

Suits you, sir

If you are new to shooting, it is easy to be distracted by the breadth of choice and prevailing fashion when it comes to choosing a gun that is right for you. **Malcolm Plant** highlights what to look for and, as importantly, what to avoid

Let me start by telling a story. I was refereeing at one of the England selection shoots for the sporting clays team a few years ago. My stand on the course at a North Yorkshire ground was a pair of high left-to-right crossing targets from a tower. They were a rather challenging pair from two different traps on report, one after the other, and at slightly different angles. But they were hittable with any shotgun in competent hands – 12- or 20-bore, though the lighter 28-bore with its smaller load of shot pellets may have been testing the pattern of the shot cloud somewhat.

There were four pairs to be shot and the steady stream of competitors was occasionally producing someone who could hit the lot and leave the stand with a satisfying 8 on their scorecard. A gentleman, who I did not recognise as a local, arrived at the back of the small queue waiting to shoot; he had a small group of disciples in tow and was explaining how to hit the types of target they were encountering on their circuit of the course. Let's just say that he sounded extremely knowledgeable.

When it was his turn to shoot, he stepped forward and asked if he could see "two pairs of the targets, please" so that he could select

his chokes and decide how to shoot these crossers. The rules say that if you have been in the queue you should use this time to determine your approach to the targets, but it was a lovely warm summer afternoon and I didn't want to upset his day, so I said he could. As he changed his chokes, I glanced around to see if my queue was backing up. That was fine, but there were a few nodding heads, smiles and winks at the referee.

"Pair Lost. Pair Lost. Loss/Hit. Hit/Loss. Thank you, sir. Unload." He walked off with 2 on his card.

So, step one in buying your first gun is taking advice from someone you can trust.

Most gun shops are reliable but I know of one in the Midlands that sold a right-handed gun to one of my friends, for his left-handed son, with the recommendation that it fitted him well. A shooting coach who worked on an adjacent shooting ground pointed out this rather fundamental mistake. The error was rectified with a different gun.

The multipurpose acquisition

For the beginner, it is perfectly possible to buy a shotgun that will do most things well. If you are interested in doing some pigeon and vermin control, together with joining the local DIY game syndicate and practising or competing at the clay clubs in the area, there is definitely an affordable gun for you.

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"Most people find over-and-under shotguns easier to use"

Get some lessons and advice from a qualified coach – there will be plenty of CPSA and BASC qualified coaches local to you. Having introductory lessons and not spending too much on your first gun, especially at a time when your shooting technique is still in its formative stage, will be better use of your money.

Around £1,000 will buy you a very serviceable first gun, which will more or less last forever. Don't dismiss secondhand guns from the well-known international suppliers; you can get good value in the pre-used shotgun market if you go to a reputable gun shop. I would suggest buying an over-and-under shotgun. Most people find them easier to use as you are looking along the rib of

a single barrel when shooting. The majority of users find this "sight-picture" easier to operate compared with the larger expanse of horizontal metal of a side-by-side gun.

Most modern over-and-unders have single triggers with a selection switch to determine which barrel fires first. The multipurpose gun to go for will be called a "Sporter" if it is being marketed for the clay shooter or a "game

gun" for the pigeon or pheasant shooter. They are essentially the same thing, though the Sporter may be slightly heavier to help reduce recoil fatigue when shooting 100- or 200-target clay competitions. The game gun will probably have a safety catch that re-engages to safe when the gun is opened, whereas the Sporter will probably remain active for firing when reloaded and closed. A gunsmith can make an internal adjustment and change to either system on most makes of modern gun.

Be mindful that there is an element of fashion involved in barrel length. When over-and-unders became popular in the UK, the gun you would see everywhere was the Winchester 101, and it is still a very

Don't shell out too much on your first gun – your money is better spent on introductory lessons



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Buying your first gun

usable gun. My first over-and-under was a 101 with knurled multichokes that protruded noticeably from the barrel ends. The 101 was a 28in-barrelled gun and many of the top clay Shots of the time shot a 101. Since then 30in barrels have become the fashion, with 32in or even 34in often favoured by the big boys.

For your first gun, however, buy a 28in or 30in that feels nicely balanced between your hands. This should be when the hinge of the action is approximately midway between your hand on the stock and your forward hand on the fore-end. Because 28in-barrelled guns are rather out of fashion they are often priced very reasonably on the secondhand market. As the actress said to the bishop, "size doesn't matter, it's the way you use it that scores".

All choked up

Far too many people worry far too much about chokes. Protruding chokes are fashionable at the moment, particularly if they are in a variety of anodised colours. I think I would go purple and rose, but I have no idea what good it would do.

The measurement of performance of a shotgun barrel has traditionally been done by assessing the number of pellets hitting a 30in circle on a pattern plate at 40 yards. This number is compared with the number of pellets originally loaded into the cartridge. To get an average, the contents of say five or 10 cartridges are counted and the patterns of five or 10 shots are assessed with cartridges from the same box.

For any bore of shotgun, 12-, 20- or 28-bore, a "true cylinder" barrel should put 40 per cent of the shot-load in the 30in circle. This, of course, means that 60 per cent of the shot-load is outside of the circle and quite widely spread.

A 10-thousandth of an inch choke constriction at the barrel end of a 12-bore is defined as "quarter choke" and should place 55 per cent of the shot in the 30in circle. "Full choke" is 40-thousandth constriction on a 12-bore barrel, but that only puts 70 per cent of the shot in the 30in circle. There is, you will see, a law of diminishing returns and going for very tight chokes does not help much and can increase recoil.

A good all-purpose choking is, say, quarter and quarter in each barrel, or half and half. Browning's standard fixed-choke combination has traditionally been a quarter and three-quarter combination. So stick to the middle ground on chokes and forget them and focus instead on your technique as a route to hitting more targets. Buy a gun with multichokes for flexibility if you wish, but don't keep changing them in the hope of great success.

So what is important?

Surprise, surprise, it is where you shoot the gun. The gun must shoot where you look and it is important that if you are right-handed, shooting with the gun in your right shoulder, your right eye must control the gun. Your right eye must point the gun where your right eye is looking. If your left eye is dominant in your perception of the world, you will shoot the gun in the wrong direction. Your shooting coach can help with this.

The line of sight of your eye above the rib of the shotgun must just graze the rib. If you are looking into the back of the top lever of the gun your eye is too low. If you are seeing a lot of the top rib like a motorway running away from you, your eye is too high. Ensuring that you mount the gun consistently to your cheek to get this gun position is absolutely key. The gun that allows you to do this is

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



a good fit for you. Elite shotgun performers train to get this gun-mount correct.

The height of the comb on the top of the stock is the critical measurement in getting this correct gun-mount. Adjustable stocks can be useful for people who have slightly out of the ordinary length of neck or stocky build, for example. But in general, though different makes of gun do have slightly different height of comb measurements, most guns do fit most people well enough, particularly at this early stage of a shooting career.

The way to check that you are getting the gun to the right "touch position" on your cheek is to close your eyes, mount the gun and check that your eye has the correct sight position down the rib of the gun. Make sure you do it consistently. Mount the gun to your cheek and eye with both your eyes as horizontal as possible. Try to avoid canting your head over the stock.

Stock length is a rather second-order measurement compared with comb height. The longer the stock, the more the weight of the gun is pushed forward and away from your body, making it more difficult to accurately point the gun. With a very short stock there is a danger that the thumb knuckle of your rear, trigger, hand will bump into the end of your nose when the gun recoils. Most find a gap of about 1½in between the end of your nose and your thumb knuckle is a good position.

So there we have it: over-and-under, good barrel length, chokes selected and forgotten, mount the gun properly, point the gun where you are looking and place the shot pattern where you want it to go. Bingo! ■

