

By Christie Melhorn, November 1 2017 — for the University of Calgary Magazine called the Gauntlet.

Growing up in a hunting and fishing household, seeing my dad in a camouflage windbreaker loading his truck with rifles was a Saturday morning tradition. While I've never gone into the bush with him for a hunt, my childhood was embellished with crisp fall and spring mornings at the shooting range. We would sit silently as his truck rattled over bumpy back-country roads on our way there. The consequential headache would usually make me resent being dragged away from my Nintendo 64. But once we arrived to the grounds, the clink of metal and echoing crack of a fresh bullet was captivating — especially at a clays course.

Sporting clay courses are fitted with machines that eject small clay discs at a variety of angles and speeds, simulating small-game animals like pheasants, ducks and rabbits. The [National Sporting Clays Association \(NSCA\) website](#) explains that clay shooting helps hunters to sharpen their skills during the offseason. But Ron Hillman, an NSCA-certified instructor at Silver Willow Sporting Club in Carstairs, explains that the sport is purposeful for hunters and non-hunters alike.

“It was initially thought of as a game for the hunter. But not everybody who shoots wants to compete — they're looking for fellowship,” Hillman said. “The first target a person breaks, they get pumped. It demands strong hand-eye coordination. You learn a different stance and how to position your body. It's really unique.”

Silver Willow is a family-run club founded almost 30 years ago by Don and Gwen Day. As accomplished trap shooters — another form of target shooting — the Days sought a fresh challenge. Shortly after trying sporting clays, Don proposed building a course on their third-generation family farm. Gwen Day says they wanted to share their love for the sport with others.

“We wanted other Albertans to enjoy what we enjoy. It's rare opportunity — especially back then. A lot of people didn't have access to this before,” she said.

As a recreational shooter, I find reward in both the sensory pleasure of the shattering clay and making a hard shot. But more importantly, shooting is an opportunity to bond with my father, whose aloof demeanour often causes unintentional distance between us. The intense focus and meditative quality of shooting facilitates a way for us to connect in a way that verbal language sometimes can't.

Based on the comradery Day and Hillman experience at Silver Willow, the relationship my father and I have with shooting is widely shared. Day and Hillman agree that it creates intimacy with others and nature, which carries potential benefits for students.

“It’s something different to do with fellow students that pulls barriers down. Nobody really has an advantage when they’re learning to shoot. You’re mostly competing against yourself,” Hillman said.

“It’s a stress relief. You can’t think about work or your to-do list,” Day added. “There’s the also element of being in nature. We’re open year-round so you can experience shooting during the different seasons. Seeing frost on the trees and hearing the crunch of snow under your feet gives an appreciation for the seasons.”

Hillman says the humbling and engaging nature of the sport has inspired its popularity, giving it the nickname of “golf with a gun.”

“I am seeing a lot of family and couples shooting — it’s the new date night thing,” Hillman said.

In their nearly three decades at Silver Willow, Day and Hillman have noticed the once male-dominated shooting industry evolve to be more welcoming of women and children.

“You learn a lot about different social dynamics at the club. On average, women and children tend to listen better,” Hillman said. “The whole industry has evolved. Guns used to be designed for the average-sized man. Manufacturers now create stocks for children and women to ensure they can shoot comfortably and make those targets.”

“I’ve seen juniors, seniors, men and women all shoot together,” Day added.

Now a more inclusive sport, Hillman emphasizes that shooting can help break down cultural stereotypes and misconceptions. He recalled a private session he once led.

“I guided a team event for a large oil and gas company a few years ago. On my squad, I had the CEO and his administrative assistant,” Hillman said. “The CEO was this 6’4”, athletic guy. And his assistant was a petite lady. With a lot of guys there’s this whole macho-thing where they think, ‘I’m going to figure it out for myself’ — that was the exact scenario here. But she didn’t feel that she had to prove something and proceeded to kick his butt.”

Hillman explains that Silver Willow is an inviting environment that values safety. All are welcome to visit, given that the club’s safety procedures and ethics are respected.

“From a safety point of view, there’s never been an accident. People are looking after each other here, regardless of if you know them or not,” Hillman said. “In a learning scenario, there are no errors here. It feels like family.”

Based on Hillman's statement, the Days' have met their goal of creating a friendly, inclusive club. Day remains modest in saying that the club's influence exceeded the family's initial vision.

“One client said to me, ‘You didn’t just build a business, you built a community.’ I thought that was a really powerful, humbling statement. I can’t say that was a lofty goal of ours. We’re just real people who try to welcome everyone who comes as a guest at our home,” she said.

[Click here](#) to learn more about Silver Willow Sporting Club and [here](#) to learn more about Canada's sporting clays community.