

High pheasants and fast balls

Malcolm Plant looks at how to perfect your shooting technique and avoid some of those early-season googlies

Shotgun shooting has many similarities with sports such as cricket, tennis, golf and snooker. All of these sports require a considerable degree of competence in eye-hand co-ordination, and a high level of concentration and mental focus is essential for good performance over an extended period of time.

I mentioned cricket first in the list of examples because, as I write, I have just been watching Ben Stokes' heroics batting on



Ben Stokes: perfect co-ordination

the final day of the third Ashes test match at Headingley in Leeds. England accomplished their highest fourth innings run chase, scoring 362; Stokes scored 135, including eight sixes and 11 fours. Good eye-hand co-ordination? I think so. Concentration and mental toughness were tested to their limits as Stokes and the last man in, Jack Leach, the spin bowler, accumulated 76 runs for their final wicket stand. Leach only scored one run, but he had the concentration and technique to stay at the crease while Stokes focused on demolishing the Australian bowling.

As we approach the game-shooting season, what can we mere mortals do to



Start in a 'wrong' foot position and move as you mount the gun

improve our performance? The quotation "The more I practise the better I get" has been attributed to several sports stars and contains the core of what needs to be done. If you haven't picked up your shotgun since the end of the game season last January, you are not really going to be in good shape out in the field. Clay shooting can help to rectify this rustiness.

Game and clays

There are two significant differences between clay and game shooting: foot movement and target variation, which is linked to target selection. Do not listen to the myth about clays slowing down and pheasants speeding up, they are all just moving targets in the sky if you have good technique. »

When shooting a Sporting clay competition, you are asked to accept all of the targets that the course setter is going to present to you. In other words, for example, shoot this target A and then shoot that target B.

You can decide that target B is too difficult and have two barrels at target A in an attempt to make sure of one hit, but you have automatically dropped a point and another competitor may be able to score consistently and beat you.

When shooting game or pigeon you are able to select which targets are most appropriate for your capability and therefore pace and align your target selection to maximise your opportunities. If you watch

“Skilled game shots are never rushed, their competence based on good mental control and target selection”

skilled game Shots they never appear to be rushed. This competence is based on good mental control and target selection, coupled with superb gun-handling techniques.

Know your technique

It is valuable to know what shooting technique you use: is it swing through, point and pull ahead, or maintained lead? If you don't know, a coach should be able to point you in the right direction. If you shoot clay competitions, you may well have to use all these techniques to cope with the challenges offered by a wily course setter.

There are strengths and weaknesses in each of them. With game shooting you can use your preferred technique because you are in control of your target selection. I would strongly recommend point and pull ahead.

To start with, choose targets that are within your capability at your local clay ground. There's no point demoralising yourself by making things too difficult from the off. Right-to-left targets, left-to-right



targets, true-driven targets and over your head — on each target presentation ensure you are hitting reasonably well with your preferred foot position set-up.

Introduce foot movement to replicate what happens in the game field. Stand facing in a 'wrong' foot position, call for the target, move your feet as you mount the gun and shoot the target. Practise on all the

crossers and driven targets.

When you feel confident, move on to more distant clays. At a good Sporting clay ground there may well be stands where several targets are presented over each shooting stand that require foot movement between different shots. The key is that the four foundations of success are embedded and practised: feet, gun mount, shot



technique and forward allowance.

Having developed a good gun mount, it is important to keep your head on the stock of the gun throughout the shot – no head lifting.

Try to use point and pull ahead consistently as your technique. Having an awareness of forward allowance or lead can only be developed by shooting

targets of differing speeds and heights, helping you to build up a library of lead pictures.

With some shooters this is more or less instinctive, with others there is some awareness of seeing the lead picture. Take care when listening to other Guns talking about lead, as everyone perceives lead differently.

Dr Malcolm Plant is chairman of the Institute of Clay Shooting Instructors and a Clay Pigeon Shooting Association senior coach.

The Institute of Clay Shooting Instructors was formed in the 1980s to provide qualified coaches with opportunities for further professional development, by the provision of seminars, workshops, practical activities and educational visits. ICSI coaches can be found at www.ICSI.org.uk



Target variation

The predominant challenge of game and pigeon shooting is target variation – the birds may be arriving from different directions, at different heights and, due to the terrain or wind, they may be curling significantly. This is why foot placement is so important.

While a competent clay shot may be able to hit 85% to 90% of clays to win a competition, a game shooter who bags 50%, or one pheasant for every two shots, is a very capable performer.

A three-to-one cartridge-to-kill ratio is good on normal game days, but for more challenging, curling and higher game targets the ratio may well go out to five-to-one or even 10-to-one, depending on the terrain and weather conditions. Be realistic about your capabilities.

Here's a tip about how to approach high, true driven targets coming towards you, straight over your head. Generally you have quite a bit of time to see this target arriving, so use this time to turn sideways on and shoot the target as a high crosser.

By doing this you can see the flightline of the target throughout the shot and you can apply the appropriate forward allowance along the extended flightline. The target never disappears under the gun. You can practise this technique at your clay ground.

And remember, whether you have a cricket bat or shotgun in your hands, make sure you keep your head down as you go through the shot. ■