

The numbers game

Dr Malcolm Plant looks at the history, rituals and etiquette behind where you end up in a Gun line on a day's shoot. As the saying goes, it's the luck of the draw. Or is it?

Most game shoots, from the DIY local syndicate and the small wildfowling club, through to the expensive estate shoots, have a system of rotating the participating Guns to ensure everyone gets a fair crack of the whip.

The increasingly popular 'simulated' clay days often have the same routine to rotate the shooting group as would occur during a grouse, pheasant or partridge shoot.

All that is happening here is that everyone draws for a number, which becomes their starting position peg number for the first drive of the day. This simple activity has become an intrinsic part of the culture of game shooting.

For a start, you learn whom you are going to be shooting next to in the shooting line,



The shoot captain briefs assembled Guns about how the day's sport will be conducted

with all of the banter and competitive etiquette that this may or may not involve.

Additionally, the rules of rotation are outlined during the peg draw process. There may be perhaps between six and nine Guns,

sometimes 10, in the shooting line.

Typically, an eight Gun line-up would move up two pegs for each drive as the day progresses. So if you draw Peg 5 for drive 1, for the second drive you are Peg 7, the third Peg 1, the fourth Peg 3 and so on...

Depending on the terrain, the weather, the capability of the Guns, the expected number of birds to be bagged and the number of drives, the shoot captain may request a move of three pegs between each drive, to even out the number of birds presented over each Gun during the day.

Draw your peg

The ritualised drawing of numbers can just be picking a playing card or a numbered marker pin from a leather slip, but since Victorian times the use of beautifully made silver and ivory peg boxes has developed. Many of these are collector's items today.

Drawing numbers is often accompanied by the consumption of a warming noggin. Cups with an engraved number under the base, containing a mouthful of sloe gin or port are inverted to reveal the your starter peg.

A very good shot in our clay club was invited to her first pheasant day a few years ago. The shoot captain, while explaining the rules of engagement for the day, mentioned that peg numbers were on the bottom of the port cup. Keen to find out who her shooting neighbours would be, she inverted the cup without drinking the port. Never forgotten that sort of thing.

A lovely little pheasant shoot in Galloway, which our wandering syndicate used to visit each year, handed out glass 12-bore sample phials with a shot of malt whisky; they had



Take your pick: varying methods to hand shooters their starting position, which range, clockwise from top left, ammunition, cartridge cases and cards

your number on the bottom and a screw cap, so you could put it your cartridge belt for elevelenses if you wished.

I got some reusable ones for our gang. Spent ammo make nice peg sets.

I have Winchester 270 rifle ammo, with number 8 drawn and magnum 44 pistol ammo with number 4 drawn. There are one or two engravers who visit game fairs

offering products and engraving services of this type.

The handcrafted wooden box and 12-bore cartridge set was made for a wandering game syndicate called the Guild of Free Loaders. I am not at liberty to disclose any more.

But just picking a number and being instructed 'two up' is an easy system. The >>





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Shooting place

peg card illustrates a useful way to avoid being next (in the Gun line) to someone who keeps shooting 'your birds'.

Having drawn your card Number 4 you will be advised that Even Numbers move up and Odd Numbers down (in column 1) or the reverse (in column 2).

For eight Guns, moving two places, you will rotate through the Gun line and only be between your starting neighbours

the instruction of 'move up two'. This past season I have had some of the best and most challenging stands by drawing pegs on the fringes of the Gun line. Not all of the birds fly over pegs 4 and 5.

At each end of the Gun line, the birds driven out of the cover in front of you will, either to your left or right, be 'your birds'. No one else is there to shoot them; good, long and hopefully high crossers – and the

“Drawing numbers is often accompanied by the consumption of a warming noggin”

occasionally; the next time would be the fifth drive.

The way it's decided which of the two columns is used is by tossing a coin, as shown on the card – heads and tails.

You see it's all a wonderful ritual, but this only works for eight Guns moving two.

End of the line

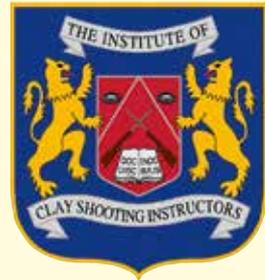
Don't worry too much if you draw a peg that may not initially look promising. Drawing 6 in an eight Gun line may not hint at a lot, with 8, 2 and 4 being scheduled by

rest of the Gun line may well be watching. This is where your technique is tested. Foot movement becomes critical with birds curling away out of the side corners of the drive.

So take your time. Pick your target as early as you can. Move your feet as you start the gun mount, to get into the best shooting position. Keep the muzzles of your gun on the target and its line and, when the stock of your gun is firmly to your cheek, pull ahead to get your forward allowance and pull the trigger. Keep your head down and stay with

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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



the target until you see the bird fold up; you might need a second barrel. Then move back to your optimum start positions for feet and gun hold point and wait for the next one.

If you're doing it right it feels and indeed looks like slow motion. Prepare for compliments at the end of the drive. You're moving like Darcey Bussell. Again! ■

