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December 1998

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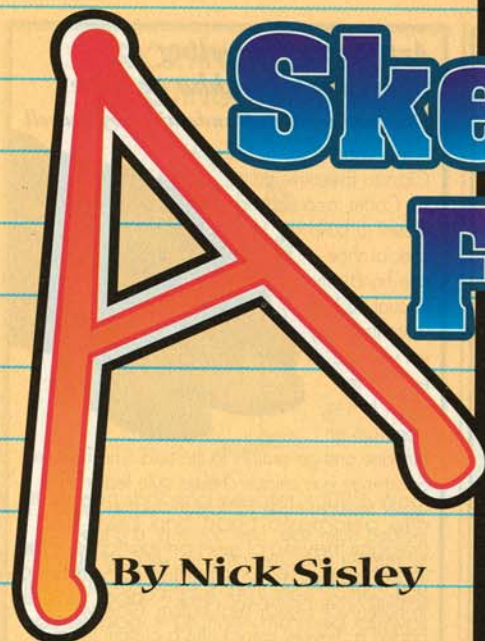
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Skeet Lesson For Sporting

By Nick Sisley

The NSCA Instructor Certification Program, with its swelling numbers of Level I, II, and III coaches, has been a significant success story. Sporting clays shotgunners all across the nation have shown an ever-increasing willingness to pay for the privilege of learning solid basics and new-to-them gunning techniques as well as some insight into the mental side of sporting.

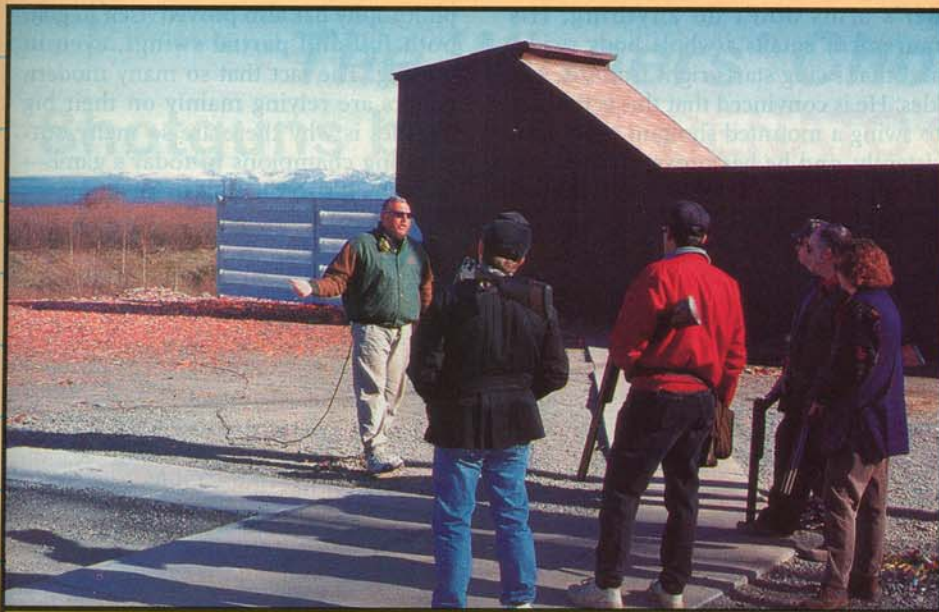
The National Skeet Shooting Association (NSSA), with the same headquarters in San Antonio, coordinates a similar instructor program. From the start, Todd Bender and John Shima have been Master NSSA Instructors, playing an integral role in the program. In 1991, several years prior to this current program, Bender and Shima had started their own instructional shooting clinics. This duo first became famous in skeet shooting circles back in the 1970s at Trinity College in San Antonio. Under coach Tom Hanzel, Trinity was this country's leading producer of the best in college shotgunners, and Bender and Shima were two of his top stars. Both became world champions several times over, and they're still quite young.

Shortly after they started their skeet clinics, I became an early student. Then again, earlier this year, I went back for a refresher course. Within an hour of the first day of teaching, I was sorry I had stayed away so long.

A few days after the clinic ended, I got to thinking about some of the new concepts I had learned there. It became evident that a lot of what I learned there could be extremely useful to sporting clays enthusiasts, even shooters who had taken lessons from NSCA Instructors.

Ever wonder why so many sporting clays shooting coaches teach shotgunning on skeet fields? Taking a sure 'nuff skeet lesson just might reveal the target-smashing answer.





There's a lot to be learned about sporting clays from other shotgunning disciplines, as the author learned from a skeet clinic hosted by John Shima (left) and Todd Bender (above). A skeet lesson can help you in sporting with better use of your eyes, different ways to swing the shotgun, even some differing philosophies on breaking doubles. Deciding which techniques can apply to sporting only gives you more tools in your shooting bag.

Watch The Birdie—Hard!

Of course, proper use of the eyes is stressed in the NSSA and NSCA programs. But after having the privilege of taking instruction from quite a number of shotgun gurus, I've found Shima to have developed a wealth of information on this score.

Shima can stand *behind* a student and tell him what he did with his eyes—repeatedly and accurately. Of course, correct use of the eyes is critical to consistent shotgunning success, and shooters can use their eyes incorrectly in a number of different ways. An instructor who is able to tell you what you did incorrectly with your eyes from behind your back is a huge help, and Bender is very good at this, too.

The most common mistake some shooters make with their eyes is not looking at the target hard enough. Bender and Shima told me that they have never had a student who couldn't be helped by helping them look at the bird harder.

Vying for a close second in improper eye use is shifting focus from the target to the barrel, then back to the target. I believe a high percentage of shotgunners do this, at least from time to time. A bird is extremely difficult to hit if the shooter falls into this trap, even momentarily. This mistake can be a very subtle one, something most shotgunners feel very strongly that they *don't* do.

When the eyes don't focus *hard* on the target initially, they tend to focus

hard on the barrel, then go back to focusing hard on the target. The switch to barrel focus need not be one that the shooter even realizes; it can be a subtle focus. But once a shooter has had this fact pointed out to him over and over and he begins to realize the subtle look he has been making to the barrel, genuine progress can begin to be made.

When an instructor points out an improper target-barrel-target focus, chances are good that the target was missed. Consequently, the sight picture the shooter saw begins to register and be remembered. It is critical that the shooter realize that 100-percent focus on the target was lost during the swing as the eyes drifted back to the barrel before a correction can be made.

Many shotgunners experience difficulty in overcoming this tendency to focus, even if only momentarily, on the barrel. The eyes are naturally attracted to movement. All hunters are aware of this natural tendency. The animals we hunt possess this trait just as we do. If we as hunters remain perfectly still, it's very difficult for prey to see us. In the same vein, if we see movement of the game we're hunting, our eyes are immediately attracted to it.

Back at the sporting clays range, our eyes are naturally attracted to the moving target. But while going with that movement, guess what other movement the eyes see? The eye's attention is naturally attracted to the barrel. With an instructor pointing it out over and over, eventually we are convinced of its

validity. Then it's a matter of working harder and harder to see the target while ignoring the barrel.

Going With The Flow

Moving the gun too early is more of a problem in skeet than in sporting, but it's still a problem in the latter discipline, especially on certain targets. The solid basic we all adhere to is not to move the gun until we actually see the target. In most cases, it isn't essential that we see the target clearly and distinctly because often, there's not enough time to do so. We can move on a target blur, then fire as the bird comes into sharp focus, or shortly thereafter.

If, however, we move the barrel before the target appears, several things go wrong. First, timing can be lost, especially if the pull is a little slower than we expected. By moving the gun too quickly, we can be too far ahead, which may result in a miss in front. Subsequently slowing down the muzzle to a speed that's slower than the target is another great invitation to miss. Most any instructor will give you lots of "no pulls" during the course of a lesson, and a high percentage of shooters will move the gun on these exercises, proof that they're leaving early.

There's yet another problem with starting the muzzle too early. What your eyes see move first is the barrel. Remember our natural attraction to movement? Move the barrel a fraction of a second before you see the target, and guess where the eyes go first? Only a fraction of a second is needed to cause the unwanted shift, preventing you from seeing the target clearly as quickly as you can.

Another potential problem that can creep into the eye/target relationship is eye dominance, an area of particular expertise for Shima. Not only does he have a great deal of experience in this arena, he has dedicated himself to studying the eyes, dominance, and crossfiring. Shima is convinced that many targets are missed by crossfiring. He also has discovered that many one-eye shotgunners occasionally open the "other" eye just before the shot, with a crossfire most often the result. He might recommend a piece of translucent tape on the lens in front of your dominant pupil. Depending upon circumstances, he might also convince a one-eye shooter to try both eyes, then he'll show him how a piece of translucent tape on the opposite lens can help the shotgunner make the transition to two-eye shooting. Shima can help you use your eyes

to better advantage in shotgunning.

The Swing Thing

Many shotgunners are "upper-body" shooters, which means they don't swing from their ankles up. In many instances, upper-body shooting involves "leaning" instead of turning. Bender is a big proponent of turning, very much against leaning. But he also knows that low-gun sporting isn't done from the ankles up. It has developed into mainly an "arm" sport. The arms have to start the swing, start the mount, and keep the swing going.

In skeet, a mounted-gun sport, Ben-

der's arms don't do anything. His movement entails a whole-body swing, and that swing starts right from the ankles. He is convinced that this is the way to swing a mounted shotgun most consistently, and he has proven it over and over through the many champion shooters he has developed as well as the numerous titles he has garnered himself.

"When you use the whole body to move, you're relying on the big muscles," insists Bender. "The more you rely on smaller muscles, the less consistent your swing is going to be." This

philosophy has also proved itself in golf, both full and partial swings, even in putting. The fact that so many modern golfers are relying mainly on their big muscles is why there are so many outstanding champions in today's game—and why it's so difficult to be dominant in golf any more. This was not true only a few decades ago, when pure talent could consistently rise to the top of the leader board.

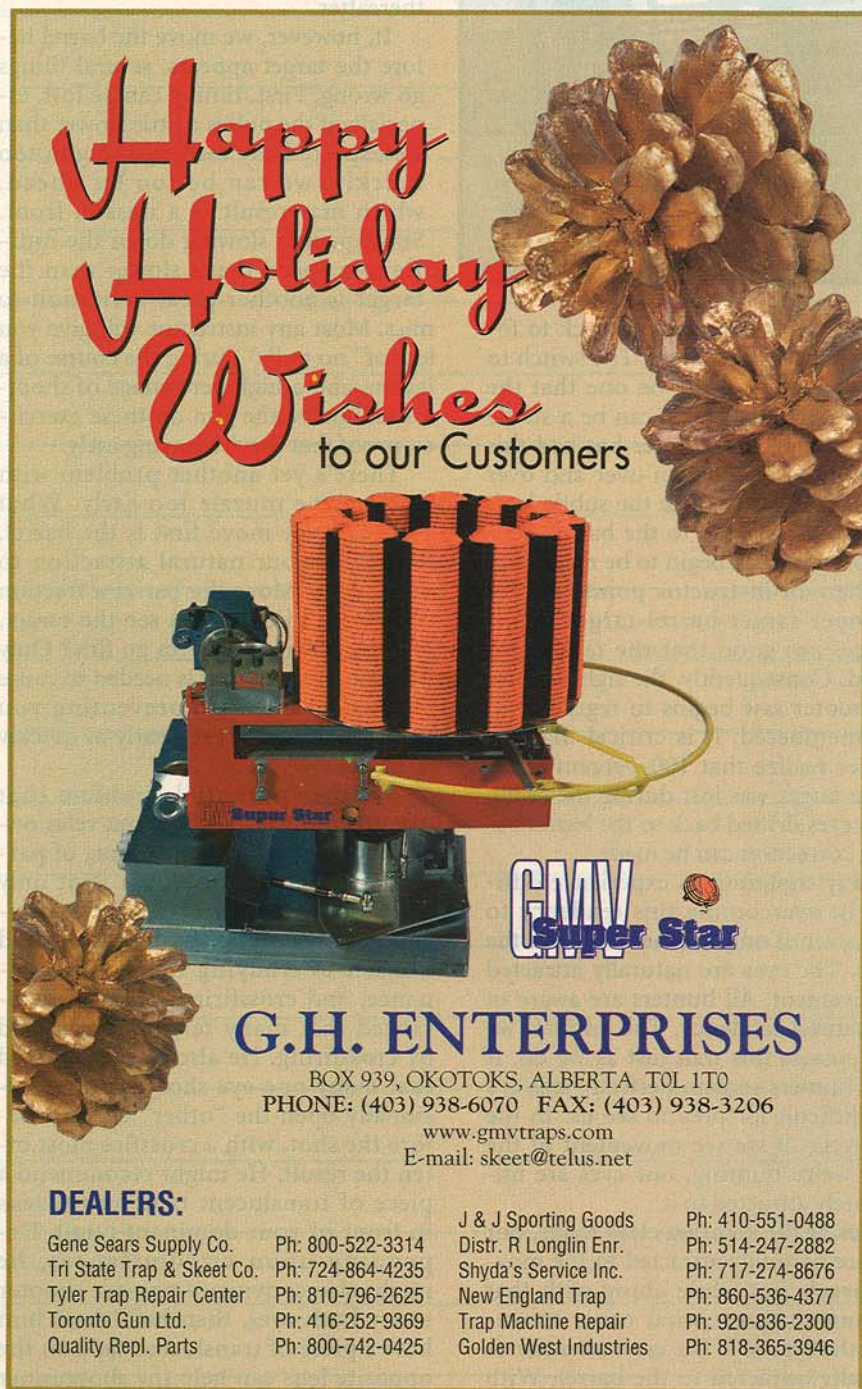
Use of the body's big muscles allows those of lesser shooting talent to compete a lot more competitively with those of greater talent. And don't forget that sporting now permits a mounted gun, just as skeet has done. I'll be first to admit that an unmounted gun often permits the shooter a better initial look at the target, and that this can be a significant advantage. However, there are target presentations where the unmounted gun does not give this advantage, and many sporting enthusiasts are taking advantage of these situations by pre-mounting the shotgun. On these target opportunities, would it be better to use the lower body to make your swing instead of the upper body, especially the arms and its smaller muscles? This is not an easily learned technique if you've been an upper-body shooter all your life, but Bender can help you with these new-to-sporting basics.

Doing The Doubles Dance

Doubles shooting in skeet involves first a target going one way, then a target going in the opposite direction. These are true doubles, both birds being launched simultaneously. Frankly, I've never thought skeet doubles did much to simulate two feathered bird shots. Most often, sporting doubles, whether true, following, or report pairs, do a better job of simulating the real thing. But we still have to shoot doubles, and in sporting, we're seeing fewer and fewer single-shot opportunities.

The shooting of doubles at skeet's middle 3, 4, and 5 stations involves some twists that will be new to most sporting clays enthusiasts. You might want to think about incorporating the technique into much of your doubles shooting at sporting, but especially with true pairs thrown in opposite directions.

If you ever take a Bender/Shima skeet doubles clinic, you won't even shoot at a double for at least two hours. Why? Because the first shot in skeet doubles is how you set up the second shot. So you work long and hard at determining *where* you break the first target. Through experimentation, you eventually learn the precise spot to



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break that first one so the second bird becomes easy.

As an example, when you break the first bird 10 feet before the skeet field's center stake, guess where the opposite bird is? That's right, 10 feet on the other side of the stake. So you know exactly where to look for it. But after you break the first one 10 feet before the center stake, the second may not be set up for your style of shooting. Maybe you have to break the first one 15 feet before the stake, or five feet, or whatever. This experience can similarly be personalized to your shooting style when shooting sporting doubles. It becomes critical not only to decide which of the true pair you're going to break first, but exactly *where* you're going to break it. By being precise with where you break the first bird, you set up the second one to make it as easy as possible.

Another thing I learned at the Bender/Shima doubles clinic is *how* to look for the second target. After breaking the first one, the natural thing to do is go to the second bird with both the eyes and the gun. With some sporting doubles, this might be perfectly okay, but I assure you such a program won't be ideal with all sporting doubles.

Because skeet doubles birds are trav-

eling in opposite directions, the Bender/Shima approach will have you stopping your swing rather abruptly after the first shot. It's easy to recall certain sporting doubles where such an approach would be appropriate. Further, the Bender/Shima philosophy will have you go to the second bird with *only* the eyes, not both the gun and the eyes. This technique is not easily learned because it's so natural to move both the eyes and the gun together.

To take the second bird moving in the opposite direction, these skeet coaches will have you slowing your swing abruptly after the first break, going with the eye to the second. At this point, assuming you've broken that first clay precisely where you wanted, your muzzle will already be ahead of that second bird, in many instances with an almost perfect lead. The result is a doubles swing that involves minimal yet precise movement. You could weave such a philosophy into your sporting doubles shooting when two clays are presented that are moving in opposite directions. However, I can envision numerous additional sporting doubles presentations where this technique of slowing the gun abruptly and going to the second with your eyes only could

prove very productive.

Interestingly, an easy way to begin practicing this technique is at skeet station 7. Break the low bird at a specific spot, then, keeping the barrel where it is, go with only the eyes to the high target. Do this over and over until you're seeing the high bird immediately after smoking the low one, then try the doubles at station 6 with the same philosophy, then on to 5, 4, and 3, at each one, working on not taking the muzzle past the center stake and going with the eyes only to the second bird immediately after seeing the first smoke.

There's a lot to be learned about sporting clays from other shotgunning disciplines. Participation in a Bender/Shima clinic can help you in sporting a great deal with better use of your eyes, different ways to swing the shotgun, plus some differing philosophies on breaking doubles. Deciding which techniques can apply to sporting only gives you more tools in your shooting bag.

Bender and Shima teach shotgunning about 300 days a year each, hosting four to six students at every session. For more information about their shotgunning clinics, call (800) 438-7340.



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