

Behind the Scenes – Some of the lesser-known aspects of hosting a registered competitive event

Most of us roll in to the shoot grounds, visit with our friends, have fun shooting the course, enjoy a meal and some more visiting and then head for home. Unless you have been helping with the shoot, you are likely not aware of the amount of effort required to make the event a success. It is my hope that when you have finished reading this post, you will have an appreciation for the work that goes into making your shooting experience the best it can be.

Before the event

Long before the first shooter arrives, the club hosting the shoot has spent considerable time planning out the shoot calendar for the year. The larger clubs have full calendars, and they frequently have most of their dates set up in October for the following year. They need to ensure they are not in conflict with other clubs and that the dates they want to use for their event are appropriate.

Once the date has been determined, the club will need to ensure that the association under which the targets are registered finds the dates acceptable as well. This is another check to ensure there are no conflicts.

With an approved date, the club then needs to determine what the structure of the event will look like. Will it be one day or two? Will it be standard sporting clays, or will there be other elements to the event, such as sub-gauge events, a Preliminary event, specialty events (pump action and/or side-by-side), Super Sporting or International Sporting (FITASC) events. The club needs to strike a balance between too many targets, which simply wears people out, and too few targets, which makes travelling to the event less appealing.

In some instances, when relying on online registration applications, the club will be required to create a shoot record within the program and configure it to reflect the layout of the shoot. In the larger events, this can require a concentrated effort on the part of the club, to ensure that dates and times are correct, to prevent scheduling conflicts. As the size of the shoot grows, the demands on the host club increase, along with the expectations of the shooters. It is in everyone's best interests to have the shoot proceed smoothly.

The event host must ensure that the appropriate number of target throwing machines (traps) are available, as well as additional units in the event of a malfunction or breakdown. Traps and their controlling electronics are expensive and require maintenance and upkeep if they are to remain functional. They must also have adequate numbers of targets on hand, and many clubs have multiple colour variations of the same target to meet changing conditions. The most common target colour is blaze orange, but there are targets with a painted underside as well. The general rule of target presentation is to have a target colour that contrasts sharply against

the background. Under normal conditions, a black target is the best target to throw when the sky is the background. Having an assortment of target colours increases the cost and the set-up time of the course.

The host should also design a course that is somewhat different than the target presentations that have been thrown on that same property before the competition. This often requires moving traps, changing out targets (to ensure the best coloured target is in the trap) and preparing the ground for the trap. Creative target setting can take many hours of work, involve several people from the club and consume a lot of targets. And all of this work can be largely rendered moot by a significant change in the forecasted weather. If targets are set with the understanding that the weather on the day of the event will, for instance, have light winds out of the south, things will certainly appear different if the forecast is wrong and there are strong winds out of the west instead. Many hours of work will have been in vain, and the targets will appear to the shooters to have been poorly set. Unpredictable winds have caused a great deal of frustration for both target setters and shooters alike.

On the morning of the shoot, the event host is busy sorting out things like getting payment for the event from the shooters, ensuring that folks are squadded, and that they are properly classified. There are often questions about membership, and those often need to be resolved before the shooter can participate. Dealing with these issues in a timely fashion and moving shooters through the administrative process requires people, planning and execution.

During the Event

For the most part, things are usually less demanding on the club during the event. If there are changes that are required on the morning of the shoot due to unexpected weather conditions, they can be made before the shooters are on the course. No changes to the course are allowed once the shooting has started. It could be an unfair advantage for one squad to shoot a station and then for the station to be changed in some material fashion before being shot by the rest of the squads. This becomes a problem when a trap breaks down and has to be replaced by another unit. It is possible to get the target to be quite similar to the original presentation, but this takes time and it is not going to be precisely the same presentation.

If there is a break between rounds of the course, the better courses will be changed in some significant manner. The average competitor is not particularly interested in shooting the same targets in the afternoon as they did in the morning, and they are even less interested in shooting the same targets on the main event that were shot on the preliminary event. These changes require an enormous amount of work on the part of the club – while all the shooters are enjoying their lunch break, the club is working diligently to re-set the course, fill the traps with targets and clean the course of refuse. All of this work is done, at break-neck speed, while the shooters are relaxing and enjoying their lunch.

Following the event

As the shooting activities wind down, the club organizers are required to count the scores and determine the High Over All (HOA) shooter, and in some events, the Runner Up, and then the first-, second- and third- place shooters in each class. Once this has been sorted out, the prizes are awarded and everyone is on their way home.

The results of the shoot are recorded electronically (on a spreadsheet for the CNSCA and entered into Winscoreonline for NSCA events) so that the individual scores are reported to the organization registering the targets. These scores are added to the individual's record with that organization and those results are used to make classification decisions.

The club is expected to complete and submit these records in a timely fashion, and they are expected to be accurate and complete. This is another administrative burden placed on clubs hosting these competitive events.

When all of the administrative work is done, the club also has to clean up after the event. These efforts include the empty hulls, the empty cartridge and target boxes, cleaning up after lunch, and moving traps out on the course. Other duties include reloading the traps with targets and making sure everything is ready for the next day the club is open for business.

Some common misconceptions

Super-hard targets – There are individuals who believe that the targets thrown at competitions are set to be exceptionally difficult, and they are less inclined to participate simply because they do not want to be humiliated. While this precise circumstance has unfortunately happened in the past, it is a rare event and it is rarely seen as clubs grow more aware of both shooter- and organizational- expectations. There are no hard and fast rules on the matter of target difficulty, most courses will be set with the majority of their targets being hittable, reasonable targets. In International Sporting, there are three classes of targets – A, which 80% of the shooters are expected to hit regularly; B, which 60% of shooters will hit regularly, and finally, C, which 40% of the shooters will hit most of the time. While these rules are not written into sporting clays, many clubs use them as a general guideline and they will design their course with nine or 10 stations (out of 14) with A class targets, two or three with B class targets and usually no more than two stations with C class targets.

The general consensus is that exceptionally difficult target presentations in any quantity do more harm to the sport than good. In Canada, we are trying to build the sport and increase participation. Few shooters will return to a course where they were humiliated and where they felt powerless to hit the targets that were thrown.

It is not in the best interest of the club nor the organization under which the competition was held to have poorly set target courses.

Impossible to win a prize – There are several different prize structures currently being employed, with the common thread running through them all is the concept of a class ranking system. Without a class system, the shooters would simply be ranked from the best shooter down to the least successful participant, and there would be one winner. With the widely diverse range of shooting abilities, there will always be those who will not be competitive at the top levels of competitive events. The class system changes the dynamic of the competition by grouping shooters together with shooters of a similar ability.

If, for instance, you are a C class shooter, and your average is 62%, you will be shooting against shooters who also have an average similar to yours. If you are frequently finishing towards the back of the pack, you are likely to be offered a class reduction to D class, and if you are winning in C class, you are likely to be moved up in B class. Some people are right on the line between two classes, and are moving back and forth, while others are quite competitive in their class and have been for an extended period.

Therefore, being properly placed in a class will make the individual competitive and they should win prizes for their shooting from time to time.

Unfriendly atmosphere – Most shooting activities and events are fun, which is why they are so well attended. Competitive events are also a lot of fun, although there are always those folks who tend to take things a bit too seriously. In reality, there is not a lot at stake – some shooters have been heard to say, “Nobody is driving a new truck home tonight.” This seriousness should not be mistaken for unfriendliness – indeed, many new friendships are struck up when strangers are squadded together at a competitive event.

A very knowledgeable shooter and competitor refers to most competitive shooters as ‘bonspielers’ – they like to compete, and they want to do well, but it is more about the social aspects of the event than actually shooting at a very high level. Most competitors are not going to sign up for lessons or buy new equipment based on the results of a shooting competition. They simply have a great time and look forward to the next event, where they get to see and visit with friends.

If you look around the next time you are at a competitive shooting event, you should notice that most of the people there are smiling, joking around and appear to be having a good time. It is most certainly not the same series of expressions you would expect to see in an Emergency Room, on a fire truck racing to a serious event, or on troops on the eve of combat. These are fun events, and the vast majority of people there are enjoying themselves.

Stressful atmosphere – Stress, in many instances, is a product of the mindset of the individual. Stress is an inherent element of competition, and how each individual handles the stress of competition usually has a bearing on both their level of enjoyment and their success. Those shooters who can manage the stresses associated with competition will usually do quite well. Those who let the stress dominate their thoughts will often struggle.

How will you know how well you are handling stress? It can manifest itself in a dramatic drop in your scores. If you shoot in the 80s all the time, but in the 60s during a competition, you are likely a victim of poorly managed stress. People under stress will often change what they do, rather than rely on what they have enjoyed success with in the past. Trying too hard will frequently have a detrimental effect on performance, in any sport. Hockey players that hold the stick too tight will not make the best passes or score a lot of goals. A quarterback who forces a pass into double coverage will not win a lot of games.

Developing a reliable shooting system and having a good, easy to perform pre-shot routine are just a few of the ways to overcome the stress associated with competition.