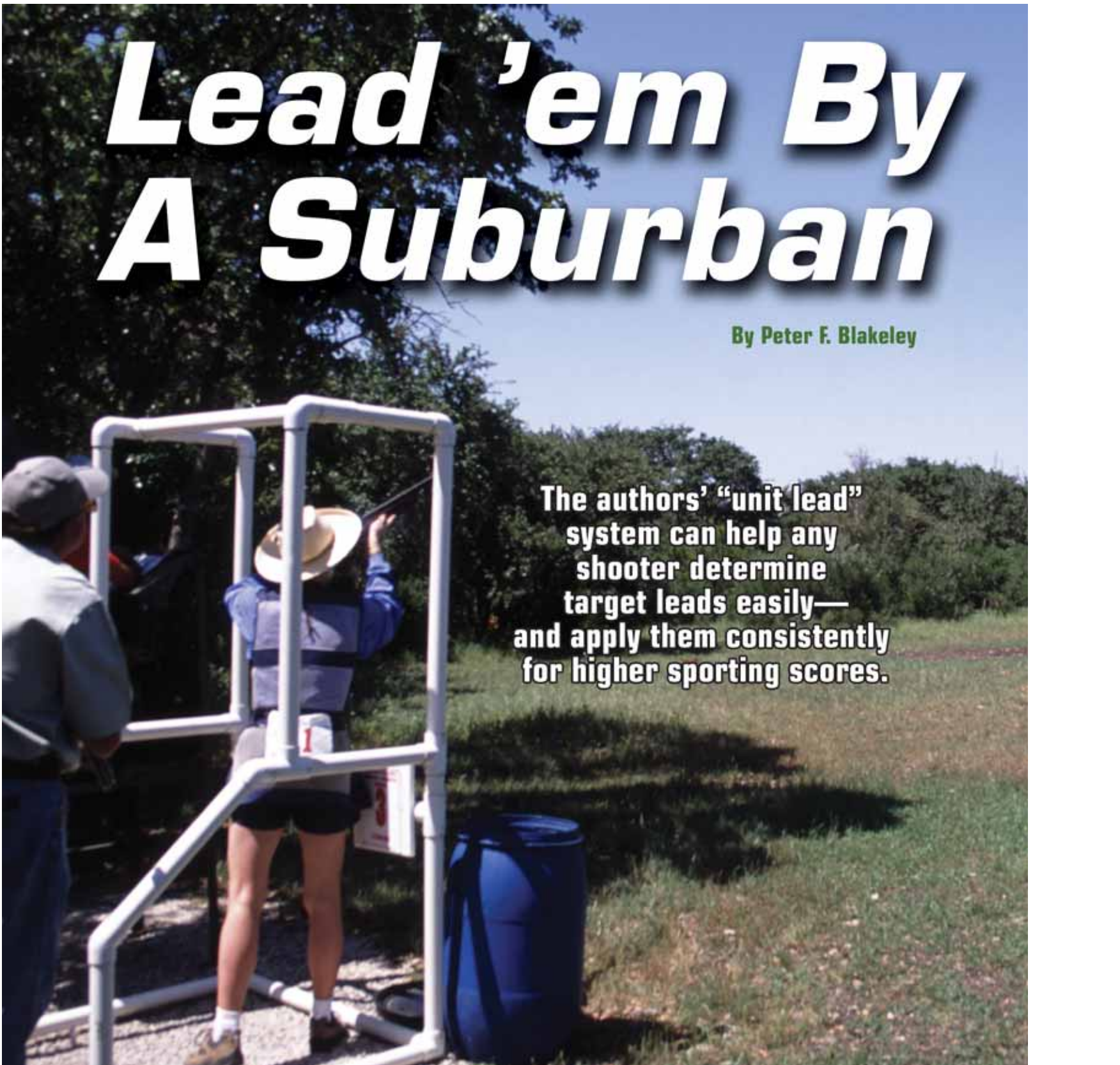


Lead 'em By A Suburban

By Peter F. Blakeley



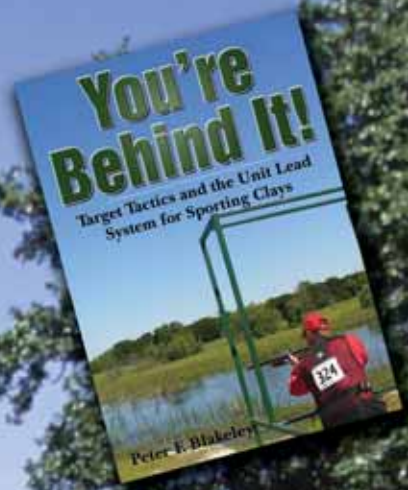
The authors' "unit lead" system can help any shooter determine target leads easily—and apply them consistently for higher sporting scores.

Sporting clays, with its diversity of target presentations, is an exciting, addicting game where so many of us thrive on the predictable unpredictability of it all. Gluttons for the inevitable punishment, we may get our proverbial butts kicked by the target setters occasionally, but we still come back for more. The adrenaline rush, the congenial camaraderie, we all love doing it, and we all strive to be better.

Over a period of time, in our aspiring efforts to be the next George Digweed, we assemble all the tangibles, all the ingredi-

ent we need (or think we need) to be a world champion. As our shotgun technique improves, we learn to control the gun better. We shoot other guns, and we become more aware of what feels right to our physical capabilities.

Eventually, perhaps at the end of that first season, we experience an overwhelming desire to abandon the "starter-pack" gun—which now feels as though it moves about as smoothly as a pig on a shovel—in favor of something more suitable. So we remortgage the house, suck up to our spouse big time, and eventually our desires become satiated. We finally acquire a



Understanding The "Unit Lead" System

If you do the calculations on a 50-yard full crosser traveling at approximately 40 mph, you need about 12 feet or so of lead. If you tell a shooter (especially a new one) to shoot 12 feet in front of the target, he won't have a clue what you're talking about. But if you teach him what a "unit" looks like at the muzzle end and then tell him to shoot six units in front of the target, he will break it every time.

Once you understand what a unit is, you can then apply multiples of units to each target, regardless of the range. For example, the lead seen at the muzzle on what I call a "narrow-angle" target at 20 yards is about 0.7". The lead seen at the muzzle on the same narrow-angle target at 60 yards is about 0.95", only 1/4" more. If you apply one unit (about 0.75"), the narrow-angle target will break at all the ranges from 20 yards out to 60 yards. It sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? The reason it works is that your shot pattern is about 24" to 30" wide, so you have a margin for error. Also, on the angle shots (not the full crossers), range is inconsequential.

On an incoming target that is at a narrow angle, or approximately 15 degrees to our shooting position, for example station low one on a skeet field, give it a one-unit lead at the muzzle at a range of 20 yards, and the target will break. If we then have another target at the same angle to our shooting position, let's say one coming from a high tower that is 60 yards away, and again we give this target a one-unit lead at the muzzle, it will also break.

The need to evaluate range when using this system is inconsequential on all of the angle shots. Think of the spokes of a bicycle wheel. If we are standing in the center of the wheel and we draw two imaginary lines, one from the pupil of our master eye and the other along the rib of the gun out to the target, the lines will diverge as the range increases. This means, in effect, that if we give a narrow-angle target a small amount of lead at the muzzle, the lead at the target will automatically increase out there at the target as the range increases. The one-unit lead at the muzzle will still break the target at 50-60 yards.

new toy's handling dynamics and the old fence post starter gun that has now been relegated to the consignment shelf of the local gun store as we repeatedly track and slash at imaginary targets. We close our eyes as we shoulder it, and as we open them, we are triumphantly exuberant, smugly confident that our master eye is always positioned so precisely along the rib.

There's practice, practice, and more practice until one day, we just know we have it down. Yep, that's it, we think triumphantly, perfect mechanics. This year we will emerge, like the super hero from the phone booth, as Captain Krieghoff, champion of the sporting clays course. To complement the new gun (we have to look the part, don't we?), a new shooting vest follows, and if funds will allow, perhaps a motorized cart. So now, armed with our new purchases, we are ready to venture forth into the sporting clay shark tank to crush all the opposition. Or so we think.

The great day arrives. Resplendent in our new shooting vest and proud of our new gear, we go to the first tournament of the season with our buddies. The weather's great, and you lick your lips in anticipation. It's a 200-target event. Gotta' stay focused, you think. At the end of the day, you shoot an 81 on the first course and 79 on the second. It's a good score in anyone's book, but you still feel as though you missed too many targets. Although you don't show it, there is a glimmer of disappointment hidden behind your smile as you accept the shell pouch and trophy.

So what went wrong? Sometimes when we miss, we know why. A sloppy mount, a head lift, a brain-fart lapse of concentration. But often we don't. Shooting coaches in the UK have a saying: "What's hit is history, what's missed is mystery." Very true. So after the tournament on the long drive home, you kick around the day's targets in your head. But you still didn't really understand why the 50-yard crosser (that nearly everyone missed) needed so much lead. You still couldn't figure out why you had to be so far underneath the dropping teal to break it.

Years ago, an experienced shooter made this rather flippant remark to me: "Shooting a shotgun is easy. All we need to do is get a gun that fits us and shoot in front of the target." Simple. Why didn't I think of that? He was correct, up to a point. But just *how* far in front? Ah, yes, that's the problem; that's always the problem. Lead, forward allowance, seeing a gap, call it what you will. Since sportsmen used crude shotguns to intercept moving targets centuries ago, more has been written about one subject than any other—forward allowance. For most shotgunners, the illusive element of lead is always a frustration factor, and identifying the correct amount we must shoot in front of a target is our stumbling block.

In bird hunting situations, the application of the correct amount of lead is less important. Why? Because game birds aren't predictable. When we hunt, the hardest thing is deciding what the bird will do and when it will do it, and they never do the same thing twice, do they? Most good wingshots would be ecstatic with a 50% average. Would they be pleased with the same average on sporting clays? I doubt it.

With competitive target shooting, we need to visually measure a specific distance in front of the target and pull the trigger when this sight picture looks right to us. Then, if the target breaks, we need to remember what we saw and repeat the process. Our gun speed, timing, and visual measurement must be exactly the same if we are to be consistent.

Visual measurement? Is measurement the correct word to use here? I believe so. All shotgun shooting is a game of

gun that fits like a glove and responds to our physical capabilities with a fluid and gracefully flowing elegance. Playing with the new purchase almost takes on a clandestine significance as, hidden away from the rest of the family members in our den or bedroom, garage or whatever, we drool unashamedly over its well-figured walnut and sleek contours.

Oh, man, his new gun just feels so good, doesn't it? Practice makes permanent, we are told, so we diligently practice our mount and swing until it becomes spontaneous. We familiarize ourselves with the subtle differences between this



It is easier to apply lead up closer at the muzzle end than way out at the target, especially in the early stages of learning to shoot.

measuring. But don't confuse this "measuring" with looking at the gun or bead. The muzzle of the gun must be positioned by peripheral positioning, nothing more. A glance back at the bead, however fleeting, spells disaster for the successful shotgunner.

The correct lead, or the visual gap we need between the target and the muzzle of the gun as we trigger the shot, is determined by three factors: speed, angle, and distance. Our boring, mundane lives are filled with everyday situations where we routinely apply these three variables without even thinking. As we drive a car, for example, we quickly develop the ability to match our speed with surrounding traffic so we can slide accurately into the flow without incident. We also learn to park the vehicle into tight spaces. We learn to judge the distances between the brick pillars of the garage so that we can drive in and out without mishap. Visual measurement is the same. There are dozens of other situations that require us to judge speed, angle, and distance. Consider the golfer judging the perfect putt or the punter judging how near the ball he is before he kicks it.

Try this experiment. Knock two stakes into the ground at a reasonable distance, perhaps 30 to 40 yards, with one stake a few feet away from the other one. Then ask several shooters to quickly glance at the stakes, then look away and guess how far apart they think they are. My guess is, you will get wildly conflicting answers, with variations in some cases as much as several feet. Then, ask each shooter to indicate to you what they think an inch is. My guess is that they will separate their thumb and forefinger a specific distance apart and give a reasonably accurate measurement.

My point is that it is easier to apply lead up closer at the muzzle end than way out at the target, especially in the early stages of learning to shoot. The reason for this is twofold: the effects of range and perspective. Evaluating range is important because it simply takes pellets longer to get to the target as range increases, but the effect of perspective on our lead evaluation is more complicated.


The definition of perspective is "the effect of distance on the appearance of objects, by which the eye judges spatial relationships." Simply put, try telling a shooter that he needs to give a full-crossing target traveling at 40 mph at a range of 50 yards about 12 feet of lead, and he will find it difficult to comprehend—and that's exactly why the good ol' long crosser is everyone's nemesis.

At extended range, judging the lead required is more difficult for many of us. "Lead 'em by a Suburban" is just a way that competitors communicate to each other that this particular target needs loads of lead. But there is a way to simplify the lead requirement on every target on a sporting clays course, even the long crosser. I call it the "unit lead" system. By using this system, we can simplify lead requirements by applying a specific number of units of lead at the muzzle end instead of attempting to calculate the correct amount of forward allowance in feet or yards out there at the target. Amazingly, on angle shots, once this system is learned, this unit lead measurement at the muzzle will also break the same target at the same angle at 20, 30, 40, and 50 yards. It seems almost too good to be true, doesn't it?

"The muzzle of the gun must be positioned by peripheral positioning, nothing more. A glance back at the bead, however fleeting, spells disaster for the successful shotgunner."

My just-released book *You're Behind It!* was written specifically for the confused but motivated sporting clays shooter who struggles with target evaluation. Does it actually work? Absolutely, but there will be lots of shooters out there who will view the introduction of a "new" shooting method with suspicion and skepticism, and who can blame them? The world is full of so-called experts who write how-to books and articles full of spurious claims that promise to turn us into overnight champions. But this system is different. It does what it says. Reading targets correctly is the application of basic trigonometry and ballistic science, nothing more, and we can all learn to do it.

I've spent the last 30 years as a full-time shooting coach carefully analyzing what does and does not work, compiling this information into a logical system. This book is both the accumulation and informative distillation of my coaching techniques that I have tried to compile in a way that is easily understood. I break down the components of lead into easy-to-understand, bite-size pieces. Once you digest the contents, *You're Behind It!* will teach you how to apply the correct amount of lead to every target you'll encounter.

The unit lead method isn't new to my students. I have developed and perfected it over many years. By applying it, many of my students punch into Master class very quickly. At the other end of the spectrum, new shooters also find that they can relate to the system very easily. Ten-year old Daniel Pugh from Fort Worth, Texas, first came to me this February, the first time he picked up a shotgun. By May, he was HOA champion in a local event. He placed first in the skeet event (he now shoots 25 straights in skeet), first in the trap event, and was beaten by one target in the 5-Stand event by an older and more experienced shooter. Not bad, eh? 

The author's just-released book, You're Behind It!, is a specialist target-reading guide for the experienced sporting clays competitor. It's a great companion to Blakeley's earlier book, Successful Shotgunning, which less-experienced shot-gunners in particular will find useful before digesting You're Behind It! More information on these books is available at www.peteblakeley.com.

©Reprinted with permission from the November 2007 issue of *Sporting Clays magazine*.