

The future of any sport is almost always determined by the confluence of the continuous study and advancement of the techniques used in the sport as well as the introduction of new participants into the game. The future of the various clay target games is bound to this theory – in the games where there are new shooters joining the ranks, the games flourish and grow, and where there is not an influx of new shooters, the game stagnates.

Sporting clays has benefitted from large numbers of new participants, particularly youthful shooters, which has both bolstered the numbers of active participants as well as expanded the boundaries of what is possible. Some of the new, young shooters are proving to be very capable competitors.

This does not happen by accident – almost all successful young shooters are introduced to the sport through a structured process which emphasizes safety and understanding proper technique. These processes can be formal or informal, but they share some common traits, namely:

A significant emphasis on safety

Any sport involving a firearm must require stringent observance of safety protocols at all times. The best time to instill these values in a young shooter is from the very beginning. As with most students, people learn best from actually doing things, and they also learn by observing. This requires the person providing the instruction to both guide the young shooter through safe firearms handling as well as display flawless firearms safety at all times.

In addition to proper firearms handling practices, safety also necessarily includes proper eye and ear protection. Eye protection typically means a plastic lens – safety glass is quite heavy and uncomfortable and offers no additional protection. Hearing protection can be broadly categorized into one of two types – ‘in the ear’ and ‘over the ear’ styles. The ear protection worn over the ear provides better protection, but it is not as popular as headsets are warm and some people find it uncomfortable. If you can introduce a person to shooting and encourage them to adapt to the over the ear hearing protection, they will likely thank you many years later, when they are still able to hear.

A hat with a rim is also a form of safety equipment. Since the most likely risk to folks on the sporting clays course is being struck by pieces of broken targets, the rim of the hat provides some protection from this target fragments.

The NSCA Level I Instructor program is designed to create an instructor who will safely introduce a new shooter to the clay target games. This includes helping the student be successful while having fun. The Level I instructor is likely the ideal person for a new shooter to learn from.

Fun

To attract and maintain the interest of a young shooter, the process must be enjoyable. Very few people at any age are willing to provide the submissive loyalty and dedication we saw in the Karate Kid movie. “Wax on – wax off” was purposeful training, but the student didn’t understand why he was doing it, and he sure didn’t look like he was having fun. The new shooter is much more likely to develop a passion for the game and want to continue with their development if they have a great time. This includes being treated with respect and dignity, hitting some targets, and seeing that they are advancing their skills in the game.

Here are some of the best indicators that you are on track as far as having a good time is concerned:

- The young person is relaxed, engaged and at least smiling – laughing is preferred
- They are not uncomfortable or in pain due to their firearm and/or ammunition
- They are hitting targets, and
- They have not exceeded their endurance limits

The instructor who can develop the student in a respectful and fun atmosphere, and advance their shooting skills is the best bet for anyone wanting to maximize their enjoyment of the clay target games. It is best when they view shooting through the lens of not having to be better than anyone else, but rather, they only need to be better than they were yesterday.

Setting limits

One of the more difficult aspects of teaching young people is knowing when to say enough is enough. Young shooters are notoriously energetic, and they are not always conversant with the concept of pacing themselves. If you are planning an extended learning session, such as a clinic over several days, it is critical that limits be set on the number of rounds each young shooter will shoot each day. If no limits are set, young shooter are likely to shoot too many rounds and then be sore the next day. It is difficult to learn when you are uncomfortable. Finding other activities that will enhance the young shooter’s individual skill sets without wearing them out with more shooting.

Shooting done for the sake of shooting, rather than with a training objective, is not productive. A lot can be learned from each shot and each target presentation – if the learning points are emphasized, as opposed to just shooting and shooting more, the young shooter will progress more efficiently.

Proper equipment

Serious thought should be given to the equipment the new shooter will start out with. Depending on their age, and their height, many young men can likely get off to a decent start

with a 'normal' size shotgun. Smaller young men and almost all young ladies will benefit from a shotgun which is somewhat lighter and somewhat shorter through the butt-stock. Most young ladies and some young men will also benefit from a stock with more drop at the heel, such as a stock with a Monte Carlo design. Another critical dimension that is rarely given any consideration is the wrist of the stock, the stock behind the trigger where the shooters had grasps the buttstock. A very narrow wrist is something that most younger shooters really appreciate

Most good instructors will be able to perform some rudimentary gunfitting services. More experienced instructors will be able to make more precise corrections to the stock to get a better fit.

If the student is going to be given the best opportunity to be successful, the shotgun he or she is using needs to be reasonably well-suited to the shooter.

The ammunition being used by the student also needs to be appropriate – the softest recoiling load should be used for new shooters. Several factors contribute to recoil – the two most influential are the mass of the shot payload in the cartridge and the second being the muzzle velocity produced by the cartridge. Other factors include the propellant used in the cartridge and the wad. For the purposes of this discussion, we will focus on the payload and velocity.

A load of less than one ounce is far more than adequate to break clay targets, especially the targets a new shooter is likely to encounter. There are several 28 and even 24 gram loads available at a very comfortable 1,200 feet per second which will break any target within 45 yards. Kent has recently introduced a 2-1/2" cartridge with 24 grams of shot – this is a very soft shooting round, which will allow the student to focus on the target and their technique as opposed to dealing with the recoil of a standard target load.

The use of more appropriate loads will give the student the best opportunity to be successful, which will usually result in the student advancing faster and being more excited about the sport.

Training

Training is not for everyone, but for the serious student, it is really the key to success. Training is rarely fun – it is much more like work. There is a significant difference between practice and training. Practice is going out with some friends and shooting informally, having fun with good-natured humor and playing around with the target presentations. Training is much more structured – it usually involves an analysis of the target presentations that are giving the student difficulties, and results in a structured training program to address the identified gap in the student's repertoire.

If, for instance, the student is struggling with relatively low, fast crossing birds coming from the left, a coach may have the student shoot for an extended period, under supervision, from

stations 3, 4 and 5 on a skeet field, shooting only the high house target. The coach will typically oversee the training to ensure the student is working on the right things – practice does not make perfect if the student is practicing the wrong things. Perfect practice makes perfect, and it is rarely fun or easy. It is very much like work, which explains why only the most serious students engage in training. It is a lot more fun to shoot a round of targets with friends without any structure, but this practice will rarely lead to an advancement of the skill sets of the practitioner.

As one of the best shooters anywhere says, and something we should all strive for, ***“I don’t shoot a target until I can hit it – I shoot a target until I can’t miss it!”***

If you have a young individual who is interested in getting into shooting, how they start will almost determine how far they go and how much enjoyment they will derive from the sport. Starting them out with the right kit and the right guidance will generally produce the most satisfactory results.