

The Sharpest Arrow.

“Where would you like to eat to-night?” My wife Alison posed the question, “the usual?”

“That’s fine by me” I replied, but her question started me thinking. We live in an area just outside Dallas where excellent eateries were in abundance. So why, with such a dazzling array of them at our disposal, did we go back to eat at the same place time after time? Most of us, when we are confronted with the everyday tasks that fill our mundane lives eventually accept certain situations and more or less become creatures of habit. But there are other situations where we learn to become more discerning and selective. Take your favorite restaurant as an example. We order a steak and we know as soon as we have eaten it if it was an enjoyable experience or not. If it was a good steak, we go back for more. If it was a disappointment, we don’t. It’s that simple, or it should be. So what exactly have eating establishments got to do with shooting lessons? Let me explain.

I came over here from the UK in 1997 and during the last eight years that I have been here time I have witnessed many changes to the shooting industry, especially the sporting claying clays industry. The first is the apparently insatiable appetite the US has for sporting clays. The interest in the game has continued to gather momentum like a rock rolling down a ravine. Without wishing to sound too negative in any way, I am surprised by this. Pleasantly surprised too, I might add, because despite the recent economic bumps in the roads and kickback with the economy, there has been no noticeable deceleration of interest, in fact just the opposite still seems to be happening. Luckily for me and others like me who “earn their corn” by coaching and by installing courses, as this thirst for success on the sporting clay course continues, so too does the demand for quality shooting instruction.

In the UK, shooting schools were developed over 100 years ago. In Victorian and Edwardian times on the great estates, elaborate pheasant shoots, where vast quantities of birds were raised in pens and “driven” over the waiting guns, were becoming more popular. It became fashionable to attend them and they quickly became hub of the upper-class society. Eventually these shoots became social extravaganzas, with lots of pomp and ceremony thrown in and soon a competitive flavor began to emerge. If Lord So-and-So’s men could hit more birds and beat the pants off Lord Bee-Knees men, so much the better. There were many newcomers to this newfound sport, mostly from the well-to-do middle classes. Until then, there was no need for these newcomers, who had no rural traditions or ways to pass on shooting skills, to demonstrate their prowess with a shotgun. But then, as the fashion demanded, if they were not to embarrass themselves in front of their superiors, they all needed to be taught the art and science of successful shotgunning. So now there was a real need to learn to shoot straight and the shooting school evolved as a result. Shooting coaches who were experienced enough to pass on their techniques were employed there. The London gun makers were quick to see this niche market and soon, especially around the fringes of London, more shooting grounds and schools began to emerge. Some of these, like the West London Shooting School, that was established over 100 years ago in 1901, still exist today.

Here in the US, I believe that the interest in sporting clays has had the same effect as driven pheasant hunts had on the shooting fraternity in the UK a century ago. Today in the US, the game of sporting clays is very fashionable, sociably acceptable and becoming more so every year. At corporate events and sporting clay tournaments events, participants like to do well and now shooting schools are springing up like flowers in a roadside ditch. But this wasn't always the case. Not so long ago most red-blooded, gun wielding American hunters would experience shudders of indignation and some sort of psychosis when it came to taking instruction. When you were a kid, if your father shot, you went with him on the dove hunting trips. You could hardly lift the gun, could you? But you loved to go. And he always got his limit didn't he? It may have taken him six boxes to get there, but what the heck? And what about Grandpappy? You listened wide-eyed as your Pa told you all the nostalgic tales about Grandpappy. Yeah, Granpappy was a great shot, a natural, wasn't he? So why should you take shooting lessons? Don't forget, most times, Grandpappy became a good shot out of necessity. When the grumbling in his belly reached epic proportions, out came the shotgun, or rifle as he case maybe and Grand pappy's hunger was appeased. There was little need for formal instruction in those days. But here we are in 2004 and competitive shot gunning, especially the introduction of sporting clays as a way to hone bird-hunting skills has changed all that. As shooters strive for shotgun success, the need for quality instruction here has increased accordingly over the last decade or so.

The NSCA instructor certification program in the US was spawned to cope with this demand. The program is divided into the three different categories to give some indication of what level of instruction to expect when employing one of these certified coaches. Many years ago I attended the equivalent of this program in the UK, the Clay Pigeon Shooting Association certification, the British Field Sports Society certification and I am also a member of the Institute of Clay Shooting Instructors which required at that time, written proof that I had an active involvement in the shooting sports for at least 15 years. But beware. Certification is not the most important thing and I know some coaches, certified at top level, who struggle to get a new shooter to break simple targets. I know others who have no formal training, who can accomplish the same task with apparent ease. Some people get into coaching for what I consider to be the wrong reasons. I had an interesting conversation with a certified coach recently who had only been shooting for a short time, less than six months. This recently retired guy proudly told me that the only reason he decided to get his certification was to supplement his pension plan!

One of the myths that exist in the shooting world is that in order to be a top coach, you need to be a top shooter. Not necessarily and let me explain why. Many of the top shooters in the world today know precisely what they need to see as they trigger a shot. They have to. There is always someone waiting in the wings to step into their shoes and fill the top slot if they don't. But although they may have the ability to do this, many of them do not have the ability to get this information target and breaking ability across to a student *in a way that he can understand*. Communication is the key here. I shot with

many top level Scottish Internationals before I came over here, some of them excellent shots, but most of them lacked the ability to communicate with a student. Ah, ha! I hear you say. The old “those that can do, those that can’t teach” scenario. This guys making excuses. He doesn’t compete at top level because he can’t shoot. Not so. If that were the case, Tiger Wood’s golf coach would have the ability to beat him any day, wouldn’t he? There is a huge difference between coaching at top level and competing at top level. But I do firmly believe that a top coach, one that is capable of instructing master class competitors, should be able to convincingly demonstrate to a client just exactly how a particular problem target should be broken, with his own gun of course. This means literally *any* target that falls within acceptable ballistic limitations, 70-yard crossers, and 60-yard battues, curling chandelles, the whole nine yards. If he can’t do this, why would he consider himself capable of smoothing out the bumps in the road when he’s instructing top-level shooters?

So now, with the multitude of certified coaches out there, just where does the aspiring sporting clay champion make a start with choosing one that will enhance and improve his latent talents? Personal recommendations are often the best way, but even here, the guidelines are sometimes not quite as well defined as they might be. Sometimes, especially with a top-level competitor, some guys prefer to be secretive when they take formal instruction. And why wouldn’t they? The shooter struggles with a particular target, his coach gives him the recipe to crush that target, does he go back and tell his shooting buddies how to do it? What do you think? The end product of taking lessons in the first place is to become a more accomplished and competent shooter and beat the other guys, isn’t it? So, here are some things for the aspiring Sporting Clay champion to consider as he picks his way through the coaching minefield.

I believe the top coach should have a magnitude of involvement in the shooting industry. His experience level should be long, high and wide. He should be a mine of technical and practical information and also be an excellent shot. I believe experience should be the sharpest arrow in his quiver. His communication skills should be beyond reproach and he should be able to quickly strike up a rapport with any client, at any proficiency level. The top coach will get a new shooter to break targets quickly. He should; a new recruit is a blank canvas, no detoxification process is necessary to remove bad habits. Oh yes, probably the most important thing of all, a top coach should be prepared to give a refund to any dissatisfied client, without question, should the situation arise. In the famous words of John McEnroe, “You can’t be serious?” Absolutely. The top guys demand top dollar and they deserve it. These are the guys that make their living by coaching, it is their only income and client satisfaction should be the prime consideration. Don’t forget, a list of successful students is one of the best billboards there is. Without results, a top-level coach doesn’t stay on top of the heap for long. A top coach gets to the top by honing and refining his skills over many, many years, until he has a formidable repertoire of fixes at his disposal. He knows exactly what is the best medicine for each particular client to such an extent that he can improve any shooter at any level. That’s a bold shout isn’t it, *any* shooter at *any* level? Absolutely again. The student makes his commitment by paying the coach top dollar for his services. But this should cut both ways. If the coach can’t deliver the goods and make some improvements

to the shooters skill level, he should in return, be prepared to refund the clients money. Lessons are expensive; taking them is a progressive thing and there should be *noticeable* improvement with each lesson. It's that simple. Several years ago I wrote an article that appeared in this magazine and in it I said that a visit to coach should bring desired results, if not change your coach. I still stand by what I said in that article and I feel that top coaches should give a guarantee on results. Some of us do. If the student can't hit the target it must be the instructors fault.

So if you do decide to invest in lessons, think about this. After the first one, were you happy with the result? Did you feel in your own mind that you had learned something? You should know if you did or not. Because if you didn't, don't forget you have a choice and just like the disappointing steak at your favorite restaurant, perhaps you should think about eating somewhere else.

Since 1998, Pete Blakeley was the shooting coach at one of the most elaborate and prestigious gun clubs the world, the Dallas Gun Club in Lewisville, Texas. Now in 2004 he hosts clinics at various locations throughout the US. His recently released book "Successful Shotgunning" (published by Stackpole Books September 2003) is considered by many to be the most elaborate and definitive guide to shotgunning ever written. For more information or to schedule a lesson, click on his web. site at www.peteblakeley.com or contact him at 940-321-4997.