

Precision Pointing Part 2

Sporting clays World champion and Carribean Cup winner Mick Howells has it, so has 29 times all American skeet champion Robert Paxton. Olympic bunker trap gold medallist Richard Faulds and Olympic skeet champion, (and also sporting clay champion), Dan Carlisle has it. Oh yes, and I nearly forgot. Five times World sporting clay champion George Digweed definitely has it, so does 2002 US Open champion Jon Kruger. In fact, all the guys at the upper end of the sporting clay, trap or skeet-shooting spectrum have it. So just what *is* this illusory but highly desirable characteristic? It's just another of the components of successful shot gunning that distinguishes the top guns in this sport, from the also rans. It's known as economy of movement and rhythm in the shot. Hallelujah! The suspense is over, so now we all know but what exactly is this? Let me explain.

Many years ago before I became a competitive shooter, a gamekeeper friend gave me some advice:- "You can only shoot 'em one at a time lad!" Exactly. This sound piece of advice is often also heard on a skeet field; pairs are merely two singles. Absolutely, I couldn't agree more. We recently held the Pan American skeet championships out here and the top skeet shooters always demonstrate perfect rhythm and economy of movement as they shoot the doubles. These guys all know *exactly* where each target of a pair will be as they trigger the shot. Of course skeet shooters can adapt easier to the repetitive timing required for registered skeet targets but we're not shooting skeet, there are no constants with sporting clays. On the sporting clays course, with the huge diversity of target presentations and also the specialty targets that are thrown on to spice up the mix, the correct approach to a pair of targets can be critical and if we think about it, the majority of presentations on sporting clays course are pairs. In last months issue I stressed the importance of accurate target evaluation in the area we intended to shoot the target. By doing this, excessive gun movement will be eliminated and the shooter will develop a rhythm between shots. Good rhythm helps to promote unhurried elegance as the shot is delivered, and reduces of any superfluous, unnecessary movement.

Many years ago, I read a book that was written by a professional tennis coach. I'm afraid that name of the author escapes me, but one part of the book was dedicated to exactly this. This particular coach found that sometimes, especially with new comers to the game of tennis, this rhythm wasn't always readily apparent in the early learning stages. This is always the case any hand eye coordination sport when and intermediary is involved, be it a tennis racquet, baseball bat or shotgun. What the tennis coach found was that most of his students could return the ball over the net far easier by the application of a simple rhythmic exercise. He would get his students to recite BALL (as they visually acquired the ball) BOUNCE (as the ball hit the ground in front of the student) and HIT as the racquet came into play to return the ball. In other words, they returned the ball to a rhythm of three beats. The success rate of the students increased dramatically, there was no superfluous wasted movement of the racquet and they were eventually returning the ball over the net with greater consistency.

In wingshooting situations in the UK, shooting coaches have always stressed that there should be a rhythm to the move on the target. Many bird hunters over there have their pet rhymes for achieving this. What about the “Bum, belly, beak, bang! on the driven pheasant shoot? Snipe hunting is another example. These small cousins of the woodcock will often sit as tight as a limpet on a rock until the last second. Their rapid flush always results in an erratic flight path that is designed to confuse predators. Seasoned snipe hunters, specialists in their own way, would recite the old nursery rhyme “Polly put the kettle ON.” The idea was that the gun came onto the bird and the shot was triggered just as the hunters said the “ON”. In these situations, rhythm is important, or a “poke and hope” and hurried, uncoordinated shot will be the result. Over the years I have witnessed many so-called “experienced” wing shooters react to a flush of birds with a complete lack of timing or rhythm, demonstrating such alarming gyrations with a shotgun that they would unfortunately put a Turkish belly dancer to shame. Most of these guys, when the pressure is on and they are in the “hot seat”, with plenty of birds about, are even worse. Watch a really good hunter make a shot at a dove or pheasant. There is naturalness in his shooting and he seems to stroke birds out of the sky with a confident flourish. Everything is spontaneous and unhurried. If the situation requires it, he will “step to the bird” to place his feet in a more advantageous position for a more balanced, rhythmical move on the target. His eyes will be locked onto the target and at the same time his gun will be moving unerringly into his shoulder pocket to complete the mount. The computations of speed, distance and angle will be complete by the time the ocular stimuli from his brain gives him the signal to trigger the shot. Of course in wingshooting situations, we have no idea where the birds are coming from or where they are going to. In these circumstances, sometimes we have no choice; shooting from an unbalanced position is excusable. Clay shooters, on the other hand, have no excuse. They can get a sneak preview of their targets with a “see” pair.

When we do this, there are several key questions we should be asking. Which target first? Be careful, this *isn't* always the one you see first. Where can I break it? Where do I look for the next target? Where can I break it? I often use the pool table comparison for this. When shooting pool, the top guys are masters at positioning the cue ball the optimum position for the second shot. It's the same with sporting clays. With repetitive shot gunning, the initial gun insertion point is critical and it is based entirely on the visual evaluation of *both* targets but I like to take this cue ball analogy a step further. The *second* target of a pair is the one that should dictate where the *first* target must be broken.

Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate this point is to once again, (as I did in the last issue), evaluate the results of two shooters both shooting the same presentation. The imaginary presentation we will look at for our two shooters is a report pair combination. The first target of the pair is a rabbit target, the machine is positioned behind and to the left of the safety cage and the rabbit is quartering away at a narrow angle in relation to the shooter. The second target is a midi, the machine is on the right side of the safety cage and the target is almost a full crossing shot, and it is *fast*. Shooter A enters the safety cage. He believes that he can break both targets in more or less the same place and sets himself up accordingly.

Trapper ready? Ready. Pull! As the orange rabbit target skips out of the machine, shooter A smashes it with conviction and then visually picks up the midi. He knows it's a full crossing shot, he knows its fast and he knows its about 30 yards away. He already has a mental awareness of the lead requirement, the gun inserts on the line at the correct lead, he stays with it for a heart beat, sees the correct sight picture, and Bang! Dead a Pair. Almost too easy wasn't it? Second pair and third pairs, same result. Oh, this is so *easy* thinks shooter A. So he drops his guard slightly, only for a fraction of a second, shoots the next rabbit late, just as it reaches some uneven ground further up the run, it hops and he misses. Momentarily surprised by the miss, he is then also late in visually acquiring the fast midi and he ends up chasing it. Instead of "collecting" the bird smoothly as he did with the first few pairs he now produces excessive gun movement and momentum. Then guess what happens? The target is now in the transitional phase, dropping slightly and shooter A shoots over the top. "Pair lost!" is the cry. Now he's frustrated. His timing and rhythm are destroyed and although he makes sure of the next rabbit, he misses the fast midi again.

Shooter B takes the stand. His set up position is different. He knows that the cunning course designer has given him the "gimme" rabbit followed by the fast midi and, after a "dry run" with his empty gun, shooter B sets himself up in a more favorable position to shoot this more difficult midi target by turning round slightly. Pull! The rabbit runs 10 yards and shooter B nails it, looks to the right to visually pick up the midi and Bang! Dead a pair. He does this on each pair and demonstrates impeccable timing between each shot. The rhythm and time delays between the initial Pull! Bang! and second report of the gun are identical with each presentation, it's almost as though he has a metronome for a brain. Of course where shooter B breaks the targets is a personal thing, individual reaction times and visual acuity will dictate where the targets will be broken. No two shooters will shoot the targets in exactly the same place as the next guy does, even though they may be shooting the targets in the optimum place for themselves.

With a *following* pair many coaches will tell you that you only need to apply one sight picture, because the second target of the presentation should be a duplicate of the first. Is this correct? In some cases it is, but to confuse the issue, with an automatic machine, the speed at which the trap re-cycles often holds the key to where both targets must be broken. The definition of a following pair is: Let's assume that we have set up correctly for the shot. If we have, this *should* mean that we look for both the targets in the same place each time, insert the gun in the same place each time and break the second target in the same place as the first shouldn't it? Possibly, but be careful here. If the automatic machine has a very fast re-cocking time that second target may be well on its way as the gun is returning the opposite way to insert on the line for the second shot. The result? There may be negative gun movement, even for a split second in the opposite direction to the target. So what's the answer? Break the first target *slightly* further out to give yourself time to get on the second. The result? The same rhythm, same sight picture, same amount of gun movement and gun speed on each target should equal consistency.

Report or true pairs require closer scrutiny than following pairs. Once again, the key to shooting pairs successfully is target evaluation and as we enter the safety cage, we ask to see a pair. This allows us to pre-program our mental and physical resources that will in turn help to maximize our split-second strategy required to break each target. Only when we know *precisely* where we need to break each target, will our rhythm be the same each time, on each pair. If we make good use of this “see pair” the targets should break. If we don’t, the computations of the correct target /barrel relationship will change each time and so will our gun management. Eventually the gun will be waving about all over the place and don’t forget, less gun movement equals more control.

Rhythmic changes, especially as we shoot pairs are dependant on the gun movement required on each shot and this in turn is dependant on the angle of the target and the speed of the target. A close, quartering rabbit for example, can be shot with a two beat rhythm, sort of Pull! Bang! A long slow incomer would be shot to a four beat rhythm, Pull! TWO, THREE, Bang! Finally, at the Red Hot Open sporting clay shoot here at the Dallas Gun Club, I was standing behind a group of Master Class shooters as they shot a long, high incomer off the tower. One of the guys ran the station. Now I’m not *certain*, you understand, but as the target came over the safety cage I could *swear* I heard him mutter “Bum, Belly, Beak, Bang!” as he triggered the shots!