



Philip Pilla has a particularly interesting background – plus it’s one that has him perfectly suited for his role at HiDefSpex. Additionally, he has some big dreams for the future of shotgun shooting and his background could well help him achieve his aspirations.

Pilla was born in Mt. Kisco, New York, which is in Westchester County. He went to school at the renowned Choate Rosemary Prep School where such notables as John F. Kennedy and others of similar fame attended. From Prep School he went on to Cornell University resulting in a degree in Consumer Economics that takes economic theory and allies it to marketing.

During his schooling he became an outstanding soccer player, almost achieving professional status – but in 1992 he displaced a tendon in his lower

back. That ended his sports career.

His father, Carlo, was a serious trap and skeet shooter until sporting clays came along in the mid 1980s – when he got interested in the new game. Of course, Philip and his brother Ryan were introduced to hunting and clay shooting when they were quite young – initially trap and skeet and then sporting. They regularly shot at places like the TM Ranch in Florida, many courses in upstate New York, plus Pilla is a member at one of the oldest shooting clubs in New England – Weston Gun Club.

**EARLY DAYS**

After his soccer injury, Pilla went to work for J. Walter Thompson, one of the largest advertising agencies in the

world. That’s where his career got jump started. The agency had started a sort of pilot program – they wanted to see how a rookie in the ad business could fare handling big packaged accounts. Tossed into this super competitive arena, Pilla became involved in making over 100 high-dollar commercials every year. His accounts included Toys R Us,

Nestle Foods, Halls Cough Drops and many other big hitters.

From J. Walter Thompson he moved to another top ad agency – Kirschenbaum and Bond. Here he gained more big-time experience, really learning what high-end marketing was all about – working with businesses like Van Cleef & Arpels, Moet Domane Chandon and others.



**ONE ON ONE**  
*WITH PHILIP PILLA OF HIDEFSPEX*  
**ONE**

**BY NICK SISLEY**



In 1995 he started his own ad agency. His work with PowerBar got him involved with that product's association with 18 different sports – from cycling to the NFL – working with Steve Young of the 49ers and Janet Evans (four-time Gold medallist in swimming). At that time he also had contracts with Confederate Motorcycles (they sell for upwards of \$60,000) and Lamborghini sports cars – how can you get any 'higher-end' than that?

But he did. Pilla next went into Winston Cup and NASCAR racing

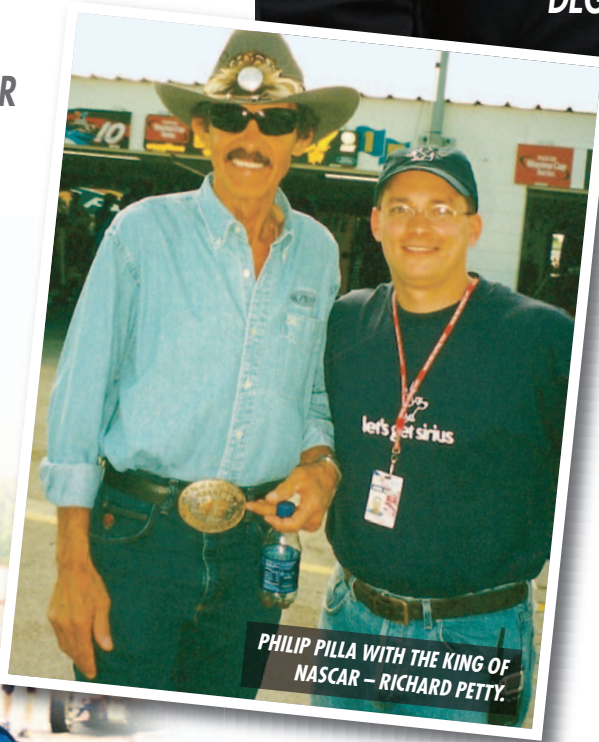
promotion with Sirius Satellite Radio, as Head of Marketing. Any of you who have been subscribers to ClayShootingUSA for long may recall my earlier 'One on One' interview with Wes Lang of Caesar Guerini. It was Wes who suggested in his interview that sporting clays needed the same type of promotion professionals that NASCAR has. Well, in Pilla we have it – this guy is deeply entrenched in sports marketing. It's this background that has helped him make HiDefSpex such an important brand name.



**HOWEVER, PILLA (RIGHT) DIDN'T START HIDEFSPEX; NOR DID HIS BROTHER RYAN (LEFT). IT WAS THEIR FATHER, CARLO, WHO HAS HIS DEGREE IN PHYSICS AND A MINOR IN OPTICS.**

**PILLA NEXT WENT INTO WINSTON CUP AND NASCAR RACING PROMOTION WITH SIRIUS SATELLITE RADIO, AS HEAD OF MARKETING.**

**PILLA AT LIME ROCK PARK RACING IN THE BARBER SERIES**



**PHILIP PILLA WITH THE KING OF NASCAR – RICHARD PETTY.**

colors that were then available and none of the shooting glasses he tried gave him the visual acuity that he wanted.

After doing a figurative ton of optics research, Carlo started HiDefSpex in 1995. He had developed a lens for use in bright sun conditions that had not only fantastic acuity but also enormous depth of field – as well as great orange target enhancement. According to Philip, "With most shooting lens colors you can lose some depth of field." But Carlo had found a way to circumvent that loss-of-depth-of-field problem, and thus HiDefSpex was born – and the rest is history.

However, Pilla didn't start HiDefSpex; nor did his brother Ryan. It was their father, Carlo, who has his degree in physics – and get this – a minor in optics. Pilla told me that his father is a perfectionist and was not satisfied with the shooting glasses available in the late 1980s. He felt that, for one thing, he wasn't seeing the amount of depth of field that he wanted. For another, he wanted to see orange targets as brighter than in the shooting lens

Today, the company offers an extensive range of glasses and lenses – and they depend heavily on their sponsored shooters for development input. Just one example would be George Digweed's input and influence into the Panther series. He had plenty to do with the development of this model – right from the get-go – and he remains a continuous sounding board for future development.



**TODAY, THE COMPANY OFFERS AN EXTENSIVE RANGE OF GLASSES AND LENSES – AND THEY DEPEND HEAVILY ON THEIR SPONSORED SHOOTERS FOR DEVELOPMENT INPUT. JUST ONE EXAMPLE WOULD BE GEORGE DIGWEED’S INPUT AND INFLUENCE INTO THE PANTHER SERIES.**

**FUTURE FOR SPORTING**

What does Pilla think of the current state of sporting clays? He believes the sport is growing and is continuing to grow. He thinks some skeet and trap shooters continue to switch over to sporting, although no doubt some continue to shoot both. He thinks instructors are bringing a significant number of new shooters to the sport, and he sees this in his lens sales. Twenty percent or more of sales go to new shooters. “Perhaps many of these folks are taking professional instruction early on – and are shown the difference HiDefSpex lenses can make,” he says.

What about target difficulty? Pilla thinks that serious competition is the key to the overall growth of sporting clays. Maybe that’s because he believes

professional competition can bring the sport to, not tens of thousands of folk who have never shot before, but millions more by way of TV.

Is the ‘class’ system really working in sporting? “In some ways yes – in other ways no. The class structure is only as good as those who enforce it and those who follow it – but the class system is not the way forward for professional shooters,” says Pilla.

So, what gun does he shoot? A Caesar Guerini Forum model with 32-inch barrels. He has it rigged with Bruce Ney’s recoil-reducing system and is very serious about his shooting. While he doesn’t get to shoot as often as he’d like to, because of business commitments, when he does practice for an afternoon he’ll often shoot 400-500 targets. HiDefSpex lenses are made in Italy where the factory

starts work at 2am in the morning Eastern Time (where his office is), so he’s busy 24/7.

What about younger shooters and their future in our sport? “Because my father started me and my brother shooting at a young age, we both feel that bringing new shooters into the sport is very important.” No doubt that’s why they have just signed up young Theo Ribbs. He shot with National Football League players prior to the Super Bowl – giving sporting clays and competition shooting some significant promotion.

What about today’s economy – and clay target shooting? “I believe that we have many, many passionate shooters in this sport. While these folks may be more selective in the shoots they attend in the coming months, I think they are going to continue to shoot.

“As to business growth, HiDefSpex turnover has doubled in each of the last four years. 2009 may be more difficult for us, but we spend one heck of a lot of money every year on Research and Development. This year we are introducing five new shooting frames, plus we have a lot that’s otherwise new and ready for market. Right now we are working on new products for 2010 – and I’m already excited about those.”

**ON TV**

Pilla’s dream is to see shooting sports promoted on TV. It would require the support of our top shots – particularly those that conduct themselves as professionals. During competition these shooters are totally focused. Most hardly talk to other competitors during the event, and rightly so.

The average Big Blast competitor has minimal opportunity to see these so-called

pros in action – since they are out there competing at different stations at the same time. But Pilla, also a competitor, says, “I’d love the opportunity to watch the best shooters in action.”

Because of his interest in watching top shooters, and his marketing background, he has some farsighted thoughts on future television possibilities. With motor racing and in all other sports, millions of fans come to watch the professionals – both in the stands and on TV. “No one can tell me that watching 43 cars race in an oval for 500 miles is truly entertaining on its own,” says Pilla. “The key to NASCAR’s success is that drama has been created, both for the drivers and the fans.”

So, how can we merchandise our shooting professionals in a similar manner? “We should continue to have tournaments like we do now – but on Saturday afternoon, have a tournament only for selected professionals,” says Pilla. “These professionals shoot their targets during a two-hour period – no other shooting would take place at this time. This would give all the event competitors time to be in some grandstand situation observing the pros at work.

During this high-level competition, several television cameras could be rolling, so TV directors can give viewers multiple observation points. Imagine a Curt Gowdy-type at the microphone, but with him is one of the best shooters in our sport. He’s not shooting, he’s giving the ‘color’ commentary on TV a la John Madden. Say it’s George Digweed, Jon Kruger or some other top shot. That’s the guy who tells TV viewers why Anthony Matarese Jr. is standing the way he is; why Wendell Cherry broke all of his first birds in doubles at exactly the same place; why Scott Robertson took one bird



of a true pair first – rather than the other. In other words, he’s helping TV viewers learn more about clay target shooting. As they learn more – they come back next week to view – and we show them at the end of the program how to get in touch with their local gun club, gun shop and coach – so they can try shooting for themselves,” says Pilla.

“When there are shootoffs late Sunday these days, even at a big sporting clays tournament, about the only folks left watching are the competitors who have placed in class,” Pilla says with frustration. “This is why having the elite shooters compete some time on Saturday makes sense.” He believes, and so do I, that the other competitors will fill the grandstands to watch the Saturday professional event. They know they will learn something. Will television cameras be rolling on the crowd from time to time? Absolutely. Will a TV commentator ask someone in the crowd a question from time to time? Absolutely. These are even more reasons to stay and watch.

Pilla also likes the idea of team shooting to create even more interest. He believes this idea is underutilized. “If teams came dressed all in the same colorful shirts, vests, pants, shorts, hats – maybe some of their clothing even could have identifying numbers on the back – that’s when the public, especially the TV viewers, take sides and pick their shoot-off favorite. As this happens with

thousands of fans, think of the marketability of shooting clothing.”

## KEY FACTORS

Pilla points out “that the keys to marketing are salability, eye appeal, focus on presentation and spectator participation. So, the shooter (or team) has to be saleable and have to have eye appeal. Venue is critical and more importantly, shooting stations need to be specifically designed if television is going to become serious about clay target shooting.

“A spectator or TV fan needs to understand what’s going on – they need to feel they are participating. Need is key – this comes down to building the drama with the personalities who are shooting. Think the look of championship golf courses – and their eye appeal, salability and presentation. Only when this happens in competitive shooting

will the figurative ‘Audis’ of the world become top line sponsors.”

In effect, Pilla wants to create the PGA of shooting – an organisation that becomes the driving force behind fan participation and the business growth of the sport. “The economics cannot be any different than fishing. Look at the Professional Bass Fishing Circuit. It started far more humble than where shooting is today – but is now a billion-dollar business.”

## HOW WILL IT WORK

How do we pick the small number of professional shooters who would compete in such TV events. “Maybe a Q School like golf,” says Pilla. “Today’s current point system is probably not the way to go, but there are possibilities there. There are ways to pull this off. Initially, maybe its just 15 top shots compete and then for 30 minutes of

high-interest TV, the top three shoot-off in front of the grandstand, shooting some serious world class targets.”

Initially, Pilla would like to see a Pro Clay Class tour, and I think he’s willing to become involved in at least partially sponsoring it. To get this concept off the ground Pilla would like to designate 10 Big Blast events in which the “pros” would compete in their own event during the weekend, preferably Saturday. All the other event participants would be able to watch since they would not be shooting at that time. The shoot-off could also take place Saturday night under this concept.

Pilla’s goal is to eventually have 30-50 guns on this 10-shoot tour, all of whom would have to qualify. The idea here is to have a purse and a true promotion of sporting clays. Once it’s recognized as a professional series, that’s when television and high-dollar sponsors might be enticed.

## BIG IMPACT

This has been an intriguing article to write. If some of what has been suggested ever comes to pass, sporting clays is going to get one heck of a figurative shot in the arm. Further, if interest in clay shooting can be brought to thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, even millions, who have never shot before – what a positive impact this would make for gun ownership all over our country. ■

Nick Sisley can be contacted at [nicksisley@hotmail.com](mailto:nicksisley@hotmail.com)

PILLA SHOOTS A CEASAR GUERINI AND HERE IS WEARING CHROME PANTHER GLASSES WITH 80 LTM LENSES.

