NATIONAL SPORTING CLAYS ASSOCIATION

TRAINING TIPS FROM TOP INSTRUCTORS



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TRAINING TIPS FROM TOP INSTRUCTORS

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BY GARY WALSTROM

Habits: Good Or Bad?

If you develop good routines and habits, you can free up your concentration to focus on the important thing — the next target.



▲ Gary Walstrom

A habit is defined in the dictionary as an acquired behavior pattern regularly followed until it has almost become involuntary. It is also defined as something that a person does in a regular and repeated way.

How much of our time should we as sporting clays enthusiasts be spending on developing shooting habits?

The biggest challenge we have as shooters is to decide what is a good habit versus a bad habit. Let me go through my list of what I consider good habits and the reasoning behind the whole process. We'll start with some very common items that we as shooters should have in our possession.

1. **Vest:** Buy one, wear it out.
2. **Hat:** Get one and wear it out.
3. **Shooting glasses:** Buy one set with a few lenses for light conditions and wear them out.
4. **Hearing protection:** Buy a good pair of electronic hearing protection and batteries.
5. **Shells:** Buy one kind, same shot size, and shoot them until you retire.
6. **Gun:** Get a good one, make sure it fits properly, shoot it until you retire.
7. **Chokes:** Buy four — one cylinder, two light modified, one full choke.
8. **Gun slip:** Buy one and use it until it turns into shreds.
9. **Shooting bag:** Buy one and put all of your stuff in it.
10. **Shooting shirts:** Buy two — one for winter months and one for summer months, and wear them out. Then go buy the same ones again and repeat.
11. **Shooting shoes:** Buy one pair for nice weather and a pair of rubber boots for rain, and wear them until they're worn out.
12. **Shooting pants:** Buy two pairs — one for nice weather and one pair of shorts for hot weather.
13. **Rain suit:** Buy one and stow it in the trunk.

None of the above are really habits, but they will make you habitual, as you will no longer be wasting a lot of time online or reading in magazines about the new gun, lenses, bags, or clothes that you need to have to shoot better.

What else does one need to become a better shooter? Shooting lessons!

What else can we do ourselves to become better shooters? Establish a lot more good habits.

Let's go through a few.

1. Come to the course and get out your old standby bag, knowing it has your chokes, glasses, batteries, hearing protection, hat and vest all stowed in one consistent place.
2. Bring your firearm to the gun course in the same old gun sleeve or case.
3. Load some shells into that bag and go shoot.

Now, when we hit the first station on the course, what do we need to be thinking about? Where are my glasses, vest, etc.? No! So if you don't have to worry about those things, what can you spend all of your time thinking about? The angle, speed and distance of the first pair of targets.

Have you ever watched the great shooters in our sport and seen how many conditioned habits they have put into their shooting routine? Some of them have gone so far as to how much exact time they take between each pair of targets. Some always load their shells from only one shell pocket on their vest. Some always wear a red shirt on Sunday for the finals. Some always wear their same old soiled Beretta hat, even though they are sponsored by Beretta and have literally dozens of new ones at home, and some never change chokes.

Why do top-tier shooters do this? It is to establish a routine or habit, so that thinking about those items is no longer required — it actually becomes part of their subconscious mentality.

The more habits a person can instill in their subconscious mentality, the more proficient that shooter will become, because they are diverting any focus, energy or attention to those things that in the moment of shooting at clay targets and breaking them are inconsequential, yet very necessary to the sport.

What are shooting lessons for? To teach you excellent shooting habits, such as proper gun mount, proper visualization, proper target reading, and proper technique, as well as stance, posture and gun safety.

How many bad habits are there? Too many to count! Anything that diverts your focus and attention away from the target and breaking the target is a bad habit.

▶ Gary is an NSCA Level III instructor in Leawood, Kansas, and has shot on numerous Veteran and Super Veteran FITASC and Sporting Clays teams, taking home multiple gold and silver world awards.

BY CLAYTON M. RUE

Only "Why" Matters

When you miss a target, you might be tempted to ask "where'd I miss it?" That's the wrong question. Don't ask "where" you missed it. Instead, ask "why."



▲ Clayton M. Rue

When a target is missed, almost all shooters, and unfortunately a lot of well-meaning instructors, instantly focus only on where the target was missed, rather than why the target was missed. Where a target was missed is a moot point — the zero is on the score card. Where a target was missed is an outcome — not a process. Where a target was missed cannot be fixed — nothing can be learned. What does matter, and what can be fixed, and what can result in breaking the next target, is *why* the target was missed.

As a Master Class shooter and Level III instructor, I often have squad mates turn to me after a miss and inquire as to where they missed the target. I don't want to be rude, but I try not to answer that question — because never once have I seen someone miss a target who had accurately read the target, then planned and executed the shot properly. There was always a breakdown, sometimes minor and sometimes major, in their processes that caused the miss.

Similarly, I have had students hire me for a lesson and think that all I need to do to make them a better shooter is to call their misses. Nothing could be further from the truth. Calling someone's misses and walking them in on the target, without correcting the deficiency in their technique, actually does them significant harm. There is absolutely no learning going on, and the student is only reinforcing bad habits. This approach only guarantees the student will never improve and the instructor will sell them a lot of lessons (at least for a while).



▲ If you missed, it's because something went wrong in the process of reading the target, planning your shot and executing.

Focusing on the *where* will cause a shooter to ask the wrong questions. They might have been unable to focus on the target, but they aren't questioning their selected focal point. They might have spoiled the line, but they aren't questioning their selected hold point. They might have been out of rhythm with the target, but they aren't questioning their setup. They simply ask, "where?" They ask the wrong question and they are frustrated when their solution doesn't work. They are focused on the *where* and not the *why*.

Alternately, if a student has a problem with a certain presentation, and they seek my help in understanding the why versus the where, I can work with them to develop a process that will consistently produce X's. Utilizing that process, with no further help from me or anyone else, they can confidently shoot that presentation from now on. All they have to remember is to refocus on the process whenever a zero shows up on their score card.

The best shooters go to great lengths to perfect the process of shooting. When they miss a target, they focus on their process and not on the outcome. They reevaluate their process and make changes immediately (fixing the *why*). You won't see them doing the same thing and simply trying to shoot in a different place (fixing the *where*). So, the next time you struggle with a target, make sure you are seeking to understand and correct the *why*. And, should you encounter an instructor who wants to talk the *where*, instead of fixing the *why* — fire him!

▶ Clayton Rue is an NSCA Level III instructor and the Chief Shooting Instructor for Grouse Ridge Shooting Grounds in Wasilla, Alaska. He has been a professional instructor since 2000 and is heavily involved in youth shooting programs in Alaska. He has hunted birds on four continents and is addicted to side-by-side shotguns. He can be reached at *clayton.rue@gmail.com*.

BY GIL AND VICKI ASH, OSP SHOOTING SCHOOL

First-Station Jitters

First-station nervousness isn't a mental hurdle to overcome — it's actually something you can face by *doing* the right things; not *thinking about* them.



▲ Gil and Vicki Ash

The jitters are just something you have to work your way through as you learn to compete — unfortunately, there's no way around it. We know there will be those who will tell you that you can think your way to the right actions, but our experience shows us you must act your way to the correct way of thinking. Let's say you are facing a 50-yard chandelle from right to left and you've never seen one before, much less hit one. You're going to say to yourself, "Holy cow, what am I going to do to hit that bird?"

What you are experiencing is fear or performance anxiety. The reason for this is when facing anything you are not experienced in dealing with, the first thing people do is default to trying not to fail — especially in a performance situation. At this point, you can tell yourself it's likely for you to hit that target, but you will soon find out you can't lie to yourself — and the more you do, the more fear you'll experience. Let's look at how the experienced shooter would handle the situation. It would probably sound something like this:

"I've shot hundreds of this type of target and I know exactly how to do this and what it will look like to break that target."

We are all a product of our experiences. The more experienced you are at doing something, the easier it becomes, and the easier it becomes, the less you have to think about what you are doing when performing. That is how the brain builds skill — one experience at a time.



◀ You can't avoid the jitters, but you can work through them and overcome nervousness with experience.

The unfortunate thing is that shooters of all levels must go through the "jitters" at different times in their careers. They begin as first-station jitters, and then jitters in the middle stations, and then in the last three stations, and then after the first day of a two-day shoot — all of these must be experienced and dealt with on your way to becoming the best you can be. You get the first-station jitters because you're filled with expectation and the hope that you'll shoot well. Then after a few stations with more O's than you can count, you stop trying and begin to shoot well. Then one day you begin to learn that trying not to miss is just as devastating as trying too hard and there is a balance between the two — that's where peak performances resides. Most of this anxiety stems from wanting to control what others might think about you and how you are shooting. News flash: They don't care, and you should never judge yourself or your friends by a score in a sporting clays tournament.

> **"The first thing people do is default to trying not to fail…"**

▶ Gil and Vicki Ash are NSCA Level III instructors who host shotgunning clinics at gun clubs around the country. Learn more about their OSP Shooting School at *www.ospschool.com*.

BY CLAYTON M. RUE

Don't Sweat The Hard Targets

You shouldn't get so hung up on difficult targets that you burn yourself out and trash your confidence. Work on nailing the targets within your skill level, *every time*.



▲ Clayton M. Rue

Sporting clays competitions are not won by the shooter who breaks all of the hardest targets. They are won by the shooter who never misses the easy targets. That said, the definition of what is a hard target versus what is an easy target varies with a shooter's class. So, to win your class, you must break all of the targets within your skill level while graciously accepting the fact that some targets are simply beyond your current skill level.

That's not to imply you shouldn't try to break the hard targets. In fact, breaking some of the hard targets, and evolving your definition of a hard target, will help you build a winning score. What this does mean is if you let your success on breaking targets that are beyond, or at the edge of, your current skill level establish your definition of success, you're mentally destroying your self-image. And when your self-image goes out the door, your confidence follows directly behind it — which leaves you on a downward-spiraling path. Wouldn't you be much happier, and confident, if you focused on the fact that you are breaking virtually all of the targets within your skill range?



BEN ROBERTS

▲ Some targets might be beyond your skill level right now, and that's OK. Work on them, but concentrate on never missing the "easy" ones to win your class.

Recently I came across one of my new students grinding away on a station that he had zeroed at the last shoot. He was having absolutely no success in hitting either target, and he asked me if I had the time to help him. I agreed, and then simply told him to walk away. This was not the advice he was expecting, so I explained that both of the targets were simply beyond his current skill level. In fact, they were beyond the skill level of multiple Master class shooters who had also suffered greatly at that station. I then pointed out that even though he had zeroed this station, he still could have shot a 92 and won not only his class, but the entire shoot. I encouraged him to go back and pick a station that he had broken between four and six targets on and practice that station until he could break all eight in a row. Instead of worrying about targets that he cannot hit, learn how to never miss the targets that he can hit.

You could see a smile break out on his face as if the pressure of the world had been lifted. All at once, the station that he had used to define his success (zero) had become a moot point. His confidence soared because he knew he could pick up way more targets on the easy stations than he was going to drop on the hardest station. For the first time, he realized that easy Xs count the same as hard Xs on the score card.

Remember, "Tis better to fight and run away — and live to fight another day." Consistently win the battles against the targets you can break, and simply walk away from those you cannot. Let your successes define your outlook, not your frustrations. With experience, instruction and practice, you will find your definition of easy targets will rapidly evolve to include more and more presentations.

▶ Clayton Rue is an NSCA Level III instructor and the Chief Shooting Instructor for Grouse Ridge Shooting Grounds in Wasilla, Alaska. He has been a professional instructor since 2000 and is heavily involved in youth shooting programs in Alaska. He has hunted birds on four continents and is addicted to side-by-side shotguns. He can be reached at *clayton.rue@gmail.com*.

BY TODD BENDER

Style vs. Technique

Style has to do with personality, while technique has to do with mechanics and execution.



▲ Todd Bender

There is always much discussion about a shooter's style and technique. But many times these two terms are intermingled without fully understanding the definition of each when dissecting a shooter's game. "Style" refers to a personal characteristic, a manner of execution. It's the way in which something is done; the personality of execution. "Technique," by definition, is the method with reference to practical or formal details, using basic skills, in carrying out a mechanical operation.

Given these definitions, copying a good shooter's style would be useless unless the underlying technique was understood and assimilated at the same time. It is the technical aspect of one's form that consistently achieves success, while style is simply the surface of execution. We can liken this to a beautiful home that is built on a less-than-solid foundation. It might look good above ground, but it won't stand the test of time.

Therefore, someone with a distinctive style might or might not have good technique. Style is not substance. Conversely, it would be rare that you would find a shooter with good technique that hasn't developed some sense of personal style during the evolution of learning and implementation of a proper technique.



MIKE HESSONG

▲ Technique is the foundation of consistent shooting and can be discerned by examining the mechanics a good shooter uses. Try to figure out what they are doing exactly the same way every time.

You will find in many sports a congruency among the top performers — they are using very similar techniques and mechanics. Many of the top shooters also have different styles. Because they might look very different, many will think they shoot completely different. But when an educated eye strips away the surface, the exterior and the style, it's easy to see that the underlying physical mechanics — the technique — is the same.

A friend of mine is IPSC Pistol Champion Doug Koenig. Doug is arguably the best pistol shooter to ever walk the planet. I asked him about the fundamentals of pistol shooting and if most of the top competitors in his discipline used the same approach. Doug said, "Of the top 10 guys (in his sport), if you cut our heads off, we'd all look the same."

So, how do you dissect form to reveal the actual mechanics that are being used? Look for what is driving the move. Are the hands creating gun movement, or is the drive coming from the lower body? Pay attention to how the gun moves with the target. Is there a change in body position or weight distribution at the end of a shot relative to the beginning?

When we watch shooters, we normally look at the target. "He hit that one hard." But how did he do it? How were the shooter's feet positioned in relationship to the field? Where did the gun start? Was his or her hold point high or low? What timing was used? But don't just watch how they shoot each particular target. Try to formulate and define a system that you might see. What do they do every time? How does it compare to other shooters at their level?

Copying the surface without understanding the substance will not deliver the desired result. Mimicking proper form can be a positive, assuming you understand the underlying mechanics and assimilate those mechanics properly — because in the end, that is their key to success.

▶ Todd Bender was named the first Master Instructor for the NSSA. He has worked alongside Olympic Gold Medalist Lanny Bassham for 10 years and is a Certified Instructor with Bassham's Mental Management Systems in Dallas, Texas. For information about Todd Bender Performance International and for Todd's 2016 clinic schedule, go to *toddbenderintl.com* or contact Todd Bender at *bendershima@aol.com*.

BY CLAYTON M. RUE

Just Relax

Relaxing your muscles — including the one between your ears — positions you to move smoothly and fluidly through your shot.



▲ Clayton M. Rue

When shooting a shotgun, one should always try to have their body in its most natural relaxed position just as the shot is released. Any muscle tightness at that critical point will only restrict the shooter's ability to smoothly and easily execute the shot. Muscle binding can result in a stalled swing, a rolling of the shoulders or several other defects that can lead to missed targets.

The first step to ensuring a relaxed body is a proper setup. This means the feet are shoulder width apart and properly positioned to provide a totally relaxed body at the selected break point. The upper body should have only a slight forward bias. Any more than that tightens up the muscles in the lower back and impedes a shooter's ability to rotate their upper body. This means you will need to "wind up your spring" a little to allow for proper body movement while the target is in the air. Then when you feel your body totally relax, that is your cue to release the shot. The key muscle group to use as an indicator that you are doing this right is the lower back. Any tightness here (at the break point) is detrimental to your shooting.

The next step to ensuring a relaxed body is to relax the shoulders. Both arms should be very loose throughout the shot. This means both elbows are pointed down at about a 45-degree angle to the upper body and can be easily wiggled by your instructor. When a shooter raises their elbows, it locks all of the muscles from shoulder to shoulder and severely impedes one's ability to smoothly and easily swing a shotgun. The key muscle group to use as an indicator that you are doing this right are the trapezius muscles (which extend over the back of the neck and shoulders). They should be totally relaxed when the target is called for.



THADDIUS BEDFORD

▲ Set up so your body is totally relaxed at the break point, then "wind up" a little to your hold point. The muscle tension will release itself as your body pivots while the target is in the air, and you'll take the shot at the proper point when your muscles are fully relaxed.

> **"Grip the shotgun no tighter than what is required to consistently control it."**

The next step to ensuring a relaxed body is to relax the hands. One should grip the shotgun no tighter than what is required to consistently control it. This is much lighter than most shooters grip their gun. A tight grip on the gun tightens all of the muscles in the forearms and upper arms. This handicaps the hands' ability to make minor corrections in muzzle movement while the target is in the air. The key muscle group to use as an indicator that you are doing this right are the forearms. If they are tensed, you are gripping the gun too tightly.

Another important muscle group to relax are the facial muscles. Squinting your eyes will result in a reduced depth of field and your ability to focus on the target. Clenching your jaws can affect your gun fit and is a sure sign you are reacting negatively to the pressure of competition. I always recommend facial relaxation as part of a good pre-shot routine.

And most importantly, don't forget to relax that muscle between your ears. The mind must be calm and free from any distractions in order for the subconscious to function at its best. The mind must be able to focus undisturbed on the leading edge of the target. Relax your mind and body to achieve your optimum shooting condition.

▶ Clayton Rue is an NSCA Level III instructor and the Chief Shooting Instructor for Grouse Ridge Shooting Grounds in Wasilla, Alaska. He has been a professional instructor since 2000 and is heavily involved in youth shooting programs in Alaska. He has hunted birds on four continents and is addicted to side-by-side shotguns. He can be reached at *clayton.rue@gmail.com*.

BY GIL AND VICKI ASH, OSP SHOOTING SCHOOL

Where Should The Muzzle Be?

If you're chasing the target with the muzzle, trying to catch up to it for the shot, you're already behind.



▲ Gil and Vicki Ash

At a recent tournament at South Florida Shooting Club, we were amazed at the comments inside the clubhouse while sharing lunch with a group of shooters. A cold front blew through early that morning with rain, and behind it came a 25 mph wind from the northwest. You can imagine what that did to the targets. We listened with great interest to what so many shooters were saying, and it continues to amaze us how shooters just talk themselves out of having a good performance. It's as if when the shooter does something correctly they are getting what they expect and don't give it any emotion, but let something happen like missing a few easy targets, and they want to pull their hair out (as if having less hair would have changed the result)! In fact, we have in our career, as competitors in the beginning and professional coaches for the last 23 years, heard shooters say things to themselves that would have made them want to hit us in the face if one of us had said it to them. As Vicki always says, "Circumstances don't cause suffering, but our reaction to them does!"



▲ Your eyes should not look down the barrel — always be looking at the target, *behind* where the barrel is pointing.

Perhaps the one thing that encourages this one-way dialogue is the fact that we can't see what happened when we miss our target. We see either a successful or unsuccessful attempt as the target is either hit or missed, but we rarely see where and almost never know why. This little fact is, at the very least, confusing, and in most cases downright confounding, even to those of us with a lot of experience. One of the main reasons shooters are confused is because of the erratic movement of their muzzles before and during the shot. Why does this confuse shooters?

Well, it has to do with how your eyes react to movement.

Your eyes will always go to the fastest moving thing in your view, and in most cases for most shooters, the thing that is moving the fastest is the gun. Way too many shooters are moving and mounting the gun going to the target (more often than not from behind the target) and then trying to do something to it, all the while trying not to look at the gun.

We have learned that if you are going "to the target," you're behind when you get there, and you will look at the gun because you put the gun on the target. In our game, going to the target seems like a good thing to do — but it's actually self-defeating, because the gun must be ahead of the target to hit it. Combine that with the fact that a shooter can be in front and behind the same target at the same time on the same shot, and you begin to understand some of the confusion and the frustration!

I explained this to a group of shooters at OK Corral in Florida this way. "I see the shot as converging lines being made by the target and the muzzle, and as they converge, the target is always behind the muzzle. The muzzle speed is adjusted to the target's speed and the shot is taken. The muzzle starts in front of the target and controls the target from in front throughout the shot. The eyes are never looking down the barrel! The eyes are always looking at the *target,* BEHIND where the barrels are pointing. This is the single most misunderstood fact in our sport today."

▶ Gil and Vicki Ash are NSCA Level III instructors who host shotgunning clinics at gun clubs around the country. Learn more about their OSP Shooting School at *www.ospschool.com.*

BY GARY WALSTROM

Compartmentalize

You know all those nagging thoughts that try to jump in and disrupt your pre-shot routine? Here's how to tuck them away for later.



▲ Gary Walstrom

Do all the top shooters rush to a tournament, unload their carts, load up their gear and rush off to shoot in the preliminary event? How many of us do that? We drive down the morning of the shoot, unload our cart, throw some shells in the back, add a vest and some shooting glasses, throw our gun in a sleeve, and off to registration we go. We register and get our score cards, shooter number and bag of goodies from the sponsors, and now we are off for a fun afternoon of shooting.

What is going on in our brain? Well, we haven't had the time to close the door on those phone calls we took on the way to the tournament; we haven't put into closed compartments the stuff that stops us from being able to get a strong focus on our afternoon of shooting. What items need to be put into those little compartments and locked away until we are done shooting? Everything!

I recently was at a FITASC event where I shot the first parcour very well and left with a 24. When I went to start my Polaris to proceed to the next parcour, the battery was dead. Fortunately, I jumped in another cart and headed off to the next parcour, while a couple of people were going to jump-start my Polaris and at least get it back to my trailer. On the second parcour I still shot well, but now it was time for questions. I wonder why my battery is dead when the Polaris was only a little over a year old? Did they get it started and was it back at my trailer by now? Where was I going to get a new battery if the current one was dead? How was I going to get through the next four days of the tournament without my ride? With all these questions now popping into the back of my mind, you know what happened on the last two parcours.

We could write a book on what happens to people who are taken out of their comfort zone, so I want to show you what you need to do to get *into* the best comfort zone.

Many people will say you have to have a plan, and they're right. But how do you handle all those little items that can ruin a plan by pushing themselves into the forefront of your mind? Some will advise you to just stick to the plan and insist that nothing else matters — but for 90 percent of shooters, that's not a real solution.

The answer is to compartmentalize the items that are in your head — extract all the things in your brain that prohibit it from focusing on seeing the target. Even in golf, what is the pro golfer thinking about when he takes the club back for his first swing on hole number 1? Nothing. Just like in shooting, he has already gone through his pre-shot routine, he has already visualized the flight of the ball, and now he's ready to go. In shooting it is the same: You cannot be thinking about anything else other than focusing on the target.

You cannot be thinking about anything else other than focusing on the target.

How then do we compartmentalize all of that "stuff" in our head? Do you want to spend a lot of money on this answer or would you like it stupidly simple? I like simple. Therefore, make a list — just make a written list of all of the stuff in your head, whether it be work, wife, girlfriend, grocery list, or whatever. With the list now written down, the brain knows that at some time it can go back to those and put them into a proper agenda of priorities and time frames, but for right now, in the present, the brain can think about looking at and focusing on one thing—the target.

I carry a journal in my shooting bag for recording my scores and what target presentations I missed (therefore what needs to be practiced next), but I have also added a page where I can empty my head of the stuff that will now allow me to truly be focused on seeing the target. I use my journal now more than ever as my brain knows where it was stored, so I pull it out after the day's events or the entire tournament and begin to check the items off the list as they are completed.

You will find it truly amazing how effective this is. The factual writing down of the "stuff" and knowing where it is when you need to go back and find all those items is an absolute solution to not letting them leak back into your present, conscious thoughts while in a tournament setting.

▶ Gary is an NSCA Level III instructor in Leawood, Kansas, and has shot on numerous Veteran and Super Veteran FITASC and Sporting Clays teams, taking home multiple gold and silver world awards.

BY PAUL GIAMBRONE, III

Aligning Expectations With Goals

No matter what your shooting goal is, be realistic about what it's going to take to get there.



▲ By Paul Giambrone, III

All too often, I see problems when expectations and goals are not aligned for the average shooter. When I am coaching someone, we talk about goals in the beginning of the lesson — short- and long-term goals — and we discuss and work on this topic throughout the lesson. I see shooters get so bent out of shape when they miss. Sometimes it's to the point where they're throwing hulls, slamming their heads back and looking up to the sky as if they can't believe they just missed a target — sometimes even colorful metaphors follow! Hey, we are all guilty of this, though quite frankly, none of us should show such frustration and disgust in our games on the field. But I often see this out of shooters who think they should be World Champions



▲ Whether your goal is to become a World Champion or just to have fun with friends and stay competitive, make sure the work you're putting in matches the goal you've set — or you'll never get there.

or even State Champions, but who shoot only four boxes of practice each week.

There is nothing wrong with setting high goals. The old saying "Aim for the stars, and if you fall short, you're still at the treetops" certainly applies here. However, if you want to chase these higher goals, you have to put in a lot of time and effort and dedicate yourself to this sport for a minimum of five years to reach any high goals. One of the best shooters in Louisiana told my father that in order to get to AA across the board (back when my father started, AA was the highest class), he had to shoot a minimum of 5,000 registered targets, shoot three times that in practice and have a reliable coach for five straight years to achieve the consistency he needed to reach this goal. Wow!

> **"My one and only goal is to take the best possible shot at the next target."**

Don't feel left out if this isn't your mindset. I have several shooters that want to just feel competitive or "not embarrass themselves" when they go shoot with their buddies. There's nothing wrong with these goals. Realize you still need good and sound coaching in order to understand the fundamentals of skeet shooting, and you need to work those fundamentals in several practice sessions to get them engrained. This doesn't mean you have to take multiple lessons and shoot as much as the guy I mentioned earlier, but you still have to work at it. This game is built around the need to have solid fundamentals and the mental control to execute those fundamentals with minimal flaws to get results.

There are several types of shooters between these two extremes as well. But no matter what your overall goal is with regard to shooting, there is one goal that can be universal. I set this goal each year, and it is applicable to all of the different types of shooters out there. My one and only goal is to take the best possible shot at the next target at that given moment in time. Give that next target your absolute best — 100 percent of your attention and focus — and let what happens, happen. Nothing more, nothing less.

▶ Paul Giambrone, III is the youngest inductee in the NSSA Hall of Fame and is a 17-time World Champion. Paul specializes in skeet shooting instruction and is an NSSA Master Level Instructor. For more information about Paul and other shooting tips, please visit *www.breakmoretargets.com.*

BY CLAYTON M. RUE

Poor Execution Or Bad Read?

Do you really know how to read a target?



▲ Clayton M. Rue

While watching the Masters' golf tournament recently, I saw a lot of very good golfers missing some relatively short putts. Sometimes the announcer would declare the putt was missed because of poor execution, but most misses were attributed to the putt simply being misread. Line, speed and distance were not only deceptive, but they also changed as the time of day and weather conditions evolved. The bottom line was, no matter how perfectly the ball was stroked, if the golfer did not read the green perfectly, the putt had no chance of finding the bottom of the cup.

In sporting clays, we have the exact same set of requirements for success. First, the target must be accurately read. Then, the shot must be executed properly. So this raises the question: How much time and energy do you put into the art of reading targets? And how many of your misses can be attributed to you simply not understanding exactly what the target is doing at your selected break point? A little time spent here might pay huge benefits.

As a target setter, I have a huge number of ways to deceive a shooter. In addition to target line, speed and distance, I have target size, color and face angle to play with. Add in background terrain, curling trajectories and subtle transitions, and I can really have fun. All of this adds up to an almost limitless number of combinations a shooter can encounter on any given day. And if you do not correctly read the target presented, the most perfectly executed shot will still fail to connect.



▲ If you're able to view the target from multiple angles — the entire flight path, if possible — you'll get a much better read on it.

So, how do you become a better target analyst? The best way is to spend some time hanging out with a few target setters. They can explain to you what they're doing with a target (or pair) and why they think it will present a challenge to shooters in varying classes. For example, they might throw a full-size target with a midi in order to confuse the shooter's judgment of distance and speed. Or, they might set a target that transitions directly in front of the station — where most shooters try to break the target. Once you know what to look for, these little tricks become more obvious. And while you are doing this, make sure you view all targets from directly behind the machine. From that vantage point you can see all of the subtleties in target flight that (intentionally) cannot be seen from the shooting stand.

During competition you will not have as many options. The best thing you can do is to view the targets from launch to landing from as many different positions as possible. This means walking as far left and right as possible (while still seeing the targets) to view them from widely varying angles. This will give you a better read on how the targets are behaving along their flight paths. You can also use a pencil for reading targets just like a golfer uses his putter as a plumb bob. Held vertically, it will show you any horizontal drift in the target line. Held horizontally, it will help you sort target line from terrain and identify the transition point.

You might think all of these things will make you look silly on the course, but I implore you to take a lesson from the golf pros. These guys look at a putt from every angle, they plumb bob the line and they pace off the distance. Heck, they even lay down on the green to get their best read. And when they are done with all of this, they get a second opinion from their caddy. They know that reading the putt correctly is critical to their success. Believe me, it is just as important to you as a sporting clays shooter.

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