

Pre Shoot Planning

As shooters progress and improve, most find that the actions they take before the call for the target have a significant impact on their success in breaking the target. I have heard it said that up to 75% of targets are lost before the shooter calls for the target. I suspect there are other techniques that can help with shooter consistency, but I teach and advocate the methods advanced by the NSCA Instructor Program, namely, "*Pre-shot planning*" and "*Pre-shot routine*". There can be some confusion regarding these two important practices, so I will attempt to bring some clarity to each of these constructs – Pre-shot planning in this monthly installment, and Pre-shot routine in the next piece.

There are fundamental differences between the planning process and the routine. One significant difference is the pre-shot planning is different with every target presentation, while the pre-shot routine is the same every time. Another difference is that typically, the pre-shot planning is done once per target stand or presentation, while the pre-shot routine is done for every set of targets. In other words, when you come to a new station, you should do your pre-shot planning once, before you step into the shooting position, and you should do your pre-shot routine before you call for each set of targets.

Having a plan

The more consistent shooters are typically those that have a plan when they shoot – their pre-shot planning works hand-in-hand with their pre-shot routine, and both contribute to more broken targets. The best shooters know that in order to develop a beneficial plan, they need to have a good grasp of what the targets are doing – the first step in this process is therefore to watch the targets with purpose. A great deal of information is obtained from watching the target, all of which is required if you are to successfully engage the target.

The pre-shot planning is something best done outside the shooting stand – if you are already standing in the shooting station, you have most likely missed the opportunity to develop a comprehensive plan. In a game like International Sporting, where there are time constraints on the shooter, the clock is ticking.

While there is not an established pre-shot planning check-list, here are a few things you might want to consider before stepping into the stand or the hoop:

- What are your safe zones of fire?
- Watch the target to establish your break-point (BP)
- Consider your stance in relation to where your break point is
- Determine your visual pickup point (VPP)
- Determine your hold point (HP)
- Make the movement to the target and break it
- If there is a second target, understand where it will be when the shot at the first target is released

This may seem like an onerous and involved process, and for someone to whom this is new, it may very well be. Once the shooter starts to apply this process to their shooting, however, they will find that they will be able to develop a sound and useful plan in a very short period of time. Experienced shooters will complete this analysis in a second or two, and without much conscious thought. One of the principle advantages of a good pre-shot planning is the virtual elimination of the stress of uncertainty during the time the targets are in the air.

The concept of safe zones of fire is somewhat less applicable to target shooting scenarios than it is to hunting, but it is nevertheless required. Every shooter is responsible to ensure

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they do no harm, and once in a while a shooter will encounter a potentially hazardous target presentation, perhaps because of something as simple as a change in the wind.

Indeed, this is something that proficient hunters do without conscious thought – it just happens. A bird flushes, and the hunter will move her feet and set up for the shot without realizing she did it. The shot is made safely, and the bird is on the ground because she went through all of these steps, seamlessly and effortlessly:

- Understood safe zones of fire
- Watched the target and determined the line
- Set stance in relation to where the target was to be engaged
- Watched the target and made the movement to the target at the appropriate time

There is no sense of panic or urgency – just one of confident efficiency.

[What are the constituent parts of a plan?](#)

What are your safe zones of fire?

Understanding where everything is in the downrange area is a vital aspect of safe firearms handling. In addition, the shooter should also have a good grasp of the dangerous range of their shotgun. This is information that the shooter requires *before* calling for the target or making a move on a flushed target. After you call for the target, or after your dog flushes a rooster is not the time to determine if it is safe to shoot. If you are shooting targets, and shooting 7-1/2 or smaller shot, a car driving by on the road 300 m in front of you is not a safety concern at all. If you are shooting 5 shot, however, that car is entirely within the range of your shotgun.

When you are hunting, there are a lot of moving parts to be considered. There are dogs and potentially other people you need to be aware of at all times, but particularly before you decide to shoot at a bird. Good bird hunters are constantly looking around, making sure they know where everyone is, all the time. When there is any doubt, they will not shoot at the bird.

Watch the target to establish your break-point (BP)

Breaking the target is the primary objective of all clay target shooters, and experience has shown that committing to the break point is an important part of consistency. One of the reasons the positive relationship between the break point and shooter success is because it is the final step in the process, and it allows the shooter to move backwards, constructing a plan and they make the reverse progression from break point to hold point.

Consider your stance in relation to where your break point is

Once you have established where you want to break the target, you will understand how to set your stance to give yourself the greatest chance for success. If you are a right-handed shooter, you will most likely want to break the target in the area of about 10 o'clock, assuming that straight ahead is 12 o'clock.

Determine your visual pickup point (VPP)

Once your stance is set, you will then need to consider the best place to direct your focus when calling for the target. A safe place to start is somewhere in front of the target thrower

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and not right where the target exits the trap. If the target is thrown fairly hard, it will be moving quickly and it will be a blur when it comes off the arm of the thrower. It is generally better to watch out in front of the thrower, along the trajectory of the target, in a location where you can see the target clearly.

Determine your hold point (HP)

The hold point is the place where you hold your muzzle when calling for the target. A safe place to start is about one-half the way between your break point and your visual pickup point. Experience will inform your hold point selection as you develop more skills – you may decide you need to be closer to the break point or close to the visual pickup point. These are very subjective decisions, and what is perfect for one shooter may be impossible for another shooter.

There are really only two hard rules for determining your hold point – the first is that your muzzle should never be above the break point, and the other is that your hold point should always be beneath the line of the target.

Make the movement to the target and break it

When the shooter has done his or her pre-shot planning correctly, given due consideration to their individual skill sets, all that should be required to break the target will be to call for the target, to see it well and then move the gun to the break point. This is largely a matter of trust – the shooter should maintain a hard focus on the target while being aware of the gun, and trust the technique so as not to shift their focus from the target to the gun – they need to trust the gun is in the right place.

If there is a second target, understand where it will be when the shot at the first target is released

Having done all this, the shooter may then be forced to do it again very soon after the shot, particularly if shooting a pair of any description. When there are two targets to deal with, the shooter is then required to determine which target to break first, and where to move the gun to to prepare for the second shot. That is to say, the shooter will require the following:

1. Determine the break point of first bird
2. Set up your stance for the first bird
3. Determine the visual pickup point of the first bird
4. Determine the hold point for the first bird
5. Determine where the second bird is likely to be after the initial round has been released
6. Determine the break point for the second bird
7. Determine if any changes must be made to the stance, either before calling for the first target or in between shots
8. Determine the visual pickup point for the second bird
9. Determine the hold point for the second bird

This all sounds incredibly complex, but in reality, with practice, it is not difficult to master. The trick is to make sure all of this is considered before calling for the target.

Good target setters (pronounced 'devious') will try to make you break the first target in a location other than where you would prefer to break it. They will set the second target in such a manner that if you break the first target where you want to break it, you will not be in a

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good position for the second target. But if you understand what they are trying to do, and you break the first target in a more difficult location, the second target will be much easier.

Remember, the purpose of pre-shot planning is to help you get set up to give yourself the greatest opportunity to be successful.

It should be noted that this is not limited in its application to target shooting. It is also very much a part of any good bird hunter's regimen as well, albeit in a somewhat modified form. A good bird hunter is always flawless in their safety, being aware of any potential hazards in the field. He or she will know where it is safe to shoot and where it is not safe, as well as any potential hazards for other hunters or the dogs. They will know when a dog is closing in on a bird, and they will identify the bird before they engage it to ensure legal compliance. So while it may be a more structured and deliberate process in a target shooting scenario, the pre-shot planning process also has a place in field shooting.