

Etiquette in Sporting Clays

Most organized activities have some basic rules of conduct, and sporting clays is no different. These conventions of behaviour, collectively referred to as etiquette, govern the respectful interactions between individuals. Etiquette is defined¹ as:

- Conventional requirements as to social behaviour; proprieties of conduct as established in any class or community or for any occasion.
- A prescribed or accepted code of usage in matters of ceremony, as at a court or in official or other formal observances.
- The code of ethical behaviour regarding professional practice or action among the members of a profession in their dealings with each other.

Etiquette in the shooting sports is rooted in a desire to combine both safety and respect for fellow shooters. Courtesy and etiquette are often difficult to distinguish from one-another. When everyone understands the fundamentals of etiquette, the enjoyment factor for the activity increases markedly.

The following points are a representative, rather than an exhaustive, list of etiquette for sporting clays. I am hopeful that after having read through the list, you will be able to add one or two more of your own.

Carrying of the shotgun – with break-action shotguns, it is normally considered proper to carry the gun unloaded, with the action open and the muzzles to the front. Unloaded is a given, as is having the action open, as these are clearly matters of safety. Having the muzzles oriented to the front is also a safety matter – all safe gun handling requires the shooter to have control of their muzzle at all times.

With pump action or autoloading shotguns, it is usually considered best to carry the firearm with the action open and the muzzle pointed directly up. There are some folks who like to carry the firearm with the muzzle pointed down, however, this is generally thought to be less desirable than carrying the firearm pointed upward.

The idea behind carrying the gun with the muzzle pointed in a safe direction has as one of its underpinnings the concept of the muzzle being pointed in a safe direction in the event of an accidental or negligent discharge. If one were to have such an unintentional discharge of the firearm, and the muzzle was pointed up in the air, it is only embarrassing. If, on the other hand, the firearm were to discharge into the ground near the shooter, there is the possibility of an injury from the debris, and if you have dogs, that is where they are. You will not get into trouble for carrying your shotgun with the muzzles down, but it is still a better idea to have them pointed straight up.

¹ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/etiquette>, downloaded 2017 11 03

Other people's shotguns – it is generally considered bad manners to touch or handle someone else's shotgun without first obtaining their permission. Most shooters are pleased when someone wants to have a look at their gun, and the vast majority will gladly allow you to have a look.

Approaching others while they are shooting – There are often differences in the amount of time each group requires to complete a particular shooting station. These differences frequently result in one group coming to the shooting stand while the other group is still shooting. Properly done, the group approaching the group that is shooting should stand back at a respectful distance and refrain from talking loudly while the other group is shooting. Driving up in a noisy vehicle or loud talking can be distracting for the shooter.

There are some groups who will come and stand directly behind the stand, and they do so without doing anything that might interfere with the shooters. While somewhat unorthodox, this is acceptable as long as they draw no attention to themselves. The best practice remains to stand back at a respectful distance and not to engage in any activity that might cause any sort of distraction to the shooter.

The rules of Sporting Clays relied upon in NSCA events stipulate that nobody may be in the three-foot area behind the shooter while the shooter is in the stand. This rule is generally considered to apply to other members of the shooter's squad, and not to members of the squad following, as there is a general understanding that they will be some distance away.

How you deal with individuals who choose not to observe this courtesy is entirely up to you. Some people will simply ignore those who are disrupting their shooting, while there are those shooters who will confront them. Still others will simply open their gun and do nothing until things quiet down. I am not an advocate of one rude act in response to another, but telling the group following you that you would appreciate not being disturbed is usually all that is required.

Observing the Rules – In addition to the written rules for Sporting Clays, each range will also have its own rules. It is the responsibility of each shooter to be conversant with these rules and to abide by them. One such example is the type of ammunition that can be used at the club. Most clubs have a policy that prohibits cartridges with shot larger than 7-1/2 shot. Some clubs, however, also have a policy that restricts the kind of ammunition that can be used. These clubs may require that the ammunition being used be designated "Target" ammunition, and they will not allow any ammunition that has the words hunting or game on the box or cartridge. They may also limit the speed of the cartridges, or the Dram Equivalent, as higher velocity cartridges will usually produce a higher sound impulse when discharged. These rules may have some safety components to them, however, they are more often driven by the management at the range trying to accommodate the concerns of their neighbours over noise levels. We as shooters can help by following the rules.

Another rule that is sometimes overlooked by shooters new to the game is the rule that requires the gun to be loaded only when the shooter is in the shooting position and ready to shoot. This is an important safety rule, but not one that is obvious to the new shooter.

Instruction – it is a very common trait in many of us to offer assistance when we see someone having trouble with some part of their shooting. At the same time, most people are not happy when someone offers unsolicited advice. This conundrum is best avoided by simply not offering anyone any advice unless they ask. Despite the best intentions, even by those fully qualified to provide the advice, it more often leads to bad feelings than any measureable improvement in the individuals shooting skill level. When the individual is ready to receive advice, they will ask. Until then, watch and respect the individual's right to figure things out on his or her own.

Don't leave a mess – None of us want to shoot at a messy station, so it is considered good etiquette to make sure all your waste finds its way into the bin at the station. This can be empty cartridge boxes, food wrappers, empty drink containers and of course your empty cartridges. Beyond these basics, it is helpful to the range management if you can knock your cardboard boxes down, as they take up a lot of room in the bins. It takes only a few seconds to get the boxes to fold flat, which increases the volume available for other waste in the bin, and decreases the frequency that the bins have to be emptied. Leaving the station clean and tidy sets a great example for the groups following behind you.