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# MANAGE YOUR STARTLE REFLEX

Rather than looking intently for the flash, wait for it to emerge into your expanded soft focus. That way, you can use your natural startle reflex to your advantage rather than your detriment.

*BY JOHN D. SHIMA*

In his classic book *Skeet Shooting with D. Lee Braun*, this greatly admired World Champion described his first 25 straight shooting skeet. He recalled it was drizzling rain at Dallas Gun Club, and he was shooting his grandfather's old double-barreled Parker hammer shotgun. Braun recalled that he wasn't making an intense effort to accomplish anything except to merely enjoy the experience of shooting that old gun.

Braun went on to describe his skeet journey, stating, "Sometime after [my first] 25 straight, my old boss and old friend, Dewey Godfrey, sensing my desire and determination to become a good shooter, made it possible for me to attend various state, regional, and sectional shoots. In all of these I gained more and more experience in divesting myself of the unnecessary thoughts and



movements that would reduce my ability to shoot well." Hans Hofmann eloquently described simplification of a task as the ability "to eliminate the unnecessary so the necessary may speak."

It has been my philosophy as a shooting instructor that the absolute "necessary" in any clay target sport is concentration and focus. Simply stated, I mean monotonous men-

tal and visual discipline. Therefore, every shooter's solitary goal before each shot should be to achieve a quiet mind and a quiet eye.

#### **MOVE ON THE FLASH — REALLY?**

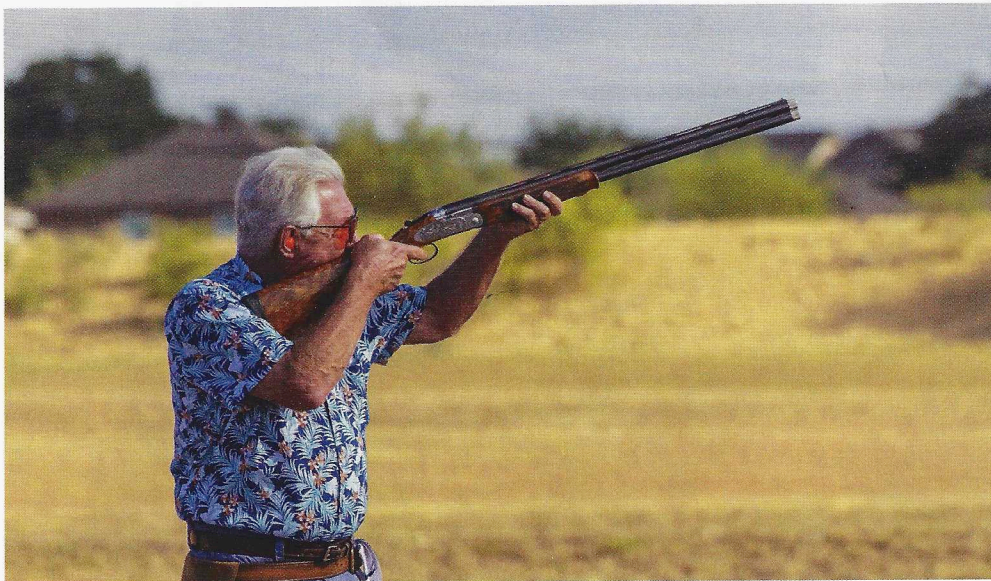
Most new skeet shooters are instructed to look toward the window of the house and move the gun on the flash. Invariably the target flashes past

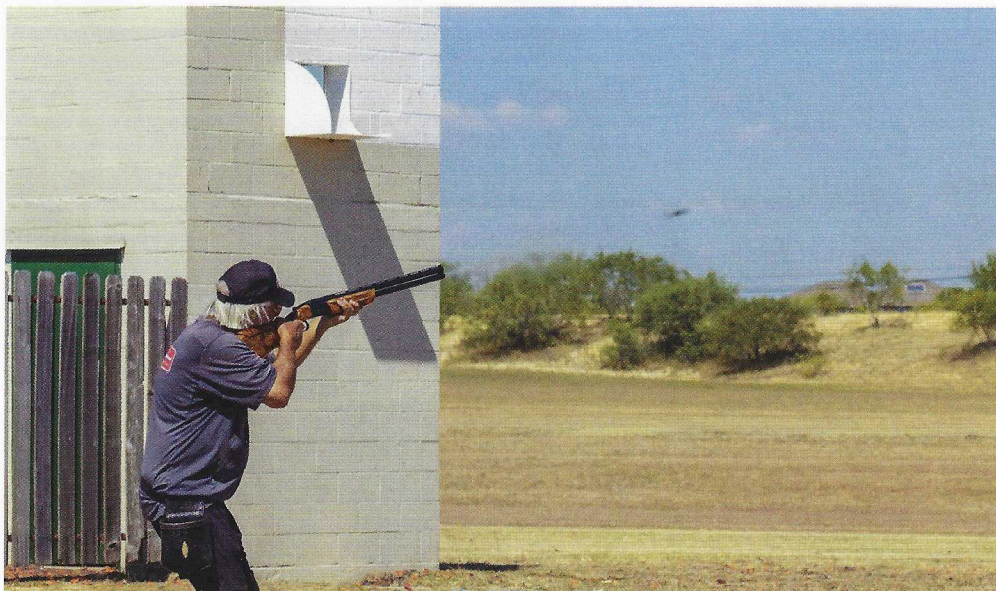
▲ Concentration and focus are two absolute must-haves for success in any clay target sport.

the muzzle and precipitates an abrupt attempt to catch up to it. Henceforth, the fear of getting beat by the target is forever embedded in the novice shooter's psyche. The insidious fear of getting beat by the target inevitably creeps into the pre-shot routine of every shooter at some point during competition, which results in poor target acquisition and a weak hit or missed target.

The ideal intention is to make a good first move on every target. Since the game of skeet

◀ Before you call pull, you have one goal: Achieve a quiet mind and a quiet eye so you're ready to acquire the target.





is so structured, it is practically impossible to miss a target if an experienced shooter starts every shot correctly. Since the shooter has control over when the target will be released, there are no

▼ Because skeet is such a structured game, it's "practically impossible" to miss a target if you start every shot correctly, the author says.

plausible excuses for failing to make a good first move on every target. As my great friend Murrell Smith reminds me, "The problem with excuses is that they never work."

Concentration and focus are absolutely necessary to making a good first move on every target. Yes, it requires monotonous discipline to repeat the same pre-

shot routine prior to every shot on every station. Even the venerable D. Lee Braun emphasized that controlling the mind is the "most important fundamental of all." He also stated that mental discipline is the most difficult factor in championship shooting.

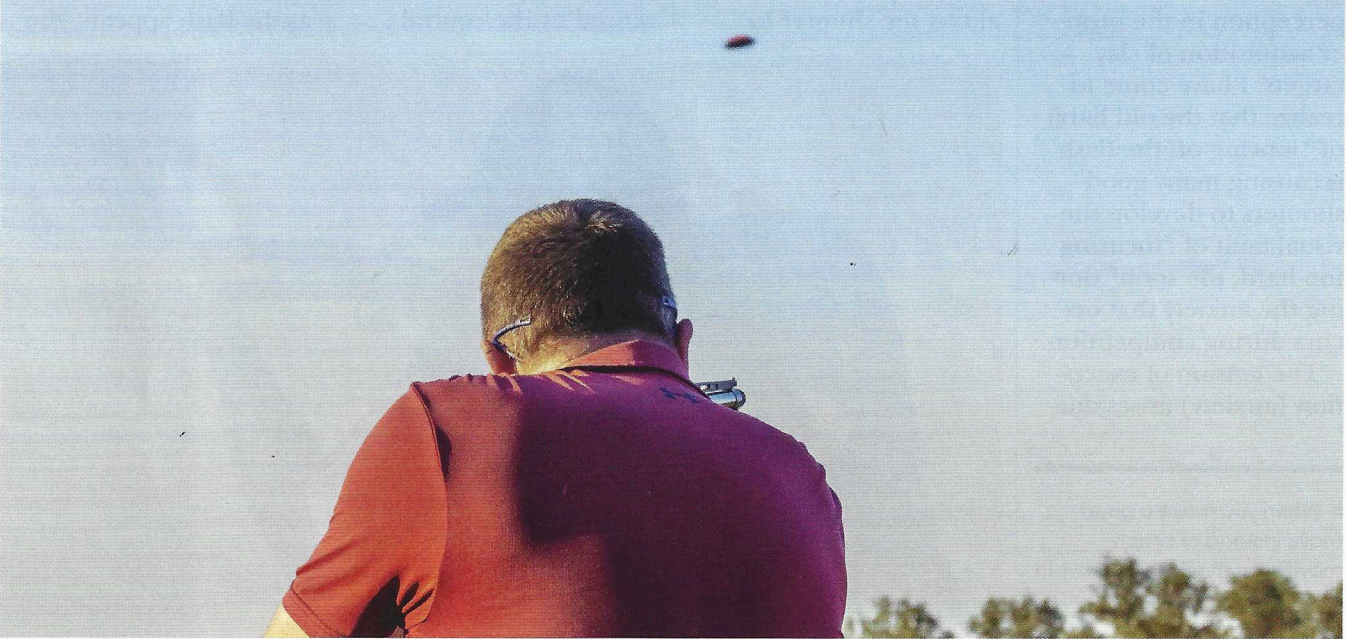
Let's assume a shooter does everything correctly during his or her pre-

◀ Make a good first move so you're not startled by the flash. If it startles you, you'll make a sudden move to try to catch up to the target.

shot routine. Then, the shooter begins with the correct gun hold and eye hold, calls for the high 2 target, is startled by its sudden flash, and makes a sudden move in an attempt to catch up to it.

**BEWARE THE TENSION OF EXECUTION**

The startle reflex is a set of skeleto-muscular contractions viewed as a behavioral interrupt that prepares the mammalian organism for action. It is elicited by an intense stimulus of sudden onset. The startle reflex can manifest as an eyeblink or a spastic movement of the hands and arms depending on the circumstances and the emotional state of the individual.



Seth Norrholm, an associate professor of psychiatry at Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit, studied the startle response in humans. Norrholm explained that startling is part of our fight-flight-or-freeze response. “It’s a reflex in the sense that it actually happens below the level of consciousness, at the level of your spinal cord.”

Whenever someone experiences emotional stress, it tends to increase their startle reaction. There’s also a connection to anxiety. Hence, the startle activator for clay target shooters is the fear of missing the next target.

When I coined the maxim, “How you look determines what you see,” I wasn’t considering the startle reaction and response at the time. I was just emphasizing the important role of visual perception in the proper acquisition of clay targets. I have come to realize that the old habit of “moving on the flash” is causing many good shooters to develop the visual fault of “focusing too hard, too soon” during the anxiety that occurs during competition.

The tension of execution (anxiety) arises dur-

► When you make a good move instead of simply moving on the flash, you avoid the problem of focusing too hard, too soon.



ing the pre-shot routine when a shooter’s mind thinks about executing the next shot successfully (future outcome) rather than quieting the mind into a state of awareness (present).

### **TRUST YOUR PERIPHERAL VISION**

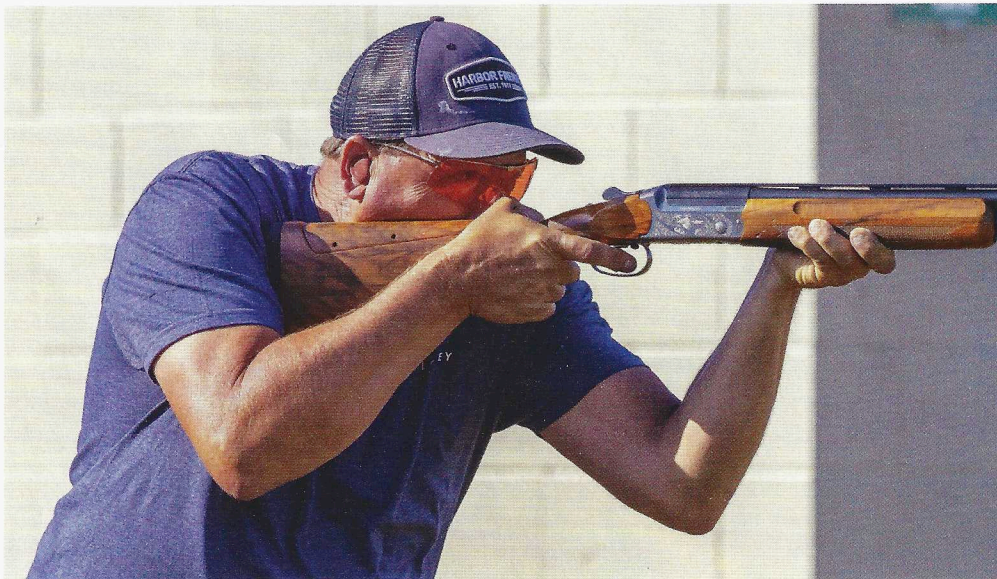
The ritual of establishing the quiet eye - quiet mind phenomenon allows the shooter to

▲ You’re startled partly because you are afraid of missing the target. This stems from anxiety and is a fight-or-flight response.

enter a state of readiness. When the shooting eye is in soft focus, it expands the peripheral visual field laterally to enhance the detection of the emerging target and instantly determine its speed, direction, and distance before it is acquired by the central

vision. Conceptually, the shooter is patiently allowing the target to enter the peripheral visual field rather than intently looking for the target with central vision.

When a shooter looks with the intention to acquire the target as soon as the flash appears, the



peripheral visual field contracts and activates the central vision prematurely. Central vision is designed to identify and track a moving object, not detect its speed, direction and distance. Shooters must be patient and trust their peripheral vision to see movement and acquire each target correctly.

I believe that “looking too hard, too soon” predisposes a shooter to an exaggerated startle reflex. The startle reflex causes shooters to abruptly start the first move with the arms and hands instead of the feet, ankles and thighs. This abrupt (bad) first move causes the central vision of the shooting eye to shift from looking for the “faster” clay target to seeing the “slower” muzzle. This shift of the eye’s depth of focus from the target to the end of the muzzle compromises optimal target acquisition.

### MANAGE YOUR STARTLE REFLEX

Since the startle reflex is an innate protective mechanism, it is automatic under certain circumstances. Once a startle has been activated, it is like a spasm that cannot be controlled. Attempts to manage the startle reflex involve two components: startle reaction and startle response:

**Startle Reaction** - Obviously, the emotions of fear, frustration, anger or anxiety will predispose a shooter to be startled by an unexpected stimulus because these emotions affect sensory perception. In the case of shooting, they adversely affect visual perception and proper detection and acquisition of targets. Developing a reliable pre-shot routine to promote a quiet mind before calling for every target is essential to preventing the startle reaction. Shooters with good visual discipline use the startle reaction as a cue to initiate their shooting reflex to make

a good first move. Therefore, proper use of visual discipline to promote a quiet eye before calling for every target is absolutely necessary. By this I mean to settle the shooting eye in expanded soft focus at the eye hold, call for the target, and then allow it to emerge into the visual field to be detected and acquired naturally.

**Startle Response** - When the startle reaction precipitates an adverse first move of the shotgun, the shooting eye instantly shifts to acquire the perceived threat. Hence, the focus of the shooting eye acquires the end of the muzzle instead of the target as it emerges. Now, the shooter must salvage the shot with a good second move. The second move requires extraordinary visual discipline to re-expand soft focus to properly acquire the target so the shooter can execute the focus-fire sequence with the target in the central visual field.

In summary, shooters must develop monotonous mental and visual discipline “to eliminate the unnecessary so the necessary may speak.” To paraphrase a common axiom, less effort is more effective. Making an effort to focus too hard, too soon is unnecessary, and it compromises optimal target acquisition.

By patiently allowing the target to emerge into expanded soft focus, the startle reflex will be activated. When the startle reflex is expected, the shooter can use it as a cue to activate the pre-planned move. Once the emerging target has been properly acquired by the peripheral vision, the target will be acquired and the focus-fire sequence will be initiated automatically. Simply summarized, “Soft focus - acquire; hard focus - fire!” **CTN**

► John Shima is a five-time World Skeet Champion. To view previous articles or order John’s books, go to [www.johnshima.com](http://www.johnshima.com).

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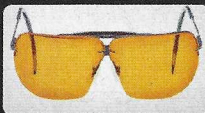
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