

Clay Pigeon Shooting Guide

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Smoking!

An introduction to the clay pigeon shooting disciplines by Don Brunt

Clay pigeon shooting has been with us for more than a century, the first governing body “The Inanimate Bird Shooting Association” having been formed as long ago as 1892. The Sport has progressed through the years and numerous disciplines are now available to choose from for the beginner coming into the sport but where should someone start?

Picture the scene... man walks into shooting ground and speaks to receptionist “Hello I would like to learn to shoot clay pigeons” after a deep breath the receptionist replies “certainly, would sir prefer to try English Sporting, Compact Sporting, FITASC Sporting, Automatic Ball Trap, Universal Trench, Down the Line, Olympic Trap, Double Trap, English Skeet, Olympic Skeet, NSSA Skeet or ZZ which we also call Helice”. Man walks out of shooting ground and heads for the local golf club instead....

Thankfully few people ever get asked such an intimidating question, but for the beginner the dilemma still exists. For many though the answer is already clear to them, this is because for most people coming into the sport they are doing so because a friend has introduced them to it, consequently they tend to follow the same discipline, for a while at least before looking to try something new. Someone from a rural background who shoots game or vermin with a shotgun will most probably at some time or another shoot English Sporting Clays which is the single most popular discipline in this country. Similarly most corporate events which feature clay shooting present targets of the type found in English Sporting. Targets which betray, courtesy of their names their origins as practise for real game targets “Springing Teal, Driven Grouse, Decoyed Pigeon”

Be prepared

However before even squeezing a trigger it is always advisable to make sure that you are suitably insured,



nobody likes to think an accident might happen to them, but in an ever more litigious society it's always prudent to err on the side of caution. Various bodies offer such cover including BASC (British Association for Shooting and Conservation), CA (Countryside Alliance), whilst Clay Shooting has its own specific body; the CPSA (Clay Pigeon Shooting Association). All three provide multi million pound liability cover but for the ardent clay shooter the latter provides additional services including a score registration system that compares shooters. This puts individuals into Classes within each discipline thereby creating a level playing field to encourage shooters of equal ability to compete against each other in Class events.

Once insured the next step is to find out where you can shoot, both the CPSA and BASC have information on their respective websites as to location of clubs and facilities available. However just turning up and hoping to blaze



away at clays is not really going to either A prove effective or B enamour you to the other shooters. Why? Well firstly you won't know what you are doing and how you should be shooting (those who say its practically impossible to miss with a shotgun have obviously never shot clays seriously) and secondly that inexperience will show in your gun handling, meaning that you probably won't appear very safe to the other shooters.

Back to School

It may seem like an unnecessary expense but a series of five or more lessons with a professional coach is the best way to proceed, it may well cost you £300-£500 depending on coach and venue but it really is money well spent. It doesn't take a long time to spend a similar amount blazing away at practice clays without gaining any understanding of why you are missing a target. If you speak to someone who took up the sport and then gave up on it quite quickly it is often the case that they became disheartened by their lack of success, ask them if they had any lessons and the answer will more often than not be a "no, I didn't really see the point". A good coach will teach you safe gun handling, the appropriate range etiquette, the principles you need to understand in order to learn to 'read' targets for yourself and will give you advice on what type of gun will be suitable for your chosen discipline and once you have purchased it will check that it fits you correctly. Having lessons allows you to make the inevitable mistakes that we all make, whilst learning a new skill in a safe controlled environment with someone who will ensure that those mistakes don't become bad habits that stay with you throughout your shooting career.

There are many types of coach who have trained in different ways favouring differing techniques, but as a rule of thumb if a coach is being recommended by others it's a good sign, few good coaches don't get repeat bookings and word of mouth is the best recommendation of all. However if you are stuck and you cant find one then try one of the associations previously mentioned as they will be able to put you in touch with someone suitably qualified.

Starter kit

Ok, so you have signed up for some lessons but what equipment should you get at this stage? Your shotgun



license hasn't come through yet so you can't get your gun but should you be buying clothing and glasses etc? Well the choice is yours, if you aren't 100% sure that it's the sport for you then hang on until you know you have a future in it, if on the other hand you have been bitten by the clay shooting bug (easily done) then the choice is yours. Generally speaking a good coach will be able to provide you with safety glasses (essential to prevent stray shot or clay fragments from going in your eyes) and hearing protection (sounds pretty obvious but how many shooters do you know who are hard of hearing?). Some coaches also provide skeet vests for their clients but if you don't have one the rule is to wear clothing that is both suitable for the weather conditions but not so bulky that it restricts movement.

For those looking to start kitting themselves out these three items are a good place to begin. Shooting glasses are a must, in fact in all types of competition they are now deemed to be mandatory so as you will be spending a lot of time wearing them it's worth getting the right pair to start with.

Hearing protection is also mandatory in competition and wearing it is just common sense, again those on a budget can get simple foam ear plugs for a few pence or for those wishing to splash out electronically amplified ear defenders are probably the most effective and comfortable solution.





If the choice of glasses and ear protection looks daunting then skeet vests are an even bigger choice, practically every clothing manufacturer linked to shooting produces at least one and they come in an array of sizes and styles from lightweight mesh fabric for hot weather use to waterproof, windproof sleeved designs for those wet and windy days. Generally speaking though the key points to look for are:-

- 1 It needs to fit you comfortably and allow free movement of your arms
- 2 It needs to have a padded shoulder for the stock to sit on when firing, this may be of a recoil reducing type, but

the primary importance is that it should allow the gun to mount in your shoulder comfortably and smoothly.

- 3 A couple of deep strong pockets are useful in which to carry cartridges
- 4 A breast or interior pocket is also useful for carrying things like scorecards

Many skeet vests have additional features such as clips for ear defenders, for carrying hand towels, and more pockets than you can find uses for. However if you stick to the main points above you won't go far wrong. Skeet vests are as much about personal style as anything else, just bear in mind that camouflage clothing is prohibited from many clay competitions.

Discipline Guide Sporting

No matter where you live in the UK you won't have to travel far to sample English Sporting, which started out as a way of simulating various live quarry species at the early Victorian shooting schools. "Springing teal" and "Bolting rabbits" are target descriptions that have been with us ever since, and although other quarry names may have fallen out of common use, many who shoot the discipline today do so for the same reasons that our great grandfathers did at the turn of the century; preparation for shooting live quarry.

Today every shooting ground offers a 'Sporting' course, whether it's an established layout with high towers at one of the large shooting grounds or a temporary course put together in a farmers field for a one off competition, most often known as a "straw bale" shoot. These smaller shoots are often 50 target events run over 5 or 6 stands (firing positions) each one throwing targets of a different distinct nature. For example one may have a pair of crossing targets, another a pair of low incomers or even high incomers (known as driven because they resemble traditional driven game) The variety of targets on offer is quite simply endless and target types can be mixed with one another so that the Sporting shooter will always be looking to find a new target against which to prove himself. Sporting is either shot in 5 or 6 man squads where each squad must move from stand to stand in



numerical order or in an open format where shooters can make their way from stand to stand in no particular order. On arrival at the Stand if there are no shooters currently shooting then the competitor may be shown a pair of the targets he is about to tackle after which he has the opportunity if required to change his chokes to better suit the targets.

Larger Sporting shoots can be from 100 to 200 targets and can involve shooting over 3 days for example at the World Sporting Championships, but the former one day 100 bird is the most popular, usually shot over 15 stands. To keep up with the desire for target variety and difficulty "Sporting" course setting has become an art form with the best in the business travelling the world to set targets. Feeding that variety are the clay trap manufacturers who can now throw targets that loop and turn in mid air (battues) that fly upside down and other ingenious modifications to raise the tempo of the sporting events. Sporting is also one of the few disciplines where several different sized clays might be used in a single event, with Standard (110mm), Midi (90mm), Mini (60mm) thin Battues (110mm x 9mm) and Rabbits all in the mix.

One major advantage that sporting has over the trap and skeet disciplines is that it can make use of natural contours and vegetation to make the whole experience feel as real as possible, for example tackling an incoming target that flies down a vegetation covered bank and must be shot before it disappears behind a large tree is behaviour not dissimilar to any number of quarry species.

Down The Line (DTL)

DTL is the forefather of many of today's disciplines such as Olympic Trap, Universal Trench, Double Trap and Automatic Ball Trap (ABT), it shares a common characteristic with them all; that is that the target is thrown away from the shooter and all such disciplines are known under the generic term "Trap"

A big part of Down the Line's continued popularity is that it is on offer at most shooting grounds, is relatively easy to get used to for those embarking on a shooting career and due to the nature of the targets thrown allows beginners to find their feet quickly, confident that they can shoot respectable scores that won't demoralise them. Of course another benefit over disciplines such as Sporting or FITASC is that many Trap layouts are under cover so it can be shot without getting rained on or having to trudge around a Sporting layout, consequently it is very accessible to the elderly or disabled who might find it more difficult to get around.

Skeet

1920's America was the birthplace of skeet (a thoroughly American sounding term, though if you get the chance check out the Wikipedia definition of skeet, most enlightening)

From its early beginnings it has evolved into three separate versions. NSSA (National Skeet Shooting Association) is the American body that controls it in its original form whilst the ISSF (International Shooting Sports Federation) controls the quicker trickier Olympic Skeet. Finally, English Skeet is the UK version of the discipline and one that differs only slightly from NSSA.

All variations use the same basic premise, that targets are shot from either 7 or 8 stations, 7 of which are situated on the arc of a 36.8 metre long semi circle whilst the eighth (only used in ISSF and NSSA) is along the long axis of the semi circle, half way between the High and low houses. Each of the 7 stands are 8.13 metres apart and are represented by a 91cm by 91cm square on which the shooter must stand. Targets are thrown from both the High (3.05 metre) and Low house (1.07 metre) both should land within 50-52 metres of the trap.

Skeet shooting is on offer at many grounds from the small informal clubs up to the large regional "Super





grounds” and it is a relatively cheap and straightforward discipline to offer. It doesn’t need a lot of acreage, it only needs 2 traps and it can be shot in all weather in relative comfort, in fact the trickiest part is building the two trap houses; one ‘low’ and one ‘high’, though in practice I have seen grounds put on perfectly good skeet targets using nothing more sophisticated than a couple of scaffold towers.

Shooting skeet is a great way for beginners to get involved in clay shooting as it teaches the basic theory and method of forward allowance. Consequently it has been the starting point for the career of many champion shots, with multiple FITASC and Sporting World Champion George Digweed having taken the British Open Skeet title back in 1991.

Tool of the trade

The guns used for the varying disciplines have evolved from the early days of competition when top shooters often carried guns with two sets of barrels, one set of tightly choked “trap” tubes for long targets and a set of open “skeet” barrels for short work. The advent of the interchangeable Multichoke system changed this and allowed the creation of the “Sporter” which is the dominant type used in clay shooting today, though some prefer to use discipline specific guns such as Trap or Skeet versions.

Barrel lengths are typically 30 or 32 inch though some 34 inch guns are coming onto the market. Weight is usually around the 8 to 8.5lbs range although the current vogue seems to be for heavier guns that are more “stable” on long targets.

Stock comb heights are higher than for a game gun and often standard “trap” stocks are used as the basis for Sporter woodwork though not the more extreme raised combs on modern ultra high shooting trap guns. Single selective triggers allow shooters to choose which barrel / choke combination to use at which target, and on higher end guns triggers are often adjustable for reach. Barrel ribs are often wider than on a game gun, usually ventilated (to disperse heat build up from repeated use) and with a

larger coloured bead on the end as opposed to the small brass bead usually found on live quarry guns. Interestingly though, some top shooters such as Richard Faulds have removed the bead from their gun entirely preferring instead to focus 100% on the target without the bead distracting their concentration.

Cartridges for competition use are limited to 28grams with many shoots insisting on the use of bio degradable fibre wad cartridges in preference to plastic wadded shells, especially when shooting over farmland or open countryside. The most common shot size used is 7.5 though 8’s and 9’s are popular for closer range work whilst 7’s and a few 6.5’s are used for longer edge on targets. Competitors often carry a mixture of shot sizes which they use depending on the targets presented, e.g. a first barrel close rabbit might need a 9 while the second barrel long crosser might be best suited by a 7.

Useful Contacts:

CPSA - tel. 01483 485400 www.cpsa.co.uk

BASC – tel. 01244 573 000 www.basc.org.uk

Countryside Alliance – tel. 020 7840 9200

www.countryside-alliance.org.uk



It's A Trap!

Fancy a crack at clay? Then get trap-savvy with the help of veteran bird-buster Mark Stone...

If you've ever shot at a clay pigeon you've come into some form of contact with a clay pigeon trap. This is the device that sends those little, made of pitch discs your way, the intended result being you shoot at it, break it and score a point. The ever ready servant of every clay shoot, traps can be made to throw easy targets, slow or fast targets and difficult targets, targets close in or at the extremities of range. Loopers, crossers, incomers, overheads, going away, rabbits, those that go straight up, Down the Line trap targets, ABT or Automatic Ball Trap, Double Rise, Skeet birds and the truly unique, fast spinning and unpredictable ZZ birds.

The thing you have to remember is that a clay pigeon trap will only throw a bird where the person who set out the course has set it to throw. There are exceptions, the Trap traps oscillate around a central pivot which means the trap will constantly throw different clays but within given parameters. The clay could go to the left, to the right, climb or fly low. There are also the traps such as the infamous Huntsman that are designed to simulate a

flush or pheasants or partridge. Set on its own dedicated, self-contained trailer, the three oscillating traps all throw at once filling the sky with clay pigeons, sending well over a hundred clays over the waiting shooters in a matter of a two- or three-minutes. Expensive, the Huntsman is good fun with a party of friends at a charity shoot or when sharpening your skills for game season. At the opposite end there are traps that just throw one at once and need human power to set them in motion.

A while ago

Before traps or mechanical devices were devised the original targets were at first birds then feathered covered silhouettes usually referred to as popinjays and shot at with bows and arrows and crossbows. First stationary then swinging, these were in almost every way the forerunner of the clay trap. As weaponry moved on the arrow was replaced by the bullet then the shotgun, the advent of being able to produce a glass ball advancing things on considerably. That said, these balls were at first thrown by hand either by some form of assistant or by the shooter themselves, one of the greatest exponents being Annie 'Little Sure Shot' Oakley.

As shotguns improved it's was first the shooting of live



pigeons that has given clay shooting many of its terms. More or less banned apart from certain places, the trap originally referred to the hollow in the ground where the live pigeon was placed, a steel plate placed on top or a wooden box with a sliding lid to keep the pigeon in its 'trap'. Shouting 'pull' used to mean tug on the piece of string that moved or pulled the steel plate out of the way so the pigeon would take off and attempt to fly away. The now familiar call of 'pull' nowadays means activate the trap and throw the clay or 'bird'. If you hit the clay it's a 'kill', if you miss it's still referred to as 'bird away'.

As the glass ball eventually evolved into the dome clay disc we know today, so the methods of throwing them advanced from the very, very basic to banks of trap that are able to determine Olympic and World Champions. But apart from the ZZ throwers, they are, to a degree, all inherently the same irrespective of the size of clay they throw.

The simplest

The most basic clay trap is best referred to as a thrower. These consist of a stiff shaft with a grippy handle at one end and either a single or double flexible plastic jaws at the other end that either one or two clays can be gently slotted into. One other thing these hand held throwers require is a reasonably fit human being since the clay or clays are thrown by having your friend take a firm hold and fling the thrower discus style or as per a dog walker's ball thrower. The hand thrower works to a degree apart from the fact they tend to break clays when you're inserting them into

the jaws, direction and distance of clay travel tends to vary considerably and they're rather energy sapping to use.

Still manually operated and once the mainstay of most grounds and Sunday morning shoots is the basic one-armed trap. You can still get them and come as something you push into the ground or lash to a tree or similar but the most familiar are the ones the operator or trapper sits on. A tubular frame usually referred to as a sled with a small seat at one end, a spring loaded arm at the other that is able to hold and throw either one of two clays, the slots in the arm gently gripping the clays.

When the arm is pulled back or 'cocked' its tensions quite a substantial spring whilst the position of the clay on the arm determines direction and speed of flight. By pushing the arm gently forward the spring takes over and launches the arm round, which in turn throws the clays. The trick is to keep your hands and arms out of the way or one of your fingers might 'fly' as well. Relatively cheap to buy and easy to transport, the manual trap has been, and still is to a degree, the mainstay of many a small clay shoot due to this design's multi-purpose applications, the fact a 'rabbit' thrower can be had and their portability.

Add a motor

By motor it means an electric one that takes its power usually from a car or caravan battery that requires recharging at the end of each day. The benefit of the electric motor is that apart from pressing the 'pull' button at the opposite end of the cable that's located at the stand,



the motor eliminates most of the human effort the manual ones require. A system that more or less applies to most automatic or powered traps is that the clays are housed in a stack or carousel, these traps usually used on basic 'Sporting' layouts. The most basic automatic trap tends to have a single stack that will hold around 50 or so clays, each one dropping onto a smooth steel plate.

When the bird is called for, an arm with a rubber bottom edge sweeps the clay off the plate and into the air, the arm then re-cocking whilst the next clay drops down from the stack up above. By altering the angle of the trap on its base and as to where the clay sits on the plate, the angle, speed and trajectory of the clay can be altered to suit. And should you be unable to find a friend or fellow shooter to press the release button, a foot control can be had. So apart from having to periodically refill the stack of clays and maybe change batteries when ones gone flat you're fully self-sufficient.

A bit bigger

The premise of the simple, single stack trap carries over to nearly every other clay trap. The difference tends to be a larger piece of machinery, larger motor, a multi-stack carousel that'll hold well over a couple of hundred clays and be able to throw or present a far wider variety of targets over longer distances at greater speeds and heavier use of the battery. Best described as universal since many of the large Sporting traps can be pressed into service for some of the disciplines, there are plenty of traps for more specific purposes.

Like the manual trap, the multi roll general trap can be set at various tilt angles meaning one trap can present numerous targets as singles or pairs. Tilted up and sideways the clay can be made to curl and turn during its flight. These traps can also be adjusted to throw not just the conventional 4½-inch diameter clay but minis, midis and rockets by the fitment of an alternative carousel and arm, most big traps holding up to four hundred clays when the carousel is filled to the top.

The trap traps

For DTL, ABT, OT, Double Rise and Skeet, the various trap manufacturers make more defined traps that work singly or in unison. DTL uses one trap that as described earlier, throws single clays away from the shooter within a prescribed distance and within certain angles and climb. ABT, OT and D/R traps are none to dissimilar apart from the angles, climb and speed are increased, they carry a large carousel since up to six shooters at a time all shoot twenty-five targets apiece and are designed to work in unison on a pre-programmed system in banks of between three and up to 10, each trap oscillating between throws to vary the target it throws each and every time.

Skeet that consists of two traps more or less facing each other located, one in the High House the other not surprisingly in the Low House. Set at a regulation offset so



their targets don't collide, these traps throw straight, gentle rising but fast target of a consistent regulated speed and angle of climb. The speed of the targets can be varied by either resetting the arm that sweeps them off the plate or by fitting an alternative main spring thereby adjusting the tension and the amount of power that drives the arm.

Bouncing bunny

More unusual targets as a rule use a purposely designed trap. More or less gone are the days when a trapper sat behind a protective screen and rolled each double edged clay down a trough, the often unpredictable 'rabbit' now has its own style of trap. Also used to throw the infamous chondel or battue clays, these almost flat, thin clays always a demanding target, the carousel sits on the side of the trap, the mechanism turning them when being loaded to be thrown. Presented edge on these traps can be varied from the low horizontal rabbit target to the springing teal. Reasonably specialist, grounds only ever tend to have one of two of these traps.

Listen up

Most traps tend to be set out-of-sight of the shooter, only the clay appearing when it's called for. But there is a trick a lot of top shooters use and that's to listen for the trap cocking or the sound of the clay being launched. Whilst not every trap is within earshot especially when ear protection is being worn, the telltale click means you're ready and waiting for your target to appear.

Whilst there are quite a few clay trap manufacturers one of the most popular manufacturers is Bowman in Nottinghamshire. For full details of the Bowman range which contains an example of every type of clay trap, visit www.bowmantraps.co.uk.

Bustin' Makes Me Feel Good!

Don Brunt looks at Clay Shooting and some of the fundamentals that can help you put more Xs on your score card

Many people consider that the techniques used for live quarry shooting don't apply to clay shooting and vice versa. Although there are certain safety considerations that differ between the two, there really is little or no difference to the end game, i.e. shooting where something is going to be rather than where it is now.

Of course it's quite clear that on a clay ground there are obvious safe areas, and once in the cage, hoop or firing point then you should be able to assume with a high degree of certainty that no matter where you shoot (within reason) you aren't likely to connect with some hapless bystander who happens to be lurking in the bushes. The same can't be said when game shooting, and knowing what does and doesn't constitute a safe shot is far more important than any knowledge of technique.

Consequently when shooting clays it's not particularly important to start with your muzzles pointing skywards when calling for the bird, the optimum position for them is to be slightly lower than the line that the target will follow. This ensures that the bird remains in sight at all times and that the minimum amount of movement is required to lock onto it. A high muzzle 'Game' style hold requires the shooter to drop their barrels to pick up the bird, and more often than not that results in them going too far below and needing correcting upwards in a 'see-saw' motion, which in itself can lead to a miss over the top.

Having to readjust the height of the muzzles in conjunction with starting with the muzzles high and the stock low also takes quite a lot of time, which can lead to



the whole process of mounting the gun becoming rather rushed. A better approach is to hold the gun closer to being mounted, just a few inches out of the shoulder so that, on seeing the bird, a consistent and smooth mount can be made, meaning that all you have to concentrate on is putting the shot in the right place. For fast going away targets you may well choose to fully mount the gun, but again don't hold the muzzles too high or you will struggle to visually acquire the bird and by the time you do it may well be too late to get off a controlled shot that has a fair chance of success. A good compromise is what is called a 'soft' mount, this involves holding the gun just an inch or two off from being fully mounted, again it makes for a straightforward mount that is both swift and controlled while removing the possibility of 'see-sawing' the barrels.

The importance of good gun mount cannot be over emphasised if you wish to improve your scores, and as such you would be well-advised to spend a little time each



week practice mounting at home, ensuring that you are able to repeat the process with the gun connecting with face and shoulder in exactly the same place every time.

Take stock

If your gun doesn't fit you correctly then you may find that to be rather difficult, in an ideal world the comb (top of the stock) should be high enough for you to see the majority of the rib. The comb should sit in the pocket in your face under your cheekbone while the stock itself should locate in the pocket of your shoulder, not out on your arm. If all you can see is the back of the action then the gun is far too low for you, you will need to fit a comb raiser or get the stock altered, otherwise you will find yourself lifting your head off to see the target.

Once head lifting starts it can be a difficult habit to break, and as well as the gun giving you a nasty thump in the face it will also be very easy to miss over the top of targets. The length of the stock should allow you, when comfortably mounted, to fit three fingers between your nose and the front of the comb while the grip should allow your finger to connect with the trigger without having to stretch for it. Cast and pitch are also important but are better left to an expert fitting, and you would always be well-advised to get any adjustments carried out by someone who knows what they are doing.

Regarding your grip on the forend, make sure your arm isn't too outstretched as this can slow down your swing, while if it is too far back movements can be erratic and difficult to control.

Of equal or even greater importance is your overall stance and in particular the position of your feet. People naturally seem to think that opening up their feet will make them more stable but the opposite is true. For a right-handed shooter, assume that the left foot should ideally point towards where the shot will be taken, which we will call 12 o'clock on a clock-face while the right foot points towards two o'clock, heels should ideally be six



or seven inches apart with the weight being distributed 60% towards the front foot. Try it out for yourself, it will feel stable and allow you to swing fairly well to either side. However don't fall into the trap of standing towards where the target is coming from. Instead always stand towards the point where you intend to break it and if necessary wind your body back towards the trap so that as the shot develops you unwind to a point of equilibrium. If you are shooting pairs then, if possible, position your feet for the harder bird in the pair, but don't be afraid to move your feet if required between shots. A good way to practice this is to try shooting a driven bird that passes down your left side followed by one that goes down your right; trying to stand in one place and shoot them is unlikely to succeed so force yourself to move, but get into the habit of moving your feet as you start your gun-swing rather than trying to do one then the other. It may feel a bit strange to start with but keep doing it and it will soon feel natural.

In the swing

When it comes to moving the gun, beware of becoming a 'swiper'. All too often people race their gun after a target, swinging through it at high-speed like a whirling dervish. More often than not this results in a miss and is extremely unlikely to lead to any form of consistency, which is exactly what is required to succeed on clays. Depending on the technique you employ you either need to match





the speed of the target with your muzzles (Maintained Lead), lock on, match speed and pull out in front (Pull Away) or come from behind the bird and overtake it (Swing Through). However, even in the case of swing through, there are only rare occasions when your gun speed needs to be dramatically faster than the target. An overly rapid swing can lead to losing the 'line' of the target's trajectory and to swinging way past it, stopping and then starting the swing again, which invariably leads to a wasted cartridge.

Although golf is a very different game it shares a common fundamental, and that is that to succeed it's vital to 'finish off the shot'. If a golfer stopped his swing immediately after striking the ball then they would be in all sorts of trouble and the same applies to shotgun shooting – don't stop the gun then pull the trigger, nor pull the trigger and then stop the gun, instead continue your swing after the trigger has been pulled. It doesn't have to be far, but if you don't then you run the risk of missing behind.

An erratic swing can also cause the shooter to commit what is a cardinal sin in terms of shotgun shooting: looking at the barrel. At all times the eyes should be hard-focused on the target; the barrel or rib should only ever be in peripheral vision and if you find your eyes going from gun to target and back again don't be surprised if you miss. Compare it with trying to catch a ball – to succeed you keep your eyes on the ball at all times, if

you tried looking at your hands to see where they were in relation to the ball then all would be lost, instead you instinctively know where your hands are. The same applies to a shotgun, if your mount is correct and the gun shoots where you are looking then your natural instincts can take over if you keep staring at the target.

And repeat...

Always bear in mind that if you are having to rush your swing it probably means that you didn't start with your gun in the right place. If you consistently struggle to catch up with targets then you are probably holding the gun too far back towards the trap, hold out a little further and the effort required to catch the bird will be less; where your swing begins is as important as where it ends.

It's important to remember that ensuring that what you do is repeatable is what makes the difference between being a good shot and an average one. This article has touched on the basic fundamentals of the sport and if all of the above can be learned and used consistently then you will be a long way down the road to becoming an accomplished shot. However it takes time, practice and rounds through the gun to really reach your full potential. Don't, though, be tempted to blaze away, burning hundreds of shells without learning anything useful. Instead consider booking a lesson with a good instructor who will help you progress far quicker than you might if left to your own devices.

The Peoples Choice Sporting Clays

Where clay target shooting is concerned there are plenty of options when it comes to choosing a discipline, however as Don Brunt explains there is only one that offers everything in one widely available package

English Sporting Clays, or Sporting as its more widely known evolved in the early 1900's as a way to replicate the flight patterns of game birds thereby allowing shooters to get some out of season practice. Of course in its early days it was, as with all of the shooting pastimes, very much a sport for the wealthy and although the first British Open was held in 1929 it wasn't really until the post-war years that it gained popularity amongst a wider spectrum. Today the varying forms of clay shooting are enjoyed by people from all walks of life.

Evolution

Sporting today is rather different to how it all began more than 100 years ago, due to its original purpose of providing game shooting practice the targets were thrown to mimic the flight paths of the quarry species so driven partridge, pheasant and grouse were the order of the day along with bolting rabbit, springing teal, decoyed duck and other suitable presentations. The modern game though has built on that and with the massive advances in traps and clays since those days the modern course setter is able to throw an impressive array of targets that are far tougher than anything our predecessors would have imagined.

A competition would normally consist of between 50 and 100 targets though events of 120, 150 and even



200 are not unheard of. The targets are shot in "pairs" from a shooting position, often referred to as a "stand" or in America as a "station". They are usually thrown as either a "Simo" or simultaneous pair where both targets are launched together from separate traps or as an "On report" pair. The latter indicating that the second target of the pair is released on the sound of the gun being fired at the first target.

The amount of pairs shot on each stand tends to vary depending on the size and difficulty of the event, for example a small open 50 target event might have 5 stands of 5 pairs each to keep costs down for the organiser while an International Championship might have two 100 bird courses with up to 15 stands or more with a combination of two, three, or four pairs.

This variation in the number of targets per stand serves a dual purpose, firstly it allows the target setter to make things tougher on the shooter as they may only have 2 or 3 pairs in which to "find" the targets and understand what is required to hit them both, while on a 5 pair stand it should be far easier for most to have found them both by the last pair or two. The other key point is that it allows the organisers to tweak things so that the shoot should run smoothly allowing as many people to go through the course as possible with a minimum of delays. That might sound easy but consider this example; stand 3 might have 2 simultaneous pairs of quick targets that are shot very quickly while stand 4 might have 4 on report pairs with a slow incoming target that has to cover 70 yards before the first shot with another slow target as the second "bird". Therefore Stand 3 might take less than half the time to shoot than stand 4 which inevitably will lead to shooters struggling to get through this "bottleneck" on the course, this leads to delays and the following stands being under utilised, none of which are likely to please the paying public.





Another feature of the larger events is squadding, this entails 5 or 6 shooters moving around the course sequentially going from stand to stand. This adds to the social nature of Sporting, and on some events a group of friends may be able to book themselves in to shoot together as a squad ensuring that there is plenty of friendly banter between squad mates, which can really add to the enjoyment of the day.

Targets and traps

As we touched on already, the modern course setter has an enormous variety of target presentations at his disposal thanks to a wide range of specialist targets and traps. The battue target for example is an ultra thin disc the same diameter 110mm as a standard clay but because it is very thin and flat it flies in an unusual way; emerging from the trap flat and edge on but turning during its rapid flight to show itself. The 90mm midi clay can prove deceiving as it looks further away than it is and because it shares the same vertical profile as a standard but is smaller in diameter it also slows down more quickly which can cause its own set of problems for the shooters. The 60mm mini is even easier to misread than the midi as its tiny size often makes it look as if it is travelling far quicker than it is, which causes many a miss in front. The wider tougher rabbit clay can be thrown along the ground where an inopportune bounce can result in the cruellest of misses or in the air either flat which is inherently unstable and

tough to break or as a looping target which due to its extra weight will head to earth with a rapid turn of speed. Add to those options the Chondel which is a standard target thrown as a looper and the possibilities that modern traps offer with their ability to tilt left, right, backwards and forwards and there are very few possible target presentations left to be thought of, the variety is simply endless which is a big part of the appeal of Sporting as a whole.

Fortunately Sporting is available widely throughout the country with many permanent grounds offering the discipline as either competition or practice while semi permanent or temporary shoots spring up in the summer months especially on the charity shoot circuit with small but fun 50 bird open shoots being run for many causes from supporting Young Farmer Clubs to Cancer Research and the like through to Church roof appeals. To find a permanent ground near you take a look at www.cpsa.co.uk or for more local small scale shoots have a peek in the outdoor pursuits or country sports section of your local paper.

The social side

The discipline has many appealing traits, primarily perhaps the social nature of a day spent with friends which, unlike some of the other disciplines, such as Trap which don't lend themselves quite so easily to being a social occasion. Another selling point is enjoying the Great British

countryside, especially if you are shooting at one of the many grounds which make use of stunning terrain and surroundings to give their course a real wow factor. Its also quite unusual as public participation amateur sports are concerned in that you might find yourself being squadded with someone who is a multiple world champion which can be a real learning experience. Imagine the chances of playing football with David Beckham, yet it's quite possible to get squadded with Richard Faulds, George Digweed or any one of the host of Sporting superstars this country has produced who perform at the highest level on the world stage.

As with so many sports today the art of shooting Sporting well now requires as much mental ability as it does technique; it does not take a motivated individual with a bit of spare money and time to invest in it very long to reach a point where they can consistently break 70 to 75 percent of the targets in a competition; once someone gets to that stage it's likely that they have the ability to break nearly every target but it is their mental game that is probably preventing them from being able to break every target on a stand consistently. For example its quite acceptable to miss one or both of a first pair on a stand if the shooter misreads it but very often the first 2 pairs might be broken, but then a complete pair might be missed while the last pair is broken. That indicates a failure of concentration as the shooter has already demonstrated that they know how to break both birds well. Similarly a shooter who misses a bird in their last pair having broken the rest is thinking too much about the fact they are about to "straight" the stand rather than about the job of actually shooting the targets.

Throw in the mental issues around having to deal with the unpredictable nature of the course, possible delays

due to bottlenecks or trap breakdowns and it's not surprising that the best in the sport are now starting to employ mental coaches to help them in their competition preparation and event routines.

Equipped for the job – the gun

In the early days as the sport's popularity grew, especially in the boom years of the 70's and 80's, it wasn't uncommon for top shots to carry two Over and Under guns around a course, a long barrelled trap gun designed specifically for longer range targets and a short barrelled skeet gun optimised for the close quick targets that are seen in skeet events. By doing so an enterprising shooter was thus equipped to tackle every target they might see from ranges of 15 yards out to 50 and beyond. However that proved to be a somewhat cumbersome solution to the problem and although guns equipped with two sets of interchangeable barrels helped ease the situation it was far from ideal. The introduction of multichoked guns where the muzzle constriction could be changed on each individual barrel made such practices redundant overnight, now just one gun could be used for every target; pop in a skeet choke to give a wide pattern for the close targets or a tight choke such as 3/4 or full for the longer stuff and a shooter could now tackle every target secure in the knowledge that they were optimising their gun for every individual presentation.

Thus the modern "Sporter" was born and although it has gone through several different stages of development the atypical Sporting gun of today is not a million miles from those early versions. Barrel length today is more often between 30 and 32 inches, wisdom suggesting that stability is required to encourage consistency, which



makes the light whippy side by side and short barrelled guns of yesteryear less than suitable. Longer barrels combined with an overall weight of between 8 and 9 1/2 lbs are a good compromise between being light enough to shoot without too much fatigue while being heavy enough to absorb felt recoil and minimise muzzle flip and to be steady and easy to control smoothly during the “swing”. A single selective trigger that allows the shooter to choose which barrel fires first is de rigueur and makes the process far easier than reaching for a second separate trigger, especially in the event of having to get both barrels off in short order. Varying recoil reducing devices such as pads and spring loaded systems make for a more comfortable shooting experience while stocks are traditionally much higher in the comb meaning that the shooters head is higher than would be the case when using a side by side which increases the visibility of the target. This combined with a pistol grip aids a consistent gun mount, and when events are won and lost by margins of a single target it is consistency that makes the difference between being good and very good. Today’s shooter is spoilt for choice with literally hundreds of different brands and types of Sporting gun available from £500 to £50,000, though most newcomers are best advised to buy one of the major brands such as Beretta or Browning / Miroku when they start out which hold their value and are well engineered and reliable. Other makes such as Guerini, Perazzi, and Krieghoff are also well know for their sporting guns and they offer a wide range of options and configurations to fit the needs of most shooters.

The cartridges

Ammunition has also changed down the years, whereas loads of 32 gram of 7 shot were the usual choice for those shooting in the 70’s today’s cartridges use a maximum of 28 grams which both reduces recoil and fatigue while having very little impact on the actual downrange performance of the guns pattern. Shot size 7 1/2 which equals pellets of 2.3 mm in diameter is the most widely used but smaller shot such as number 8 or 9 are often used to ensure a very dense pattern on closer targets while some may switch to a larger 6 1/2 shot size cartridge for longer targets which in theory at least require more kinetic energy to be delivered on target to make a successful break.

Another development since the sports beginning was the introduction of the plastic wadded cartridge, this saw the introduction of a plastic shot cup into which the shot was poured, on leaving the barrel this cup kept the shot together before falling away and is generally accepted to aid in maintaining consistent patterns downrange. The older felt or fibre wadded cartridges that have been in production for hundreds of years have been updated for the modern shooter and are judged to be a preferred option when shooting over grassland especially on temporary shooting venues but they do have a few issues

which can make them a second best option for many shooters. Firstly the absence of a shot cup can reduce the effectiveness of the pattern at longer ranges while the current trend for “overboring” competition shotgun barrels means that they don’t have the flexibility inherent in plastic wads which enable them to expand in the larger bores to create a perfect gas seal, consequently in some guns a reduction in muzzle velocity occurs which may alter a shooter’s “sight picture” meaning they have to consciously add on more forward allowance or “lead” to the target.

Accessories

Attire has also changed and while plus fours and acres of tweed were the preferred look of the sporting gentry in the 20’s, 30’s and 40’s today’s serious competition shooter prefers technical ultra light fabrics that keep them cool in summer combined with insulating layers to keep out the cold during the winter months. Freedom of movement is key and the ever popular skeet vest continues to be the most popular garment for ensuring a good consistent gun mount while carrying cartridges in comfort. A range bag is also useful for carrying cartridges in bulk as well as the other paraphernalia of a sporting shooter; chokes, glasses and ear protection, all of which are available in so many different styles, options and price brackets that each of them would be worthy of an article in their own right.

Thus suitably equipped you are ready to go forth and enjoy quite simply one of the most enjoyable forms of clay shooting yet devised, comparatively cheap, widely accessible and enjoyable for shooters of all abilities, it really is worth giving it a try if you haven’t already. As they say with certain cat foods.... 8 out of 10 can’t be wrong...



Bang For Your Buck!

Whether you shoot clays or live quarry it's important to make sure you are using the right ammunition - Don Brunt's basic guide should point you in the right direction

Early shotgun shells used brass cases, not very unlike rifle cartridge cases of the same era. Starting in about 1877, paper based ammunition started to replace brass shotgun shells. These looked similar to what we use today with a metallic "head" at the base of the shell which houses the primer, base wad and the powder and this type remained popular for nearly a century, until the late 1960s when plastic cases started to replace paper and by the 1980s, plastic cases had largely replaced nearly all paper versions although some premium manufacturers still used them as some circles still consider it to give a better ballistic performance.

The modern build

Today, modern shotgun shells typically consist of a plastic case, with the base covered in a thin metallic covering. Some manufacturers have dabbled with producing what appear to be all-plastic shells, though they are made with internal metal reinforcing rings at the base where the metal head would sit. This type gained some popularity back in the 1980's but have since disappeared from the market.

The shot itself is most commonly contained within a plastic shot cup inside the cartridge, on the bottom of which is a gas seal and usually some sort of collapsible plastic shock absorber which is designed to reduce recoil, the shot and wad combination sits behind the end of the shell which is crimped over to hold everything in place. Shot cups have slits cut on the sides so that they peel open after leaving the barrel, allowing the shot to continue on in flight undisturbed.

The more traditional felt or fibre wad is a block of generally speaking some type of organic material such as cork, felt or paper. This is often favoured when shooting over environmentally sensitive areas as the wad will degrade over time as opposed to plastic wads which can look unsightly, and have in the past been linked to livestock deaths through ingestion.

When considering a shotgun shell you need to find a compromise that allows you and your gun to perform well at your chosen target, without the whole experience proving to be too tough on your shoulder or your wallet.



Shot

Cartridges are designated both in terms of the shot weight, for example 32 grams and in the shot size such as number 5 or 9 etc. The Shot size number though goes against common convention in that the bigger the number the smaller the diameter of each pellet in the shell, which is the inverse of what you might expect.

As a rule of thumb the smaller sizes, 7, 7 1/2, 8 and 9 are used predominantly for clay target shooting and give a dense pattern which is needed to ensure that enough pellets strike the relatively fragile but small clay pigeons. The medium sizes such as 4, 5 and 6 are most often used for live quarry shooting as their size gives increased striking energy which is needed to deliver the lethal force required. Sizes which are bigger than this such as BB, 1, 2 and 3 are more suited to waterfowl such as geese who have large bodies covered with a thick covering of down, though these bigger shot are also used in vermin control when shooting predators such as foxes which again require a considerable amount of "knock down" power. There are larger sizes again such as SG and SSG which are termed "buckshot" and these were originally used for shooting deer at close range though this is now illegal. These sizes are now more commonly used in law enforcement applications. The rifled solid slug projectile which delivers an immense amount of energy onto its target is often used on the continent for wild boar hunting but is not used in the UK.



Steel shot, or one of the other non toxic alternatives on the market is always used when shooting ducks and geese, as to use lead would be in contravention of UK legislation which has for many years made steel shot mandatory for such quarry and it is also sometimes used (although not widely) for clay shooting purposes in sizes 7 and smaller, though due to the comparative lightness when compared to lead it tends to lose impact energy when tackling long range clays.

Things to consider

Case length – Check your gun has the correct chambers for the shells you are buying. Putting a 3 inch magnum cartridge into a 2 3/4 inch chambered gun is potentially dangerous; although the shell will fit into the chamber as it is fired the crimp will open into the barrel rather than the chamber and the shot will have to pass through a bore that is now in effect too tight a fit. This produces an over pressure which could lead to a catastrophic failure of the barrel and a trip to Accident & Emergency ...or worse. Many field guns are equipped with 3 inch chambers but it's vital to check the markings on your barrel before shooting any very heavy loads.

Antimony – This is added to the lead to change its degree of hardness, game shells often have a low antimony percentage of less than 2% which helps the pellets deform slightly on impact, thereby inflicting more damage and more lethality to the quarry. Clay target shells on the other hand have higher levels of antimony which helps deliver more energy to the clay, especially at longer ranges. Most clay loads have an antimony level of between 3 and 5% though having a content any higher than this is counterproductive, as antimony is lighter than lead and can reduce the kinetic energy being imparted to the clay. As convenient as it may sound it's not advisable to shoot live quarry with clay shells as they don't give the same quality of kills as cartridges made for the purpose.

Speed – This is something that many people get very passionate about when it comes to ammo performance, quicker is better they say but lets remember that physics

dictate that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, a super quick burning powder will create higher pressures and although the loads "Barrel Time" will be quicker the pay off is increased felt recoil, which can lead to increased muzzle flip and a harder time acquiring your second shot. It's also worth considering that very high speed loads can be more susceptible to "blowing" the pattern. At the other end of the spectrum of course there are the slower loads which shooting schools have adopted purely because of the reduced felt recoil and the subsonic offerings that in some circumstances mean the difference between a shooting ground continuing to operate or close down because of noise complaints. Of course one of the quoted benefits of a fast load is that people find that a rapid cartridge needs less perceived forward allowance than a slower one, meaning that they are shooting "at" the target more so than with a slow shell; however it can be surprising just how negligible that difference can be at average distances.

Weight of Shot - For clay shooting most competitors use a 28gram (1oz) load that is the maximum permitted for competition use, however recent years have seen the introduction of lighter 24gram and 21gram loads. These lighter loads equate to reduced recoil which can be an important consideration when shooting large numbers of targets in a single session. Research also suggests that ballistically speaking they are arguably capable of throwing superior patterns although they contain fewer pellets than their heavier and more expensive brethren. Live quarry shooters have rather more choice though the standard load is either a 30 or 32 gram load of number 5 or 6 shot which will suffice for most quarry from pigeons,





to grouse, partridge and pheasants. However the trend for “High Bird” shooting where pheasants and partridges are presented over the guns at heights of 50 yards and over have meant that the cartridge manufacturers have had to respond and high performance game loads are now available in 34, 36, 38, 40 and even 42 gram loads, quite often utilising number 5 or even number 4 shot to maintain striking energy at long range. There are even occasions when a 56 gram (2oz) load of number 3 has been used effectively on birds that with lesser ammunition would be wounded rather than cleanly killed. However the occasional game shot would be well advised to stick to a 30 or 32 gram load as the recoil generated by these heavy loads can be unpleasant and can be more than a lightweight game gun can mechanically cope with; the unpleasant impact on the pocket of these big hitters is also a consideration.

Price & performance

Competition shooters are often tempted to think that a more expensive cartridges translate into better scores. In an ideal world your weapon of choice would have been regulated at birth to perform at its best with a certain brand, load and speed in the fashion of the best London guns. Today however you are better off instead “regulating” your choice of shell by testing several brands, both on the pattern plate and on the range to find what suits you best. Once you have found a perfect partner for your gun and choke combination, one that obliterates the target without turning your shoulder or your bank balance to a quivering jelly, then stick to it religiously. Resist temptation to trade up or down if you can, as by staying with one brand, one load and one speed you will have found the one true path to claybusting enlightenment... consistency.

One can argue that these days there really is no such thing as a bad cartridge, however with major competitions being won and lost by a single target the incentive for those at the top of their game to stick to the best ammo is strong. The benefits of super consistent, high speed shells that deliver near perfect patterns are obvious but perhaps the greatest benefit that competition shooters take from these high priced high performers is absolute confidence, which can be what makes the difference between victory and defeat.

Do's And Don'ts

- Do pick up spent shells when shooting live quarry.
- Do try to find a shell that suits your shooting style, your gun and your quarry and stick to it.
- When your pocket can afford it buy in bulk as it saves money.
- Make a point of checking your barrels regularly, especially if a shot doesn't feel normal, a misfire may well leave the wad still inside the barrel, and putting another cartridge through a blocked barrel is a recipe for disaster.
- Don't EVER mix 20 bore and 12 bore shells together in a pocket, bag, or belt. It is possible in the heat of the moment to drop a 20 into the chamber of a 12 gauge gun and its size will allow it to drop through the chamber and lodge in the barrel, if you then put a 12 bore shell in behind it and pull the trigger you have in effect turned your gun into a hand grenade, its not the kind of mistake you make twice.
- Don't use shells that are rusty or are obviously damp, chances are that the powder may not burn properly and may end up scattered unburnt down the barrel. If you then load and fire another cartridge down that same barrel it may ignite that excess powder causing a potentially dangerous overpressure.

Wads up?

Don Brunt takes a look at cartridges and the age old conundrum of plastic vs fibre wad.

It's a subject that divides people and like politics and religion it's sometimes better kept out of a discussion but there are valid arguments on both sides.

When it comes to clay shooting there's very little doubt that plastic wad cartridges are accepted as offering superior performance to their felt wadded brethren. By containing all of the shot load within a shot cup until it has left the barrel there is no interference with the pellets as they go through the first and most traumatic stage of their journey towards the target. With no contact with the barrel itself all of the pellets should leave the muzzle in the same condition that they were in when the cartridge went into the chamber, without any damage or deformation that can cause gaps in the shot pattern or increase the number of "flyers" that leave the pattern very early on.

Bang or pop?

Another of the big issues that has emerged in recent years which favours plastic over fibre is the overboring of barrel tubes on competition guns. With some guns on the market now being sold with barrels that are almost closer to the diameter of an 11 bore than a 12 bore it's easy to understand why fibre cartridges can really struggle to make an effective gas seal. Without a good snug fit in the barrel it's easy for much of the pressure generated by the propellant to escape around the sides of the wad which causes a drop in muzzle velocity which in turn effects range and striking energy. Hence why you may hear some guns at fibre wad only clay shoots that sound as if they go off with a "pop" rather than a bang; that sound, or rather the lack of it is performance being lost.

Tests confirm that in the main plastic wads invariably deliver more consistent patterns hence why competitions at the highest level all use plastic wads almost without exception. Some sporting shooters who have tight fixed choke barrels may well carry some fibre wad cartridges in their bag for very close targets as patterns with fibres at close range are generally speaking a little wider than with plastic but if you look at the ISSF and Olympic competitions where a single target can mean the difference between taking gold or being an also ran, every single cartridge without exception is loaded with plastic.

World accepted or UK specific?

Of course overbored barrels are here for a good reason, reduced recoil, improved patterns and reduced fatigue



when shooting intensively are just some of the benefits that they deliver. Plastic wads help in delivering all of those because they obturate in the barrel, swelling slightly under pressure to make a good gas seal that maintains ballistic consistency, of course those benefits were designed into the gun with the assumption that the cartridges being used were plastic wadded. It's a fair assumption to make as we in the UK tend to use far more fibre wad cartridges than the rest of the world who in the main don't even consider them, consequently why would gun manufacturers who sell their wares all over the world change their barrel profiles just to accommodate our fascination with fibre?

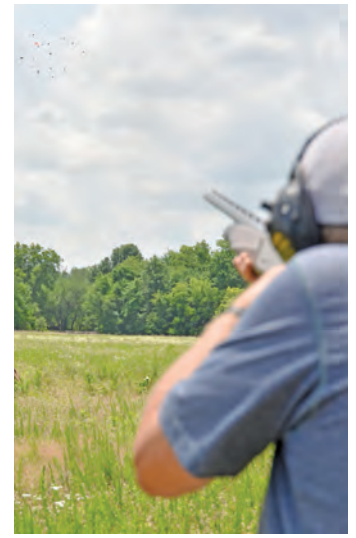
That fascination comes partly from circumstance and the choice of clay target shooting that dominates the UK. For many years English Sporting has been our discipline of choice and many Sporting events and grounds use agricultural land on either a permanent or temporary basis over which to set courses. The thinking goes that if livestock grazing over the land might ingest a wad it could cause intestinal problems leading to serious health issues and although it has never been a widespread problem landowners tend to avoid taking the risk. Another "environmental" concern is that large areas of ground covered in a sea of wads can look rather unsightly and can end up inside hay or silage which again goes into the livestock food chain. In Europe for instance the vast majority of clay cartridges are shot over Trap ranges where wad fallout is confined to very specific areas with no risk to livestock hence there is no reason for fibre wads to be used. There are some other issues though with fibres, firstly recoil is generally higher as a plastic wad has a collapsible central stem or matrix built into it which absorbs part of the recoil whilst fibre although flexible to a point just doesn't have as much "give" in it. They are also in the main rather dirty to shoot; just take a peek up a set



of barrels that have been using them and chances are they will look quite a mess and this combined with the “confetti” that can emerge from the business end of the gun on firing can on occasion be so bad it almost obscures a rapid second follow up shot.

Game loads

That reasoning carries across into game loads though here there seems to be some fogging of the issue and whether fibres are acceptable or not varies wildly from shoot to shoot. Most large commercial shoots are quite relaxed on the subject which considering their guests are paying £40 and upwards per bird in most cases for the privilege of shooting it makes sense to allow the customers to do as they wish. However arguably it's the large commercial shoots that are depositing the most wads into the environment while small driven or walked up days may only fire a few dozen shells each day in comparison with up to several thousand on a big commercial day.



Arguably though using fibre wad shells through a true game gun is less of an issue than with a competition gun. Barrels usually have a more conventional bore without the long forcing cones and tapered boring and as such the gas seal is more effective which narrows the performance gap between the two options.

For those who split their time between competition and game shooting the ideal solution might be to have a different gun for each or even to have 2 sets of barrels tuned for both fibres and plastics if ballistic perfection is their aim, however for most that isn't a practical solution so its best to compromise and err on the whichever side of the coin you fire the most cartridges, which for most will be clays.

Out of our hands?

The whole fibre vs plastic debate may eventually be decided for us anyway, if the doom mongers are right and we are eventually forced to use steel or non toxic loads instead of lead then the fibre wad will be consigned to being a footnote in the history books. This is because steel shot must be contained within a plastic shot cup and all steel loads contain plastic wads, without them it can cause damage to barrels over time.

Hopefully it won't come to that and we will still be discussing the pro's and con's of the two options many years from now. In the meantime people will continue the debate, but remember, so long as you are shooting well and enjoying your sport does it really matter that much?... Please discuss...

The Sporting Look

Clothing for the competitive sport of clay shooting

Although some may disagree, game and clay shooting share an awful lot in common and whilst the supposed game shooter's dress code may ere towards the traditional, the clay breaker still needs to apply some thought if only to ensure total comfort.

Hats off

For clayshooting a hat or cap is nigh on mandatory, the infamous baseball cap universally regarded as the one to wear. Plenty of them are available from gunshops and clay grounds, some being promotional garb, so if you don't mind a logo on the front, you might even get one for free.

Look & listen

Compulsory at CPSA registered competitions; you must wear both eye and hearing protection. Although they won't do anything to enhance the target or allow you to monitor your surroundings, general industrial safety glasses and foam ear plugs are acceptable and usually available from either your local gun shop or DIY store, but you can go 'upmarket' and pay for safety equipment with more fashionable designs or extra features to suit your needs and your pocket.

With safety glasses, most shooters look for interchangeable polycarbonate lenses. Many, such as Napier, Oakley, Randolph, Eye Level and HiDefSpex offer a basic package with extra lenses at additional cost in a selection of styles whilst Zeiss provide optically ground, fixed lenses. Others like TopGun provide a similar option but their package is multiple glasses, the user changes glasses instead of lenses.

Make your marque

The gun industry is more than capable of providing the clay shooter with numerous opportunities for you to pay for their advertisement... tee-shirts, polo shirts and fleeces all emblazoned with the make of your favourite 12 bore. Nevertheless, some (but by no means all) 'gun brand' clothing can be exceptionally well designed for the job in hand.

For purely practical (and to some extent economic) purposes – the best thing to do is to try the major outdoor retailers and go for a 'layering system' of clothing. Fell walkers' fleeces and waterproofs are often far thinner yet



work more effectively than bulkier non-specialist clothing. Do remember, by the time you've added two or three layers of cold weather clothing your gun's length will have altered.

To round off the upper torso comes the skeet vest; all you have to do is ensure the pockets hold sufficient cartridges, and it is comfortable and of the correct size. The choice is almost endless; most of the gun manufacturers offer at least one or two of these garments, whilst independents such as Castellani, Musto, Top Gun, Bonart and Staunz cater for all comers.

Some people will prefer a clay shooting jacket to a waistcoat, the main difference obviously being that the former have sleeves. As with the vests, there are plenty of jackets to choose from; Deerhunter, Blaser Active Outdoor and Musto producing three of the best. Whichever you decide on, make sure you mount your gun when trying them on.

As for trousers, the great thing about clay shooting is that you can more or less get away with wearing whatever you want so, unless you prefer ordinary jeans, the outdoor and golfing market offers some good choices. Lightweight, windproof, loose fitting and quick drying, designs such as those I currently wear by Patagonia are unsurpassed.

Stand firm

Sporting shooters tend to take a leaf out of the game shooter's kit, wellies, leather boots or even industrial footwear being the order of the day. However, for the clay shooter, most of the layouts tend to be built on hard standing and often undercover eliminating everything but the cold. To that end, more thought can be applied to your footwear, although the one style to avoid at all costs is the ubiquitous 'trainer' - they offer little in the way of support when it comes to shooting.

Four manufacturers of hiking boots and cross-over footwear to look out for are Jack Wolfskin, Brasher, North Face or Icebug. These styles offer increased ergonomic support where it's needed around the arch, toe and heel, plus soles that grip and flex.