

Precision Pointing Part 1.

There are many reasons why we miss targets and no doubt you've heard them all before. Gun fit, gun mount, stance, trying too hard, not trying hard enough, testosterone level, anxiety level, the weather, the sausages you had for breakfast, the list is endless. But to my mind, there's one main thing that bubbles ominously to the surface and affects our ability to be consistent, more than any other. So to illustrate this point, here's a story about two tournament shooters, both of them secretly aspiring to greater things, at a prestigious event somewhere in the US.

On his arrival at the venue, the first shooter (we will call him shooter A.) has painstakingly walked the course to survey the testing presentations. He is quietly confident as he enters the arena. His chosen gun is a Krieghoff. The gun is heavy, as it should be. The close grain of the exhibition grade walnut is a compliment to the superior handling dynamics, balance and stability of a top quality, recoil-soaking competition gun. He's proud of the gun, it fits him well, conforming exactly to his personal contours. They are a perfectly matched team. In his hands it becomes alive, responsive, well suited to his physical capabilities. They are coordinates, a subtle blend of precision engineering and muscular coordination.

"Can I see a pair he asks?" as he enters the confinement of the safety cage. Of course. The trapper nods obligingly and hits the button. The pair of indistinct orange blurs appear from behind a clump of vegetation, accelerate wildly away at a narrow angle from the machine, then begin to curl almost imperceptibly as they bleed off energy. As they succumb to the gravitational pull, they begin to prescribe separate trajectories, each subtle in its individuality, to land behind the sanctuary of a tree line. Shooter A appears pensive, pausing for a moment before he drops a pair of his chosen shells into the chambers, then closes the Krieghoff with a satisfying clunk. Pull! The gun speaks twice, the targets break. Second pair, same result. The targets are destroyed, again and again, with almost monotonous consistency. Good shooting! The trapper nods with approval as he hand the score-card back, emblazoned now with an impressive row of X's. Congenial camaraderie kicks in and the congratulatory but slightly envious hands slap in triumph as shooter A leaves the station. He smiles as he walks away. Ah yes, running a difficult station like that is a moment to be savored!

Now it's shooter B's turn. Like shooter A, over the years, he has diligently assembled all the relevant components necessary for successful shot gunning. Gun selection, gun fit, mount and swing, choke, shot size and shell selection all fit neatly into the equation. His chosen intermediary? A Perazzi this time, another superb example of the epitome of the competition gun, tailored precisely to match his physical requirements. He knows the gun intimately. Shooter B tries a few dry mounts. He's practiced his mount and swing so that it is spontaneous, as natural as blinking an eye. As the gun comes up, it feels as reassuring comfortable as sinking into his favorite armchair does after a hard day. As it is guided unerringly to his shoulder pocket, he experiences the subconscious tactile assurance that tells

him that his master eye is exactly where it should be, in perfect alignment with the rib. He's ready. He takes the stage, carefully loads his shells and calls for the targets. The first pair are crushed convincingly, "Dead a pair," the scorer confirms the result. Pull! and the second pair are airborne, "Loss, dead," calls the scorer. Can't be! Yep, I'm afraid so. That questioning backward glance over his shoulder to the onlookers meets with only cold confirmation. That second target sailed over the trees without so much as a chip. Third pair, same result. Shooter B leaves the confinement of the safety cage with a seven, a good score on a difficult station, but unfortunately, not good enough.

So what went wrong? Two things. Both shooters had done their homework. Both shooters possessed a gun that matched their physical requirements. Both shooters had perfect mechanics and perfect gun management skills. The first difference was, shooter A made better visual sense of the target that shooter B did. He saw that subtle nuance in the flight line of the second target as it ran out of steam and dropped towards the trees. As his brain transmitted this visual information, his gun management compensated, and the target broke. Shooter B, unfortunately, didn't. The second thing was that shooter A knew *precisely* where he would break each target and because of this, he didn't rush his second shot. Once again, shooter B didn't.

Providing we have taken the time to ensure that our basic gun handling skills are as good as we can make them, the *only* reason we miss airborne targets is because the muzzles are in the wrong place as the shot is triggered. The aspiring shot gunner has absolutely no control over any airborne target. Few of us would disagree with that statement. Once he triggers the shot, it's all over. As I often stress to my students, with shot gunning, your eyes and your shotgun must work as a team to achieve consistent results. In competition situations, visual discipline is a must. We may use our eyes to see but our success with a shotgun depends on what we do with what we see. Eyesight, the most complex of the sensory systems, must be utilized to its maximum potential if we are to achieve mechanical excellence. There should be a subtle blend of these neurological and physical ingredients, which we call hand-eye coordination. What we are trying to achieve is an *accurate* conversion of visual information into effective physical movement to move the gun into the right position. Many of us don't do this. Many misses occur because we misdirect the muzzle. We just don't see what we are supposed to see and even if we do, we don't allow our brain enough time to process this optical information accurately and we "poke and hope" at some of the targets. This is exactly what happens when we rush a target. Think about what happens on the second target of a pair, we shoot the first target late, then end up chasing the second. In desperation, as we come onto the second target we don't have enough time to establish the correct target/barrel relationship but what happens? We pull the trigger anyway and hope for the best. This is exactly what I mean, a pure "poke and hope" shot and we've all been there at some point.

The top shooters don't do this, they know precisely where each target will be *at the point of interception*, and this is the important bit. Most instructors will tell a student to watch the target all the way from the trap arm to the point where it hits the ground. I agree with this but I take this a step further with my students. Targets are broken because we have made an accurate visual assessment of the target behavior *in the area we intend to break it*.

The ultimate outcome of the shot depends on how well we have done this. No other reason. As we strive for a different level of performance, this ability to evaluate the target in this area deserves, no, *demands*, what should be a prime consideration. It's what I call precision pointing. What the target does before it reaches this spot, and what it does after, is inconsequential. As the shot is triggered, if we have evaluated the variables of speed, angle, trajectory and range accurately the target breaks. If we have left one of these critical components out of the equation, the gun goes bang but it doesn't. Break that is. It's that simple. And the only difference between a "poke and hope" shot and a precision shot may be a couple of milliseconds, just enough time to allow the ocular stimuli the brain receives to be converted into a physical response to move the intermediary, the shotgun, accurately onto the line of the target. Then, and only then, will the target break.

In bird hunting situations, it's different. Snow geese, for example, indistinct and nebulous as they slice through the early morning mist over the spread, see the glint on the barrels of the Benelli autoloader and take evasive action. This sudden directional change with the geese, must trigger initially a visual response, followed by a physical one to reposition the gun. The mourning dove, riding the thermals of the hot breeze on the Texas panhandle, spots a glimmer of movement and deploys the afterburners, departing at a speed that would make an Exocet envious. Once again the visual response must be correctly processed if we are to make a corresponding physical one to put the barrels in the right place. But then, live quarry can think. The hard part in hunting situations is deciding what a live bird will do and when it decides to do it. Clay targets are inert, mixtures of pitch and chalk. They don't think. Compared with live quarry, they're predictable. Sure, they can respond to a puff of wind now and then, and sometimes seem to have a mind of their own, but for the most part it is possible to decipher their variables and beat them.

This accurate visual assessment is a logical break-down of the various components involved. Every airborne target has several variables to consider. The first (and most important) is the line or trajectory and (more importantly) where we intend to intercept the target on this line. Line is more important than lead, but it's surprising how many shooters get this first basic step wrong. I see it every day out here at the DGC. Providing we have the appropriate coordination skills to move the gun, developing the line should be easy as pointing a finger but failure to do this results in far more missed targets than any other. With targets that are in the "transitional" phase, because of the time lapse between the optical input the brain receives, we sometimes trigger the shot as energy is bleeding off and the target is dropping. For this reason, line is directly proportional to range and must be given careful consideration. The other component is the lead requirement. How much lead a target requires must be one of the most frequently asked questions on the sporting clays course. The next question is what does this look like over the end of the gun. Basic trigonometry, speed assessment and the application of ballistic logistics are the main influences on lead requirement, or in simple terms, target angle, speed and range.

Target evaluation is high on my list of priorities with a group of students and the development of a personal repertoire of sight pictures is crucial to success on the sporting

course. Of course it is, we all know that. Surprisingly, some students, in some cases experienced students, when they are asked to carefully evaluate a particular target before they take their shot, often never spot these subtle nuances. When I ask them to describe to me what the target is doing often the difference in the visual description that they give me can be considerably different to my interpretation, until I let them shoot the target and point out why they missed. Then the light comes on and they realize it for themselves. In other words, I see things that they don't. The strange thing is though, more often than not, the shooters that take the time to correctly unravel the mysteries of a target's behavior usually either end up in the winners enclosure at the end of the tournament and at top level competition, there's no doubt in my mind that it certainly pays dividends. So next time you miss a difficult target go through a visual check list. Was your visual interpretation of the targets behavior (in the area you intended to shoot it) *really* clear or *nearly* clear? Nearly clear is a compromise. Your answer should be really clear. Like shooters A and B, it may make the all the difference between a point or two at the end of the day. Or to put it bluntly, the difference between winning and losing.