

SO YOU WANT TO BUY A

Sporting clays began as out of season practice for bird hunting and has evolved into a tough competitive sport. In the beginning, any gun that was used for bird shooting was considered suitable for sporting clays – but just as the game has evolved, so too has the equipment. Today's sporting clays gun may appear similar to a bird gun but the fine engraving and handsome wood conceal design features as sophisticated as those taken for granted on the trap and skeet fields.

When choosing your ideal sporting clays gun the first consideration is the type of

action your gun will have. It is of course correct to say that any gun pointed in the right place will break targets, but we are looking for the soul mate that will make the task easier. Whereas side by sides and pump guns will clearly suit some, they are not the ideal choice for the majority. I will say no more than I enjoy shooting both at clays and revel in the challenges that they bring to the game. If your prime motive is to have fun, then the side-by-side or the pump is a good choice. If you want to compete, the choice is between the semi-auto and the under/over.

SPORTER?

PART I OF A SERIES OF ARTICLES



BY ALAN RHONE



SEMI-AUTO

The semi-auto has gained considerable popularity in recent years in spite of apparent drawbacks in design. Utilizing a single barrel in what is mainly a two shot game restricts choke selection to a compromise. For simultaneous pairs, when both targets are thrown from the same trap and are at similar range, this is not a big problem. In European style sporting, with two widely different targets at varying ranges, it can become more so. If your first target is at 35 to 40 yards and your second at 20 yards and closing, you are making life difficult if you have only one choke possibility. In this specific example, most would use a boring of around Modified and tailor the shells for the range. A Modified choke, shooting large hard shot, will choke up quite convincingly to Full for the first

longer target – and following this with a skeet load of 9s for the second closer target will at least give you the mental feeling of a scattergun. It's not ideal, but a workable solution that many use because, to them, the advantages of the semi-auto outweigh the disadvantages.

Advantages include low perceived recoil and muzzle jump, light forward weight and low investment cost. Recoil is a major consideration to us all today and the semi-auto goes a long way to reducing this without adding weight and gadgetry to do so. The inherent design spreads the peak and makes the gun more comfortable to shoot over a long competition. Because there is only a single barrel extending beyond the forward hand, the gun feels responsive and easy to put on target. If a sudden change of direction is required, the gun flows

to it without effort.

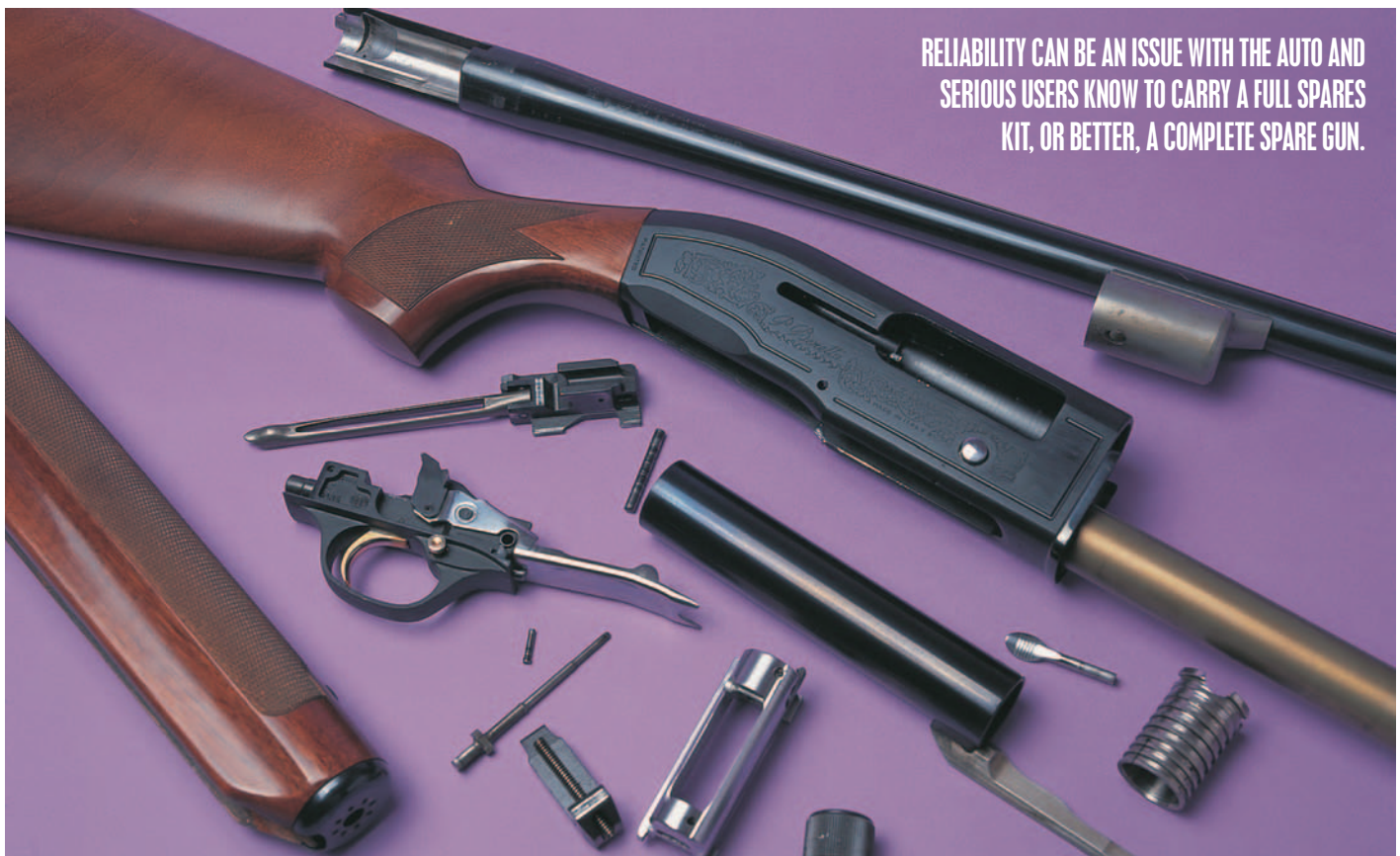
The semi-auto provides top drawer performance at low cost because there is zero hand fitting of parts and no expensive building of barrel sets that must be regulated to shoot together. It is much simpler to make a stock for a semi-auto and this brings custom stocks into an affordable price range. If your stock fits, you will shoot better and many find that they can buy a custom built gun based on a semi-auto for less dollars than even a middling under-over.

Out of the box the trigger pulls may be a little rough and perhaps the chokes supplied are not perfectly matched to the bore – but there are plenty of good 'smiths who have made a business of ironing out the imperfections of the trigger units and there are a multitude of after-market choke tubes that can be matched to your

bore diameter.

Reliability can be an issue with the auto and serious users know to carry a full spares kit, or better, a complete spare gun. Customising and re-working, perhaps adding a custom-built trigger group, can aid reliability but the mechanism has a lot to do and it has to do it at high speed. It is not surprising that parts break from time to time – but do they always have to break at a critical time?

Shell selection becomes more important as the auto owner must find a brand that cycles reliably in his gun. Popular, low recoiling and easy shooting it may be, but the semi-auto does not come close to the user numbers of the under/over. Take a look around any major event and see what the top performers are using. Sure you will see a lot of autos, but the dominant gun is the under/over.



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OVER & UNDER

Twin barrels and a hammer and firing pin for each, makes this gun the ultimate in reliability – and this is what champions want more than anything else. Heading towards a shoot-off, or building a big score, is not the time when you want doubts to enter your thoughts. Big scores demand absolute concentration on the target and there is simply no room for doubt, be it in yourself or in your equipment.

will have his or her own ideas and requirements, so perhaps it will be helpful to detail the likely choices you have.

BARREL LENGTH

This is probably the most debated topic on the shooting planet and also the one most likely to cause anguish to the new purchaser. For the under/over the popular choices today are 30" and 32". Few use 28" any more and the 34" could be said to be a passing

feels like you were never away and your scores are back in the comfort zone soon enough. Maybe the flirtation even added a little zest and a point or two to your average scores. That much is probably true for those of us weaned on short barrels, but the new shooters – without any preconception of barrel length and without a lifetime of sight pictures – may just take to the long barrels and shoot the better for it. It won't happen of course, because we veterans tell the

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Of course, the under/over is more expensive – they are harder to make – with the top brands demanding many hours of handwork by skilled craftsmen. Forget the fancy engraving and figured wood – it is the mechanism that makes these guns expensive. Even in basic grade, a top brand under/over can cost many times the price of a semi-auto but it is a price that serious competitors feel well worth paying.

Whatever your choice you need to decide on the specification before paying your money. Each

fashion, although unfairly. Many rushed to try the 34" and, finding it was simply too much gun for them, went back to the shorter lengths. The fact here is that shooting a long barrel takes time and may mean re-learning your mental sight picture all over again.

We clay busters are notoriously fickle and when the new mistress proved demanding it was fun at first. Having a new model on the arm attracts attention and makes a man feel good – but the party can't last for ever and it all gets too much. Going back to the old girl

newbies that 34" is too long and they should stick with what everyone else uses! Personally, I think that the long barrels may yet have their time – but the change from shorter lengths after many years is probably a change too far.

So, the popular choice is 30" to 32" and of course 31" for those who cannot make up their minds and want it all. In Europe, and particularly the UK, the dominant length for sporting clays is 32" and this suits our lengthy targets very well indeed. If the gun is well balanced, and not unduly

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muzzle heavy, a 32" gun can handle like no other, coming into its own on the rangy edge on targets floating across in the distance.

If balanced well, it is not a disadvantage on the close targets flitting between the trees on the woodland Parcours. Balancing the long barrels well can mean a heavier overall weight, as the length in front of the leading hand has to compensate for the weight further back. Some shooters will simply be overburdened with the sheer size and weight of a 32" Sporter and will be better suited to a 30". The difference may only be 4 to 5 ounces, but it can make a marked difference by the end of the day, especially if the weight is at the upper level of your personal tolerance. In spite of the popularity of the 32" Sporter, I am convinced that many would actually shoot better with a shorter gun. What they might lose on the rangy targets would be more than compensated for by improved response on the fast close birds we see in so many competitions. It all comes down to personal physique. Bigger, more powerful shooters will suit 32" guns but others may wish to stick with 30".

So what about the 28" that I dismissed early on? I have no doubts that this length will suit some perfectly, and there is no reason why we see it so little – other than it has simply fallen out of fashion. The one place the 28" is still seen is on the semi-auto and this is because the overall length of the gun is more. Typically a semi-auto user will choose a barrel length around 2" shorter than he would normally use on an under/over. A semi-auto with a 32" barrel is long and a 34" incredible. I used to shoot trap with a 34" Remington 1100 and that was a long barrel!

CHOKES

Fixed or choke tube? If fixed, then what should the gun be bored? I see no valid argument for fixed chokes on a sporting clays gun. The very nature of the game is varying targets at varying ranges and it is a game for which screw-in chokes may have been invented. I know that an expert can go around the course and break them all with Full and Full but why even try? We have the technology and can choose the perfect combination of shell and choke for the range and speed of the target, so why on earth would we want to make it more difficult. There are those purists who want to, and I respect their choice, but for the average competitor it is a no-brainer. If you must use fixed chokes then a boring of around Modified and Modified will cope with everything, especially with sensible use of the different shot sizes and shell types. If you like, you can drop a notch to Light Modified and Modified – and if it helps your mental game then do so. Improved Cylinder in both or first barrel will break most targets, but you are stretching it a bit on the really long stuff. You do not get extra points for handicapping yourself, so there is little point in doing so.

If using screw-in chokes, make sure you pattern test every choke with the shells you intend to use. Ensure that they really do match the bore of your gun and throw the patterns you expect. It is not unusual to see a choke tube marked Modified that actually measures Improved Cylinder – although this happens less often today than it did in the past.

Before rushing to replace the chokes supplied with your gun by the factory, do some pattern testing. It is a little upsetting to spend a hundred bucks to improve

your chokes only to discover that the best results come with what was originally supplied. Lastly, don't keep unused choke tubes rattling about in the bottom of your shell bag. Store them in containers or a choke box, and if you drop one, don't use it until you have had the opportunity to check it in both barrels and ensured that the safety step has not been compromised.

Many competitors take choke matching a little further and have the entire barrel and chokes reworked by a barrel expert to wring the last bit of performance out of the gun. Such work may include over-boring, or back-boring as it is commonly known, forcing cone extension and choke profile tuning. Many guns will come from the factory with this work already incorporated, but a real expert can still make a tweak here and there.

I have seen some impressive results achieved by custom barrel work and if you feel it gives you an edge then it is well worth the money. Never forget that shooting is as much a mental game as it is anything else. Believing you have an edge will actually give you one.

Barrel porting is another common option and it can be helpful in controlling muzzle jump in a barrel light gun. If you are considering custom barrel work, choose carefully and ask others who has done work for them. For every expert who can really improve things, I am betting there are four or five who can make it worse. Your gun is an expensive investment, so choose carefully. ■

To be continued.

Topics for Part 2 and 3 include:

- Ribs:** profile, adjustable, height, width, elevation.
- Sights:** none, mid sight, hi visibility.
- Triggers:** pulls, shapes, types.
- Stocks:** length, pitch, comb height, adjustment, pad adjusters, recoil pads.
- Recoil:** reducers, stock mounted, barrel mounted, mechanical devices, reducing stocks, sliding combs, soft combs.
- Balance:** weight distribution, adjustable.
- Weight:** overall and component parts, adjustable weight by adding/removing.
- Customisation:** Action work, trigger work, paint jobs.

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