameter D and having no muzzle attachment. We have formulated simple extensions of these calculations to handle those rifles having conventionally tapered barrels and/or lightweight muzzle attachments producing approximate results which should be good enough to be in the ballpark. Ultimately, there is no substitute for test firing in ambient shooting conditions for rifle tuning.

As shown in **Sheet 1**, we accept input of barrel mass, if that is accurately known, and calculate an Average Diameter to use for tapered barrels. Alternatively, we can accept a Midpoint barrel OD measurement and estimate barrel mass from that. We also accept an unthreaded muzzle OD measurement and calculate a Vibrationally Effective Diameter to use in vibration calculations as its geometric mean with the calculated Average Diameter, which biases toward the smaller muzzle OD.

Without requiring more details, we simply accept the mass of any muzzle attachment and calculate an adjusted Vibrational Length of the rifle barrel by extending its rod-measured internal length at its Average Diameter to match the total mass of the barrel and attachment. This approach seems to work well enough for muzzle brakes weighing a few ounces, but is speculative for heavier suppressors, for example. The vibrational coupling with a heavy suppressor attached to the muzzle via a single threaded joint is questionable in any case.

5. Worked Example

The attached images show screenshots of a worked example using a “live” Excel workbook of four spreadsheets which is freely available upon request from the author as an email attachment. In addition to having access to a current version of Microsoft Excel, the user will also need access to a good interior ballistics program such as QuickLOAD®, which we routinely use in load development here. In particular, this analysis uses the QL definition of start time ($t = 0$) as the time of chamber pressure reaching 10-percent of its peak value (**P-Max**). Other interior ballistics programs might use time-since-sear-break, or time-since primer ignition, either of which would occur much earlier, and their event timings would require adjustment for use here. [Just note the time of **10% P-Max** and subtract it from all other event times.]

The example shown is for a known accurate load in a heavy-barrel 6.5x47 Lapua rifle using a 27-inch barrel of constant 1.250-inch OD and having no muzzle attachment. The bullet is a 153-grain Hornady A-Tip propelled by 39.2-grains of the new Alliant ReLoader-16 temperature compensated powder incorporating an anti-copper-fouling additive.

Sheet 1 shows the Data Inputs, **Sheet 2** shows the calculation of the Mode Frequencies and Shapes, **Sheet 3** shows the relative Excitation Spectrum, and **Sheet 4** shows the Calculated Results, including a graph of muzzle position $y(t)$ in fractions of a millimeter versus time t in microseconds. The table of Event Times shows the QL-calculated bullet exit occurring at **2 microseconds** after the muzzle has reversed its downward movement and is starting back upward again. This timing match is excellent for launching these match-type bullets with zero initial yaw and yaw-rate while also producing somewhat “compensated” long-range accuracy with this bullet and powder load. The calculated vertical muzzle speed is upward (positive) at a mere **0.045 mm/sec**.

Do not peremptorily dismiss these tiny calculated vibrational amplitudes and muzzle speeds as being so small that they can safely be ignored. They are perfectly capable of ruining the expected performance of good rifles and ammunition.

You will usually find that the peak excitation frequency (here **486.38 hz**) falls between the natural **Mode 2** frequency (here **434.58 hz**) and **Mode 3** frequency (here **1216.82 hz**). In this example, **Mode 2** is the dominant muzzle vibration with the faster **Mode 3** modulation providing the critical reversals in vertical direction muzzle motions. “Your results will vary,” as is often said.

6. Summary

If you find that you lack sufficient control authority in tuning your bullet weight and propellant load choices for bullet exit at or very near one of the plotted reversal times, your choice of rifle barrel length and weight simply cannot fire bullets of your selected caliber and chambering optimally. Shortening an existing long barrel can usually allow proper load tuning with the desired bullet and powder. Using this analytical tool during rifle design can avoid making that costly mistake. If you have never fired a properly tuned load in one of your rifles, you are in for an eye-opening treat. “Benchrest accuracy” truly can be achieved by all riflemen.

Sheet 1. Data Inputs

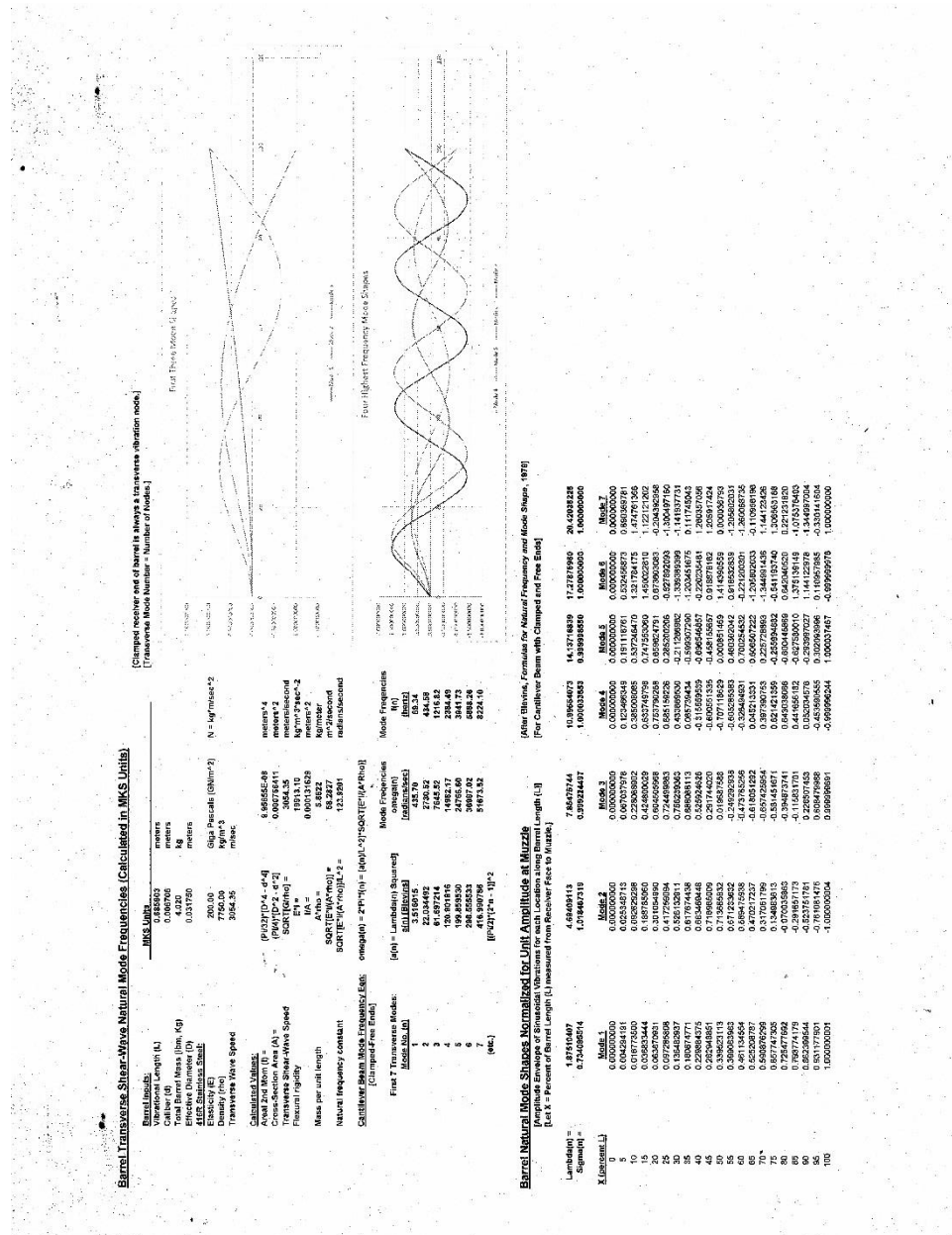
Data Input [With Units Conversions to MKS Units]:

[Sample data values for a known accurate Heavy Barrel 6.5x47 Lapua are included and must be modified as needed for your rifle.]
[MKS Data Values to be used in subsequent calculations are all in Column F. Most have to be copy/pasted or manually entered.]
[Formulations used are noted in comments.]
[User inputs for units conversion are indicated in Bold.]

Barrel Material Specification (isotropic steel)		Suggested Steel Properties:		Cro-Mo		Stainless	
Density (rho) =	lb/in ³	Steel Type =	416R	4140	416R	4140	416R
Units Conversions:	Kg/m ³	Density	7750.00	7850	7750	7850	7750
	484.000	Linear Elasticity E =	7752.94	205.00	200.00	205.00	200.00
	483.817	Bulk Elasticity B =	7750.00	160.00	160.00	160.00	160.00
		Shear Elasticity G =		80.00	72.30	80.00	72.30
		Poisson's Ratio nu =		0.29	0.30	0.29	0.30
Young's (Linear) Modulus of Elasticity (E) =	GP	Linear Rod "Speed of Sound" = SQRT(E/rho) =	200.00	5110.25	5080.01	5110.25	5080.01
Units Conversions:	GPa	Bulk Material "Speed of Sound" = SQRT(B/rho) =	72.30	4614.66	4543.69	4614.66	4543.69
	29,000,000	Transverse Shear-Wave Speed = SQRT(G/rho) =	200.00	3192.35	3054.35	3192.35	3054.35
	29,007,368						
Transverse Shear-Wave Propagation Rate =	SQRT(G/rho) =		3054.35	m/s			
Bore Inside Diameter (Caliber, d) =	inches		0.006706	meters			
Units Conversions:							
	0.2640						
	0.006706						
Actual Barrel Length (L') from Bolt-Face to Muzzle =			0.685800	meters			
Units Conversions:							
	27.0000						
Actual Barrel Length (L') from Receiver-Face to Muzzle =			0.680400	meters			
Units Conversions:							
	26.0000						
Barrel Mass (M' if known) Excluding Any Muzzle Attachment (kg) =			4.0203	kg			
Pounds =	8.8632						
Ounces =	0.0000						
Estimated Barrel Mass (M') based on M' = rho * L' * (PI/4) * (Dm ² - d ²);			4.0203	kg			
D(Midpoint) = Dm =	1.2500						
Muzzle Attachment Mass =			0.0000	kg			
Pounds =	0.000						
Ounces =	0.000						
Total Barrel Mass (M) Including Any Muzzle Attachment =			4.0203	kg			
Units Conversions:							
	8.8632						
	0.0000						
Unthreaded Muzzle OD of Barrel (D*) =			0.031750	meters			
Average OD of Barrel (D*) =			0.031750	meters			
Vibrationally Effective OD of Barrel (D) = SQRT(D** D*) =			0.031750	meters			
Vibrationally Effective Barrel Length with Attachment (L) =			0.685800	meters			
[Extending the Average OD (D*) to Match Total Mass (M)]			0.010000	meters			
Measured Rifle CG Offset (dCG) Below Bore Axis =			0.010000	meters			
[Measured at CG by Suspending Rifle via Bore vs Plumb Line]							
Interior Ballistics Data [All times in microseconds (mu-sec) based on t = 0 at 10-percent P-Max]							
Rise time to 80-percent Peak Base-Pressure (t80) =			341	mu-sec			
Time of Peak Base Pressure (tp) =			514	mu-sec			
Time of Bullet Exit from Muzzle (tb) =			1328	mu-sec			
Bullet Muzzle Velocity (vp) =			839.42	m/s			
Peak Base Pressure (G/P Transducer psi) =			2754	MPa			
			54,140				

[About 0.98% of Time to P-Max]
[Affected by Barrel Length]
[Affected by Barrel Length]
[About 90% of P-Max]

Sheet 2. Natural Mode Frequencies and Shapes



Sheet 3. Excitation Spectrum

Excitation Spectrum [Modeling Base-pressure Curve as a Gaussian Function]

Time to Peak Base Pressure (mu-sec) = 514 microseconds
 Time to 60% P-Max (mu-sec) = 341 microseconds
 Sigma (mu-sec) = [delta t] = 173 microseconds

Frequency Domain Function is Fourier Transform of Time Domain Function

Time (mu-sec)	Rel. Base Pressure	Frequency (hertz)	Relative Excitation
0	0.012110	0	0.71633469
20	0.016960	50	0.75761213
40	0.023436	100	0.80443302
60	0.031955	150	0.84794475
80	0.042993	200	0.88731927
100	0.057076	250	0.92177933
120	0.074765	300	0.95062385
140	0.096637	350	0.97325163
160	0.123248	400	0.98918213
180	0.155101	450	0.99807248
200	0.192595	500	0.99972968
220	0.235978	550	0.99411766
240	0.285294	600	0.98135946
260	0.340338	650	0.96172800
280	0.400611	700	0.93644584
300	0.465298	750	0.90560092
320	0.533255	800	0.86643156
340	0.603025	850	0.82170288
360	0.672869	900	0.77928383
380	0.740836	950	0.73101836
400	0.804838	1000	0.68076253
420	0.862762	1050	0.62938810
440	0.912677	1100	0.57760991
460	0.952452	1150	0.52636700
480	0.980873	1200	0.47600689
500	0.998731	1250	0.42741840
520	0.999399	1300	0.38100324
540	0.986770	1350	0.33716233
560	0.965267	1400	0.29619929
580	0.929813	1450	0.25822335
600	0.883769	1500	0.22355469
620	0.828854	1550	0.19223260
640	0.767031	1600	0.16402627
660	0.700396	1650	0.13894060
680	0.631069	1700	0.11683751
700	0.561037	1750	0.09753716
720	0.492163	1800	0.08083372
740	0.428013	1850	0.06650431
760	0.363868	1900	0.05431773
780	0.306645	1950	0.04404212
800	0.264698	2000	0.03645108
		2050	0.03032682
		2100	0.02472774
		2150	0.01976978
		2200	0.01583635
		2250	0.01073981
		2300	0.00827419
		2350	0.00632892

