

Eye Dominance revisited.

Several years ago I wrote an article on eye dominance that appeared in the November 2000 issue of the magazine. As a result, I received many letters and phone calls from delighted sporting clay competitors who tried what I suggested and saw a marked improvement in their game. Now several years later judging by the number of posts on the various shooting web sites, it would appear that there are still many shooters out there who do not fully understand the importance of correctly diagnosing eye dominance and more importantly why (in a competitive environment) even when the correct diagnosis is made, some shooters can often benefit from closing the “off” eye i.e. the one not above the rib as they trigger the shot. Notice that I say “in a competitive environment” because this is the important part. So why exactly, do some shooters think that they can abandon accurate master eye diagnoses and still optimize their shooting performance? There are a variety of reasons but the two main ones are (dare I say it!)

1. Incorrect diagnosis in the first instance place.
2. A reluctance to do anything different even when a correct diagnosis is made, especially if the guy is a long time bird hunter and he is entering the competitive environment of the sporting clay arena for the first time.

Sporting clays is still gathering momentum here in the US and corporate hospitality shoots are now big business for many sporting clay facilities. We do lots of corporate entertainment events and charity fundraisers here at the Elm Fork Shooting Park in Dallas and it is often through this medium that many long time hunters make the natural progression from bird hunting in the field to the competitive environment of the sporting clays course. And who can blame them? Show me the guy who drools unashamedly over sporting firearms, licks his lips in eager anticipation of the fast approaching dove season then won't admit that (after his first taste on the sporting course) he hasn't become seriously infected with the sporting clay bug. No close season, same camaraderie with congenial folks and lots of fun. And of course it's good practice for the real thing isn't it? Absolutely. But for some of them, there is a myth that persists with combining any sort of competitive shooting with bird hunting. For example, how many times have you heard some one say “old so-and-so is great live bird shot but he crashes and burns on the skeet field or sporting clays course?” alternatively, “I don't shoot sporting clays because it ruins my bird-hunting skills”.

Recently and quite by accident at a corporate event, I think I found out why. Many bird hunters, sucked into the more competitive environment of the sporting clays course for the first time, often don't realize the importance of correct master eye diagnoses and who can blame them? One of the most prolific hunting writers, Jack O'Connor, suggested that in bird hunting situations it was essential to keep both eyes open so that we retain full peripheral vision (an obvious advantage in the field), full stereopsis (or depth perception) and full binocular vision and that master eye diagnosis was inconsequential in a hunting situation. Other more recent writers in the past have suggested the same thing and (although we may get away with doing this in a bird hunting situations) in a competitive environment this advice is incorrect.

I feel that most shooting enthusiasts fit into two categories. The first is the avid bird hunter who has probably shot for many years. He joins a gun club on a whim but only uses the facility sporadically, usually a few days before the start of hunting season to “get his eye in”. He is a purely recreational shooter and he is genuinely happy breaking 50%-60% of skeet, trap or sporting clay targets on his home ground and as the season permits, he goes on the occasional quail, dove and duck hunt. The

second is the fiercely competitive sporting clay enthusiast who reads magazines like this one. Often the 1st guy, as amazing as it may seem, even with all the readily available information on the subject nowadays, will have absolutely no idea what eye dominance is. It is only when he (or she) decides to move up a notch and enter a local tournament, fun shoot or charity fundraiser that they begin to have problems with their consistency. Don't forget that high scores are the product of consistency. These same guys then become hooked on sporting clays and although they enter hunter class and shoot a reasonable score, they become frustrated as they strive for new levels. The avid dove, duck or quail hunter may shoot his six or seven in the safety cage but doesn't really understand why his competitive buddy shoots a ten.

So he goes through the checklist. Primarily, he will focus on the tangibles, the accessories and cosmetic paraphernalia are first on the hit list. The new gun, the adjustable comb, the shooting glasses with multicolored interchangeable lenses, the set of chokes. Next comes correct gunfit, stance, mount, the improved mechanics and muzzle management exercises. The list is endless and all these things will certainly help. He will notice an improvement but his scores are still "patchy" and sporadic. So what's the problem? In many cases the one thing that is often overlooked, that one thing that may contribute more than anything else to this frustration and failure to improve can be an ocular dominance one. The wheels will continue to come off big time if any visual problem however slight, continues to be ignored. Eyesight, the most complex of the senses must be used to maximum potential if we are to achieve mechanical excellence and put the barrels in the right place and we can only *consistently* break targets by accurately converting this visual information into physical effort to do this. Our eyes and the gun must work as a team if we are to achieve this.

What often happens is this. We do a simple eye dominance test and usually, this will give us a clear indication of which eye is the dominant eye. So now we fall into the trap of thinking that if we are a right shouldered shooter, with a right master eye, we can leave both eyes open and shoot successfully, don't we? With a strongly dominant right eye we can. However, if the dominance is weak, we may have problems in certain circumstances, on certain targets, the left eye may be persuaded to take over. This problem often manifests itself on the left to right crossing shot, (right shouldered, right master eyed shooter) because the target will be acquired by the left eye first. The problem is compounded especially if the gun is an over & under because the dominant visual impression is the one that the left eye sees of the stacked barrels. If the dominance is slight, the dominant visual impression of the broad sighting plane of the S x S can influence the dominant eye to the extent that a reasonably clear target/barrel relationship is seen and the shot will be successful. The type rib on a shotgun and amazingly, certain light conditions also, ie. strong sunlight from one side or the other of the barrels, can influence a clear target/barrel relationship. This is why some people can benefit from using a "glo-dot" especially the type that is only visible to the eye above the rib.

Of course, in many bird-hunting situations we may be blissfully unaware that a problem like this even exists. In bird-hunting situations the difficult part is deciding exactly what the bird will do and when it will decide to do it and none of the feathered variety of targets gives us the luxury of doing exactly the same thing twice for our benefit. In other words, because of these limitless variables of line, speed, angle and range that we experience with feathered quarry the shot will never be necessary to *exactly* replicate the shot the bird is either hit or it isn't. Most bird hunters accept without question the more-than-occasionally missed bird and most are more than happy with mediocre success in the dove fields or on the quail hunt. But the same isn't true of the clay target competitor and in a competitive environment an exact target/barrel relationship must be established if we are to be consistent.

The confusion arises when we attempt to assess the degree or strength of the dominance. I say “attempt” for a good reason, because this is far from straight forward, especially if the dominance is only slight. In an effort to explain or better still, to try to demonstrate this, if we focus on a distant object (with both eyes open) and then point at it with an index finger, we will see a “ghost image” of two fingers, in other words we will see TWO images of the one finger. This is something called *diplopia* and it is normal to see this when using our binocular vision. One of these images will appear to be slightly clearer i.e. the stronger of the images will be the one that the dominant eye picks out, the slightly less clear image will be the one that the sub dominant eye sees. It may take a few attempts before you see what I mean with this you will see there are still two images there, central to our line of vision. Under normal circumstances, with strong dominance in one eye, the brain will ignore the weaker of the two images. When looking at an object in the distance (depending on the degree of dominance) we will experience something known as *crossed diplopia* and here, the finger seen by the left eye will be to the right, the finger seen by the right eye is to the left. So, in a competitive shooting situation, (as we then substitute our shotgun barrel for the finger), which one do we use for the correct target/barrel relationship as we trigger the shot? Good question. Of course closing one eye and then the other will mean that the finger will remain in line with the object depending which eye is the dominant one but on occasion, (if we insist on keeping both eyes open as we shoot) this is not as well defined as it might be and this is when we experience problems and miss the target. We break targets by applying an accurate conversion of visual information into a corresponding physical one to put the barrels in the right place and any confusion with the selection of the correct sight picture will result in inconsistency.

So what conclusions can we come to with all this? In a competitive environment, there is simply no substitute for making sure that the eye above the rib is the one we are using for the correct target/barrel relationship as we trigger the shot. As an example of this, there is a lady skeet shooter, Ellen Nelms, at the Dallas Gun Club, one of the best in the world. An eye dominance test reveals that Ellen is definitely right eye dominant, but she still wears a strip of tape on the left lens of her shooting glasses because she knows that on occasion her “off eye” may kick in and she may shoot down the side of the target as a result. So what do I recommend? Only the guy who triggers the shot knows what he sees. We may use our eyes to aim but our success with a shotgun, even more so in a competitive environment, depends on what we do with what we see. The only way we can be consistent is if the eye above the rib is the one we are using for the correct target/barrel relationship so if there is any hint that your inconsistency may be caused by weak dominance, try this. Acquire the target with both eyes open. By doing this we have retained everything that nature has given us, full peripheral, full stereopsis and full binocular vision. Close the “off” eye a split second before the shot is taken, just as the correct target/barrel relationship is seen. Unfortunately, some shooters abandon objectivity and often display a stubborn reluctance to try this because the myth still exists that we must shoot with both eyes open. But if we can be more consistent in a *competitive* environment by closing the off eye, why not give it a try?

Since 1998, Pete Blakeley was the shooting coach at one of the most elaborate and prestigious gun clubs in 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.