

THE SHOOTING JOURNEY LESS TRAVELED

Sometimes your skeet journey takes a turn you hadn't expected and you end up rekindling your love of the sport in a new way.

BY JOHN D. SHIMA



LEFTY RAY COURTESY

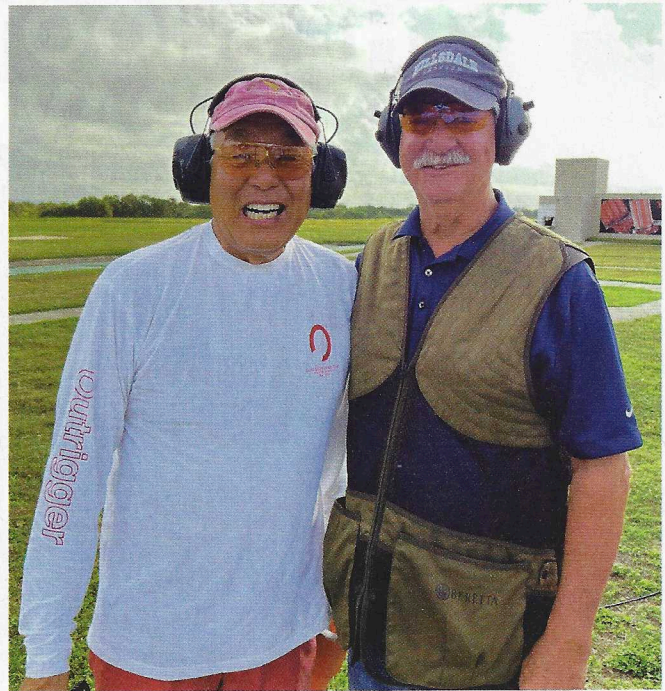
Robert Frost originated the phrase “the road less traveled” in his famous poem, “The Road Not Taken,” in which the speaker reflects on a decision at a fork in the road and takes the path that’s less worn. It is obviously a metaphor for individuals who are willing to deviate from societal norms in pursuit of greater self-discovery and personal fulfillment.

In his book, *Strength to Strength*, Harvard psychologist Arthur Brooks addressed the need for highly skilled professionals to pursue career changes and reinvent themselves as their technical skills diminish with age. Brook’s research showed that peak mental and physical performance begins to diminish around the age of 50. Brook’s recommendation for these individuals is to

transition from strength in one career to strength in another endeavor that inspires purposeful growth and meaning.

During my four-plus decades as a master shooting instructor, I have worked with many shooters who were once NSSA Class A or better when they were younger and engaged my services to help them regain their shooting prowess after a decade or more away from the sport. Although I am able to help many of the serious competitors improve their averages, I help most of them by teaching them to accept their limitations and discover joy in shooting regardless of their scores.

Rarely, I encounter an individual like Craig Roberts from Toledo, Ohio. Like me, Craig began shooting with his father at a very young age.



They became a formidable skeet duo in their area. Craig excelled as a competitor and became an excellent student of the game. By the time he attended my clinic at Island Lake Shooting Range in Brighton, Michigan, five years ago, Craig had read my books and most of my articles. I was immediately impressed that Craig wasn’t interested in becoming a better shooter — he enrolled in my clinic to become a better shooting instructor.

Craig explained, “A few years ago, before my back and hip surgeries, I took so many

▲ The author (left) has worked with many students who are seeking to regain the shooting prowess they once had.

things for granted — mobility, stamina, even the simple act of standing on a shooting range for hours. Recovery was slow, frustrating, and at times, downright demoralizing. There were moments I thought I’d never feel at home with a shotgun again. But skeet isn’t just a sport to me — it’s a lifeline. The crack of the clay, the focus it demands, the camaraderie with fellow shooters: These things pulled me back, even when my body was fighting me every step of the way.”

During our day together in Brighton, I learned that during Craig’s 55-year shooting journey he enjoyed shooting

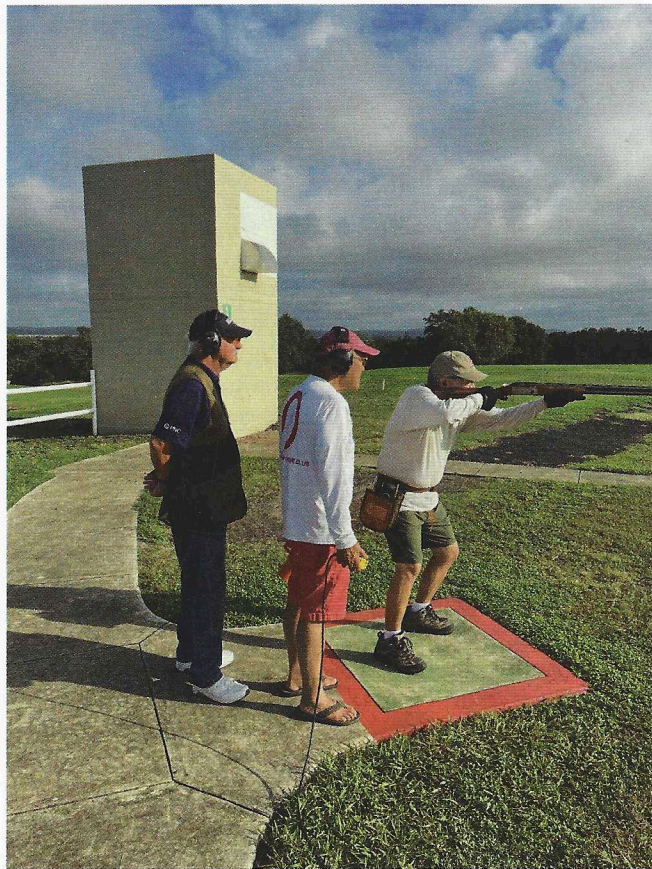


◀ Rather than trying to get students back to the scores they shot in their youth, the author encourages them to discover joy in shooting regardless of their scores.

competitively as well as mentoring shooters through NRA and Boy Scouts programs. Finally, after seven years as chairman of the annual Boy Scouts Sporting Clays Classic fundraiser, Craig has chosen to pursue a shooting journey less traveled — to become a better instructor in the clay target sports so he can spend this season of his life mentoring a new generation of aspiring shotgunners to love shooting as much as he does.

A few months later, Craig organized a two-day clinic for me at his gun club in Toledo. His purpose was two-fold: to help his friends become better skeet shooters, and to watch me teach so he could become a better instructor for them.

Craig admitted, “I



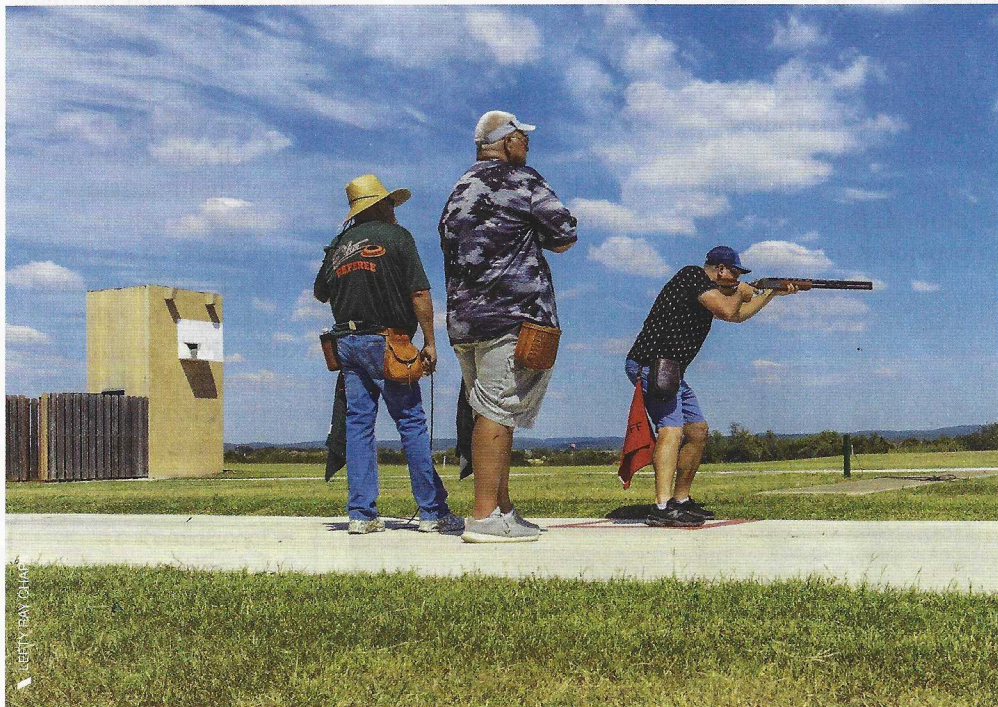
▲ Some shooters find a renewed sense of excitement and purpose in becoming coaches and mentors.

know firsthand that the path back isn't linear, and it isn't easy. It's about showing up, even if you're starting from scratch. Now, with every session on the range, I feel a renewed sense of purpose — not just as a shooter, but as a coach and mentor. My setbacks have given me a deeper understanding of what it means to push through pain, to adapt, and to find new ways to succeed. I want to pass that on. I want my students to know that limitations don't have to define them. In fact, those obstacles can make you sharper, more empathetic, and ultimately a better athlete and teacher.”

Craig's appetite for learning and desire for teaching fuels his passion to become the best clay target shooting instructor he can be. He reminds me of *The Second Mountain* by David Brooks. It explores the journey toward a more meaningful life by helping people transition from individual pursuits to focusing on making a difference in the lives of others in their community.

In Brooks' narrative, the first mountain rep-

◀ In our youth, when we might be shooting at our peak, it's easy to love skeet. But shooters who step away and come back decades later sometimes need some help finding that love again.



resents traditional goals that are connected to achieving success, accumulating wealth, and attaining status. After passing through the valley of frustration and disillusionment, climbing the second mountain is a metaphor for the individual's commitment to acquiring deeper values, improving relationships, and strengthening worthy organizations and communities. Brooks espouses the belief that true fulfillment comes when people move beyond self-centered ambitions and embrace a way of life guided by higher principles and meaningful connections with others who share their values.

When shooters are struggling to cope with the loss of shooting skills that represented a significant part of their identity, it is usually difficult for them to accept change and attempt to choose a new path in their shooting journey. Brooks said, "Sometimes a singular event alters a seemingly normal life, other times a nagging feeling creeps into your life that whispers 'you are on the wrong path.' The previous goals are no longer relevant and your sense of direction has been lost."

Just as I am inspiring

► It's normal for your goals to change over time. Just remember: This game is supposed to be fun.



Craig to become a better shooting instructor for his friends, he has inspired me to add a new dimension to my teaching journey. Craig will be the first participant to attend one of my Shima Shooting ExperienceSM sessions as a non-shooter. Just as he did during my clinic at his gun club in Toledo, he will observe me teaching the regular participants and make notes so we can discuss his observations following each session.

I already expanded the traditional three-day SSE to provide a day-and-a-

half competition SSE as a tune-up for competitive shooters. Since Craig's journey will likely resonate with other individuals who are seeking a shooting journey less traveled, I foresee myself offering a three-day instruction SSE for a group of people who aspire to become better shooting mentors.

According to Christina Hibbert, "The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to



◀ Work on being the best you can be, working within your own limitations and passions.

creating something that gives you purpose and meaning." Research conducted by Martin Seligman revealed that many people are satisfied living a pleasant life, while others aim to pursue an engaged life. An engaged life is more than experiencing bouts of happiness — it is striving to become the best you can be.

That said, Seligman's research also indicated that a meaningful life is the ultimate quest. These people live a life in which serving others is their primary purpose. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "It is one of the beautiful compensations of life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself." Finding purpose and meaning through service involves engaging in activities that benefit others, which leads to a greater sense of fulfillment and connection. In other words, the shooting journey less traveled is actually the road that leads to contentment. **CTN**

► John Shima is a five-time World Skeet Champion. To view previous articles or order John's books, go to www.johnshima.com.