

# Shooting Out Of



MIKE HESSONG

▲ To get out of a slump, you have to set up the shot properly every time. Establish your break point, hold point and visual focus point for every shot, and practice until you can go back to them consistently.


▶ If you hit a shooting rut and can't seem to move on, go back to basics — polish your fundamentals until they are as flawless as you can make them.

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# A RUT

Stuck in a shooting rut?  
Here's how to break out of it.

BY MARTY FISCHER



**W**hen I look back over my 30-plus years of coaching skeet, sporting and wingshooting enthusiasts, I can honestly say that with the exception of the totally new shooter, most of them had hired a coach or instructor at some point to help them get out of a shooting slump. In other words, their shooting was in a rut that was deep enough to keep them from climbing out and moving forward on their own.

The one thing that is consistent about shooting slumps is that they are found in all of the shooting sports and they can show up unexpectedly. When the wheels come off for a shooter, they usually seek help from one or more of their shooting partners — who sometimes make good recommendations and sometimes make bad ones and dole out terrible advice.

Unfortunately, most shooters seek too many opinions when they're struggling, and the variety of "fixes" they are offered generally does more harm than good. Keep in mind that all shooters don't see leads the same way. They don't shoot the same shooting style on a given presentation, and they certainly don't take



the same mental approach to the clay target sports.

In most instances, shooters are looking for help to build some consistency back into their shooting game. It is often the lack of consistency that leads them into those deep ruts, and without a defined path to climb out

and sporting shooters are not the same for all, you have to identify the simplest of shot elements, like the visual focal point and hold points that are set before calling for the targets. While sporting clays courses give shooters no consistent reference points for setting the gun



▲ Consistently starting the gun in the proper place for the target at hand is a huge step in getting yourself out of a slump.

of that rut, many back away from shooting, some to the point of quitting altogether.

You can often avoid the feeling that could cause you to walk away from the game by going back to the basics that got you to your achieved level prior to the slump. Things like visual focal point, gun hold point (horizontally and vertically), break point, an understanding of what the target is doing in its flight at the break point, and knowing where to look for the second bird if shooting a pair and an understanding of what it is doing in flight. While that seems like an overwhelming number of shot elements to get perfect, it really isn't that difficult.

Since the visual acuity and reflexive skills of both skeet

in place, a regulation skeet field does have range finders in place. These short stakes help provide a hold point reference for the shooter. That hold point can be slightly adjusted depending on how quickly the shooter can focus on the target. A quick rule of thumb for setting the pre-shot hold point: Start the muzzle just ahead of where the target is clear to your vision. Then set it vertically to get on the line of the target in the kill zone. If you can consistently start the gun in the proper place for the targets at hand, you will take a huge step towards getting yourself out of that shooting slump. The key here is that once you find that perfect hold point for the shot, you have to be able to come back

to it shot after shot.

Many shooters who are struggling with consistency can't fix themselves and will seek coaching help to remedy the situation. Most experienced coaches can find the main problem that caused the drop-off in the shooter's game, since they are usually pretty obvious. It is not uncommon for shooters, with the coach over their shoulder, to shoot brilliantly near the end of a shooting session. The challenge is whether or not the shooter can take the information he is given and turn it into a consistent and successful approach to his shooting. I can't tell you how many times students have asked me what it would cost to have me over their shoulder at the next shoot. Of course, that's not legal under NSSA/NSCA rules, but there is something about having your coach present to give you confidence.

Since scoring inconsistencies while dealing with changes that a coach puts in your game can be a common occurrence, let's take a look at some things you can do to minimize those frustrating misses. The first thing you've got to do is have faith in what your coach asked you to do. If you don't have that, the inconsistencies will continue and you will most likely revert back to what you were doing before the changes.

After coaching shooters for more than three decades, I can tell you that the biggest problem for shooters of all skill levels is their inability to make a successful shot repeatable. You would think that repeating a shot where

you simply smashed a pair of clays would be easy. In English sporting the game demands that you shoot the same presentation two, three or four times on a station. On a skeet field, the targets are the same every time and only the presentation angles change as shooters move around the shooting pads.

The inability to break all of the pairs on a station, even the so-called "easy" ones, is what drives shooters to a coach. A good instructor can certainly get you onto those "easy" presentations, but it will be up to you to build on your consistency in order to stay on your game. It is here that most shooters fail. To be successful at sporting or skeet, you must develop your shooting basics so they are solidly in play every time you call for a target.

I distinctly remember a student that I was coaching for the first time some years ago out West. He had a few quirks in his game, one being that he liked to point the gun very close to the trap of the clay that he planned to shoot. I could see that this gentleman had some nice shooting skills (NSCA Class B at the time of the session), but like so many shooters, he was shooting well in spite of his incorrect pre-shot setup. The first target was past his gun barrel almost as soon as he called for it, and you could see the gun chasing the bird across the field. This happens often on skeet fields, too.

We spent a lot of time working on the basics of target visualization and initial setup during our first session. At the end of our first day on

the range, I felt really good about where this shooter's game was versus where it had been a few hours earlier. I was happy and he was happy. The session included a few things that would hopefully remind him of the little tweaks we put into his game.

To his credit, that single lesson allowed him to win HOA in a clays shoot a couple of days later. The fix in his game was a simple one. To be honest, I wish it were that simple with most shooters, but I will tell you that most of the misses that shooters experience are not because

they don't know how to break the target. They happen because the shooter got away from the fundamentals of the game, which a good instructor would be able to point out.

All of this written conversation is in many ways a reminder that when you have hired a coach that you trust, and you find yourself improving under his hands-on tutelage, it would make sense to stay the course by implementing the changes that were made to your game.

If there's no coach involved, make sure you are

consistent with your shooting fundamentals. If you find yourself chasing targets to acquire a lead picture, make an adjustment away from the trap to give your eyes a little bit more time to see the birds clearly.

It has been said that if you do something 21 straight times exactly the same way, the effort can become a habit. Whoever said that certainly wasn't a shooter, because skeet and sporting enthusiasts work in rounds of 100, where the basics of the game demand the same series of actions in order to be consistently successful. Rest assured that performing consistently the right way will get you out of that shooting rut more quickly than anything else.

The breakdown in the shooting sequence comes when shooters get caught up in the changing target presentations they have to shoot during that 100-shot round. In many instances, the problems come when certain types of shots are being attempted. One way to work yourself into a troubling target is to move right or left to change the shot angle to make it less challenging. Once you start hitting the less technical clay consistently, slowly work your way back to the problem bird. You will shoot changing angles along the way, and suddenly that problem target doesn't look so intimidating after all. You will find that shooting targets where you are comfortable and working your way into the problem target works well for shooters. Both sporting and skeet are best played by confident



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▲ Struggling with pairs? You need a game plan — always know exactly where to look for the second bird.

## TIPS TO HELP YOU AVOID A SHOOTING SLUMP

Regardless of your shooting game — it's all about the basics.

Identify your break point, hold point and visual focal point for every target.

Never give yourself a reason to miss a target. When you say "Pull," make sure you actually mean it.

Remember that clay target shooting is an EYE/HAND game. The eyes see the target first so the hands can move the gun in place based on what the eyes see. In other words, don't move your hands until you see the target.

Always have a game plan when shooting pairs. Know exactly where to look for the second bird of a pair once you break the first one.

Try to shoot every target as consistently and aggressively as you can without elevating your stress level. Understand that there is a fine line between too fast and just right.

Develop a consistent pre-shot routine that includes your setup and a mental rehearsal of the targets breaking before you call for the bird(s).

Stay hydrated through the round of clays.

Wear a lens color on your shooting glasses to keep the eyes comfortable and provide a contrast between the target and the shooting background.

Never forget that the most important target is the next one. What you have done or will do later is of no consequence. The game is played one target at a time.

shooters.

Things like identifying where you see a target clearly, where you hold the gun to start the shot sequence, where you insert the gun relative to the target in flight and how you perceive lead and trust it are all important. Coaches should know this, and their coaching style should include each of those things so they can be performed the same way for every target of the round.

So here's the bottom line. If you have hired a coach with the expectation of improving your shooting prowess, give what he says time to work for you. It is very easy to go back to your comfort zone, but sometimes you have to take a step back to take two steps forward. One thing is certain: The more you do something the same way, the more confident you will be with your shooting game. And let's face it, it's much more fun when you can keep those wheels on your shooting game. **CTN**