MATCH The HATCH

Which shooting technique should you use? It depends on the target.

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Inside every fly fisherman's vest is a box full of flies. In this box, there are green, blue and red flies. The reason for the variety of colors is that fish can be picky eaters. Some days they only eat green insects. Other days, only blue or red insects. The experienced fisherman knows this and will try to present the color of the day to the fish. This is called "matching the hatch." In sporting clays, there are three basic types of target behaviors. An experienced shooter knows this and will also try to match the hatch by selecting the best shooting technique for each presentation.

A shotgun shooter can choose to use any one of several

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methods to obtain the required lead on a moving target. These techniques are commonly referred to as maintained lead, pull away, swing through, intercept and a few others, including poke-and-hope, spray-and-pray, etc. Each of these approaches is capable of getting the shooter's muzzles in front of a target. And just like the angler who wants to select the best fly color, a sporting clays shooter should also want to select the best technique for each presentation.

What is important to understand is that it is the fish who decides which color fly will work best on that day. Presenting the wrong color fly will not catch as many fish. In fact, it might actually scare the fish off. The same is equally true for the sporting clays shooter in that it is the target that decides which shooting technique will work best. Use the wrong one and your success rate will go down.



▲ Getting a good read on a target is crucial to understanding if or how the lead is changing throughout the target trajectory.

Every shooter has a default shooting technique. It might be one that they were taught early in their shooting career, or it might be just what they did naturally when they first attempted to hit a moving target. This default shooting method is where most sporting clays shooters begin. They only have one method of establishing lead on a target, and they use it on most all of their targets. This approach serves them well in the beginning and might even get them punched up a class or two. But at some point, their default shooting technique will no longer generate higher and higher scores. Thus, the use of a single shooting method is a reason why a lot of shooters stall out somewhere in the middle classes.

There are several commonly used shooting techniques, and each one has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. In order to consistently break all of the various presentations seen on a course, a shooter should learn to select and execute a method that best matches what the target is doing. Put another way, the shooter can minimize his risk by matching muzzle behavior to target behavior.

So, what is target behavior? Target behavior is determined by the target setter and is broadly grouped into three buckets. The first are targets that can be shot with a relatively constant amount of lead, such as a perpendicular crosser. Second are targets that require an ever-increasing amount of lead, such as a rapidly falling target. Third are targets that require an ever-decreasing amount of lead, such as a rapidly climbing target. Each of these types of targets has one or more shooting techniques that matches the target behavior. Equally, they each have one or more shooting techniques that should be avoided because muzzle behavior will be in conflict with the target. A shooter should choose wisely, because an error here will set him up for failure.

Let's start with the crossing target. A perfect example of this would be a skeet target at station 4. This target travels across the sky at a relatively constant velocity (behavior number one). Therefore, the best technique for shooting this target is one that exhibits a similar behavior. This is why almost all skeet shooters use a maintained lead technique for this target. The barrels are in perfect rhythm with the target, so it is the lowest-risk method. If the shooter's trigger release is a little early or late, the target will usually still break.

One can also attempt a crossing target with a pull-away or swing-through technique, but the risk to the shooter goes up, as both of these techniques are timing critical approaches. If the shooter's trigger release is only slightly early or late, the target might be missed — so why risk it?

The one technique that should never be used for this type of target is any form of decreasing lead. The last thing you want to do on a constant velocity target is to let your barrels stall out.

Now, let's discuss the targets that require an ever-increasing amount of lead (behavior number two). An example of this is a target that is quartering in toward the shooter. The longer this target is in the air, the more lead it needs, as the angle between the shooter and the target is ever-increasing. Therefore, we want our barrels to behave in the same manner. This target is best shot with a pull-away or swing-through technique, as both of these approaches generate increasing lead. These approaches both work equally well for any target that is accelerating downward due to gravity.

However, for targets that require an ever-increasing amount of lead, one should not attempt them with a maintained lead or decreasing-type lead. For example, a shooter should not attempt a dropping target with one of these techniques. Both of these approaches will quite predictably result in misses behind the target. Simply put, the barrel behavior for these techniques will be in conflict with this target behavior.

Finally, let's discuss targets that require an ever-decreasing amount of lead (behavior number three). An example of this is a target that is quartering away from the shooter. The longer this target is in the air, the less lead it needs, as the angle between the shooter and the target is ever-decreasing. Again, we want our barrels to behave in the same manner. This target is best shot with a collapsing lead or intercept method, as both of these techniques match what the target is doing. These are also good techniques to use for any target that is decelerating rapidly due to the downward pull of gravity.

So, what happens if a shooter attempts a target that requires an ever-decreasing amount of lead with one of the other techniques? For example, if one attempts a quartering-away target with a swing-through or pull-away technique that increasingly generates lead, the barrel behavior will be in conflict with the target behavior and the shooter will quite often miss in front of the target. This is the most common miss on this type of target; it is caused by failure to match the correct shooting technique to the presentation.

Using this set of guidelines, let's take a quick test. The target setter has set up a springing teal about 30 yards directly in front of you. The target is thrown straight up with an above-average launch velocity. The question is, which shooting technique should you use? Hmmm. You're right. It depends upon your break point. If you shoot it on the way up, the target is decelerating. If you shoot it on the way down, it is accelerating. If you shoot it at the top, it is briefly stationary. So, in this example, you would select three different shooting techniques based upon your selected break point.



▲ Barrel behavior must match target behavior. If the lead is constant, maintained lead works best. If the lead is ever-increasing, like on a falling target, swing-through or pull-away works very well.

Therefore, break points and technique selection are integrally tied together. What a target is doing early in its flight might be totally different than what it is doing late in its flight, and usually is. Think about springing teal, chandelles or battues. Where you attempt a target is part of the behavior-matching process. This is where shot planning comes in. You can modify your break points and shot sequencing to play to your strengths. And remember, if you attempt a target with a given technique but fail to commit to the break point, then the wheels fall off the wagon.



▼ Read targets carefully to determine the technique you should use to break each one.

Given the above, there is a simple three-step approach to building all of this into your game. The first step is identifying what color insects the fish are eating that day. The second step is to select an appropriately colored fly. The third step is to present that fly to the fish. Sound easy?

Identify, select and implement. By matching the hatch with the best shooting technique for the given presentation and selected break point, a shooter can fill his creel with X's. Just remember, it's the fish who gets to choose the technique. CTN

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