

What's hit is history, what's missed is mystery.

The amusing title of this article is a saying that many coaches in the UK use. For some of us, the reason a target fails to break is often exactly that. Mystery. But it's never a mystery for the top guys. Let me explain. I have always stressed to my students that the majority of targets are not missed (within reason), from the results of ballistic incompetence. They are missed because of plain old pilot error, we simply fail to put the barrels in the right place as we trigger the shot. After a sporting clay event, I often make a copy of a client's scorecard so that when he comes for his next lesson we can both analyze it. I made a comment to one of these clients that I could often tell (by the way the scores were marked on the card) if the shooter was shooting "instinctively" or "intuitively" because there is often confusion between the two. The client asked me to explain what I meant by this.

The dictionary defines instinct as "the ability to perform certain functions *without training*." Intuitive is defined as "the application of *knowledge* to reach a conclusion, without resorting to rigorous logic or analysis". The key words with the first definition are *without training*. With the second, the key words are *the application of knowledge*. We hear a great deal nowadays about "instinctive" shooting. Trust your instincts. Some bird hunting is instinctive, reflexive shotgunning and many bird hunters are good instinctive shooters on the close shots. But for the majority of shots, clay target shooting is not instinctive and for the competitive environment, "intuitive" would be a better choice of words. I have never, for example, in many years as a shooting instructor, seen anyone *consistently* "instinctively" break a long target and we're talking about 40 yards plus targets here. Believe me, it just doesn't happen. I have never seen anyone show any sort of consistency by *instinctively* break a curling chondelle or a dropping teal. Of course they may manage to hit it occasionally, but then, that's not really the same is it? Not if you expect to win it isn't. But they can *learn* to do it.

To illustrate this point let's consider the case of two aspiring sporting clay champions. Shooter number one is our instinctive shooter. Of course he's done this sporting clay game before, he's a great quail hunter, a reasonable dove shot and he's had his moments with a shotgun in the duck blind too. He enters the temporary confinement of the safety cage and asks to see a pair. Without any hesitation, he loads up, calls for the targets and confidently crushes them. So far so good, that was easy wasn't it? Or so he thinks. Next pair, dead, lost. Next pair, lost, dead. Now he's frustrated. On the remaining two pairs he only breaks one more target and exits the safety cage with a five. Does this sound familiar to some of you? Next the intuitive shooter gets into the cage. He considers each target carefully. He's shot sporting clays for a few years and things are coming together nicely. He's a dedicated guy; he lives for his next tournament and if he decides to do something, he likes to do it well. He confidently breaks his first pair. Next pair dead, lost. He slowly opens the gun but before hurriedly calling for his next pair of targets, he pauses for a moment. Still pensive, he drops two more shells into the chamber and closes the action with a satisfying *clunk*. With the next two targets, he's right in the middle of both of them and the scorer's voice sings out with a gratifying "Dead a pair!" It's the same result with the next pair and the next. In fact he systematically destroys the remaining targets with apparent ease. Lots of hand slapping from his buddies and our intuitive shooter comes out of the cage with a nine.

So what was the difference? The instinctive shooter puts his gun somewhere in the vicinity of the target and hopes for the best. Sure, he knows that moving targets requires some lead, but he's not *really* sure how much. It's a grey area for him, there was no game plan. He may have also noticed that that one of the targets had a subtle curl to it. Better shoot underneath it he thinks, but he's not really sure just how far

underneath. In other words, for most of his shots he was “poking and hoping”. Of course he does this most of the time when he’s bird hunting too and he gets his share so what’s the problem? The problem is that we are trying to compare apples with oranges here. The shotgun is a forgiving weapon and most of us are happy with 50% or less in hunting situations. Birds never do the same thing twice but targets do. Apart from the occasional puff of wind to slide the target slightly off its flight line, the targets are predictable. Amazingly, the top shooters will notice even this subtle nuance in the target’s behavior and they develop the ability to quickly change their sight picture and compensate. I often tell my students that they should remember what they see when they break the target because if they don’t they don’t know why they hit it and logically they don’t know why they missed it either. It’s simple logic isn’t it? If you miss, you must know why, so that you can adjust something with your game plan, otherwise you become really good at missing. And this is where the intuitive guy came into his own. He was more precise. He had to be, unlike the bird hunter, 50% on a sporting clay course just won’t cut the mustard. So he carefully re-evaluated the target, knew what he had to see to break it and triggered the shot only when he saw it. There was no mystery when the target broke. With the target he missed he knew exactly where he had gone wrong and applied a subtle adjustment to his sight picture. Over a period of time he had ironed the kinks out of his game and if he missed a particular target, he went back to his coach to find out why. Then, once his coach had explained him how to hit it and he was successful, this particular sight picture was filed away in his memory bank for another day. Of course all of us miss sometimes but it is rare for one of the better shooters to miss a target and continue to miss it. Some of the top shooters are just so good at doing this that you can watch them take the back edge off a target then re-adjust their sight picture slightly to be slap-bang in the middle of the next ones. In the UK we call this “tailoring” a target.

By this point some of you will be accusing me of splitting hairs with this but am I? Well, if I am, let’s think about something else. How many of you guys have made the trip to shoot doves in Argentina? As the birds fly in locust-like swarms across the soya bean and peanut fields, it is easy to become mesmerized and intimidated by the numbers and you “poke and hope” at them. You may be a good shot I’m willing to bet that you missed your first few birds didn’t you? The reason you missed was because you didn’t bother to evaluate them. Or perhaps you did hit a few but let’s be honest here, were some of these hits mainly by accident because there were so many birds? Then you begin to notice a flight pattern with the birds as they head in to the watering holes and quickly out again to their evening roost. You start to focus on one bird at a time, apply what you believe to be the correct amount of lead and suddenly you start to connect. You now shoot intuitively and you become grooved in with a particular shot it almost becomes monotonous, almost boring doesn’t it? So you start taking the birds 10 yards further out. Once again early success is “patchy” but then you become “grooved in” and the birds begin to crumple at the extended range. All that’s happening is your brain is becoming programmed and instead of a poke, you begin to apply intuitive logic to each shot. The only difference between a poke and hope shot and an intuitive judgment shot is a subtle adjustment of timing, a split second, just enough time to allow your brain to make visual sense of the target. And the good thing is, once we can apply intuitive logic to clay targets, the repertoire of sight pictures can then be applied to hunting.

In a competitive environment, some guys never learn to shoot intuitively and as a result never get the next level. Sure, they may routinely shoot in the 70% to 80% but then they hit a ceiling, struggling to break through to where the real goodies are. By a process of elimination they eventually figure some of the targets out on their home course and the “feel-good” factor, that “warm fuzzy feeling” of confidence will be a big boost to them. If they are purely recreational shooters, that’s fine but let’s be honest, none of us enjoy missing do we? Many of them will crash and burn big time as they go to a tournament at an unfamiliar location and enter the realm of the unknown. We only get out of this game what we’re prepared to put in. The real test of our skills is if we can shoot a good score with unfamiliar targets and in unfamiliar surroundings.

For those guys, let me say this. There is no mystery about reading targets and we can all learn to do it. Reading targets is the application of trigonometry and ballistic science. Before we attempt to shoot at a target we see on a sporting clay course we need to consider five things. The first is its trajectory, or line. Targets don’t fly in straight lines, they rise, there is a transitional period and they fall. The second thing is where we intend to shoot the target on this line. This is important and this is where most of us miss. Line is proportional to range and if you get the line wrong, you might as well forget about the lead. The last three things are the lead requirement needed which is based on three things, speed of the bird, distance to the bird and angle of the bird. With proper instruction, we can unravel the variables on every station and every target on a sporting clay course can be analyzed, no exceptions. The guys that win are the ones who can do it better than the rest of us. There are only two ways to learn to do this, either figure it out for yourself at the timescale here will obviously depend on the ability of the shooter and the number of targets he is prepared to put in, or go to an experienced coach. For most of us, there is no doubt in my mind that this is the best way. And remember this, shooting lessons aren’t cheap. If your present coach can’t get you to break your problem targets, don’t be afraid to go out and find one that can.

So, as the definition from the dictionary says, the main difference between an intuitive shot and an instinctive shot, is that one requires the application of knowledge to be successful, the other does not. And while we’re on the subject of dictionary definitions, *history* is defined as “*a thing of the past*”. There is no doubt in my mind that when you learn to successfully apply this accumulation of knowledge to sporting clays, the targets and the days of the patchy scorecards will be exactly that. History.

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