

PRESSURE IS THE ISSUE, SAYS **CHRIS BATHA**



DOUBLE TROUBLE!

EVER NOTICE THAT THE TOP MASTERCLASS SHOTS MAKE THE GAME LOOK EFFORTLESS? THE KEY TO CONSISTENT SHOOTING IS TO START IN BALANCE AND FINISH IN BALANCE. MASTERCLASS SHOTS ARE RARELY SEEN OFF BALANCE.

Maintaining balance requires rhythm and timing, essential to smooth body movement and rotation. Arriving at the break point in balance, you are better able to change position for the second target of a pair. If you are out of tempo with the target, you'll rush your swing and lose your balance – the result is inconsistency and missed targets,

particularly the second target of a pair. Remember, rhythm is the key to maintaining your balance.

With the exception of single targets in 5-Stand and FITASC, Sporting Clays is a game of doubles. They come in various guises:

- On-report pair, where the second target of the pair is released on the report of the first shot.
- Following or Rafael pair, more often seen in FITASC where the referee/scorer releases the second target as quickly as the trap will cycle so the second target follows the same trajectory as the first target. Or, my personal favorite, where the

second target is released as soon as the first comes into view of the referee/scorer.

- True pair, where both targets are released at the same time.

Course setters take full advantage of these combinations, mixing them, using speed, angle, target variety and terrain to trick or distract your eyes and disrupt your rhythm and timing.

When it comes to a 5-Stand single, with full use of the gun, most of us have a relaxed confidence, knowing that if we don't break the target on the first attempt, we have a second shot in hand. Being relaxed, our move to the target is smoother, unhurried,

with muzzles and target in sync, resulting in the perfect shot. However, that same single, now shot as one of a pair, presents a different challenge! The target that you crushed with a smooth swing as a single now seems a completely different presentation. It suddenly appears quicker and you react with a faster (often out of control) swing. This reaction is easily explained – pairs create pressure and pressure affects rhythm and timing.

To better illustrate the level of pressure a target setter can create, let's consider two target presentation scenarios. The first offers a right to left crosser with an on-report teal. The break point of the first shot leaves the gun in the perfect position to move gently up to take the teal. No pressure – charity targets. There's plenty of time and no need to move your feet. Bang, bang! Dead pair. No pressure.



The second scenario is a true pair – a fire cracker left to right low midi, exploding off the trap arm about 30 yards out, followed by a slow right to left incoming looper, also 30 yards out, giving a short time window of opportunity for the second shot before it hits the ground. Now the pressure is on. You feel the need to jump on the first target quickly to gain vital time on the second – and this is where the wheels fall off. You rush your first shot and miss, then swing swiftly to the second –

a fast gun to a decelerating target. The station becomes a sequence of hits and misses, all because you have fallen into the course setter's pressure trap, wrecking your balance and timing.

Two Targets

The solution to 'Double Trouble' is to recognize that on every station there are two 'individual' targets and each should be analyzed and shot as two separate targets. The most important aspect of any pair is to mentally establish the 'time available' between the first and second shots. You need to learn to create the maximum time possible to allow hard focus and a well-timed, balanced swing.

Because pairs can be thrown in so many sequences, accurate target-reading is essential. You must learn to appreciate exactly

what the target is doing, its speed, angle and trajectory. You should also understand the different flight characteristics of the various sporting targets – but that's for another article. Let's stick to rhythm and timing.

Beginner and intermediate shooters tend to use one swing technique for every target presentation. The only thing that changes is how fast the swing is, according to the individual's perceived speed of the target. You should practice all the various techniques to be able to match technique to target presentation. You will always have a favorite, but you should be able to use sustained lead, come from behind, spot shoot or swing through – whatever might gain that split-second required to be able to adjust your stance or move your feet to the second target while

maintaining your balance and tempo.

Footwork is an essential skill in maintaining balance. Wherever there is time to move your feet when shooting the second bird of a pair, then do so. If there is no time, then always set up for the most difficult target and shoot the easier target from the less advantageous stance position. If there is no advantage to favoring one target or the other you are likely to go for a 50-50 setup. Like all things, with different targets there are different approaches – 80-20 or 60-40. With practice and experience you will discover what works best for you.

Know Your Points

Different pair presentations have subtle differences that can cause those inexplicable and frustrating misses. Each target of the pair will have its own pick up point, hold point and break point.

Let's consider the simplest presentation – the following pair, where the second target is released as fast as the trap will cycle. Though the second target is a repetition of the first, the pick up and break points will be different to the first target, having moved slightly further along the line of flight and, if not correctly assessed, the gun will be swinging back too far to the first target's hold point forcing you to stop the gun and start a new rushed swing to catch the target up. Worse still, the faster-moving gun often powers past the decelerating second target and you miss in front. By establishing the correct pick up and break point of the second target, your swing will be smooth, muzzles will match the target speed, and the result will be a more consistent second shot.

Whether a following pair from the same trap or separate

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machines, use the waiting time before it's your turn to shoot to analyze your pick-up, hold and break points for the first target. As the first target reaches its break-point, quickly look back and note exactly where the second target is on its flight line and mentally establish your second hold and break point.

Which One First

With true pairs, another puzzle is which bird to shoot first – it's not always obvious. The simple formula is to take the bird that disappears behind an obstacle, a tree, bush or hits the ground first. Analyze where you would shoot that target, then see where the second one will be – and establish the hold and break point for the second target.

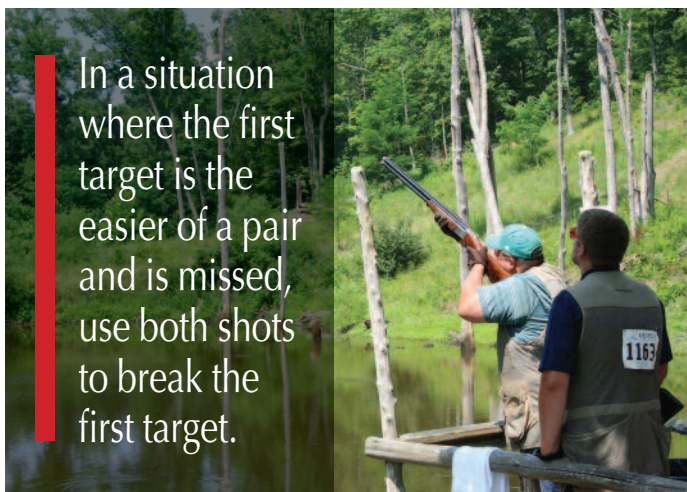
With a crossing true pair, it's good practice to take the rear target first and continue the swing to the second or leading target. This can seem unnatural, but you need to override the natural impulse to shoot the first target that your eyes lock onto. If you do that, it means moving your gun back to the second target or attempting to ambush it with a static gun. However, there are occasions when shooting the first target is the right thing to do – but you need to

discover this for yourself.

Remember, pairs need to be analyzed as single targets. The plan should always be to break the first target, leaving the gun in the best position to make a smooth insertion onto the second target.

In a situation where the first target is the easier of a pair and is missed, use both shots to break the first target. It's better to stay on the first target and break it with a second shot than to miss a target and then try to make a move to the harder target – which usually means another miss. It's far better to have half on your scorecard than the dreaded pattern of hit one, miss one, miss one, miss two.

There are three stages, of progress to overcome 'Double Trouble'. The beginner needs to concentrate on the fundamentals of straight shooting – stance, posture and gunmount. The intermediate needs to learn the importance of target reading and hard focus. The advanced shooter needs to practice the rhythm and timing of a shot to create smoothness in their shooting style. The best shots always appear to have more time and less movement when making the shot (maximum efficiency for minimum effort) which ensures the balance that creates the rhythm and tempo of consistent shooting. ■



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