

The manual trap, a mainstay of small sporting clays clubs since the inception of the sport, is gradually being pushed aside. Big competition clubs rarely use manuals, and now these reliable devices are fast becoming an endangered species at many small clubs. The small sportsmen clubs were the last bastion of the manual trap, but it's rare to find one of these clubs that does not have a plan to "upgrade" to automatics.

Some clubs think of the move to automatics as progress, others see it as taking on a major cost to stay financially viable. Whatever the rationale, there are practical reasons for moving away from manuals. There is also a price to be paid for abandoning the versatile equipment that made our sport interesting.

Small clubs tend to not be bound by the same bottom-line considerations for their operations as the big competition courses.

Sporting clays has become a nice "sideline" for many shooting clubs in America that were formed during the post war era of the early 1950s. For many, the shooting game provided an infusion of new shooters and money and has salvaged the fortunes of many a small club. Fifteen years ago it was not unusual for these clubs to set up shop with a handful of manual traps purchased in the sporting goods department of the local K-mart.

The first paying customers at these small clubs led to the realization that the club can bank more money serving up sporting clays targets than they can trap or skeet. All the club needed to keep the money rolling in was enough volunteers to operate the traps. Quickly enough, the volunteers came to realize that a day working

as a trapper was not the ideal situation for an aging World War II or Korean War veteran or even the fifty year old "youngsters" who were now enjoying the club, founded by their dads and grandfathers.

LABOR ISSUES

"Kids...that's what we need! We need some kids!" Clubs looked into other options to relieve the load on aging volunteers. If only some of the teenagers, so abundant in the community, could be brought into the club to help out with this strenuous activity, the shooting fun could continue. "We thought we could pay kids a little bit and give them some free shooting and they'd line up at the club house door," says Tom Ekleberry of

TOM THOMPSON LOOKS AT THE PROBLEMS FOR SMALL SPORTING CLUBS THAT ARE PLANNING THE LIMITED TRANSITION FROM MANUAL TO FULLY AUTOMATIC TRAPS.



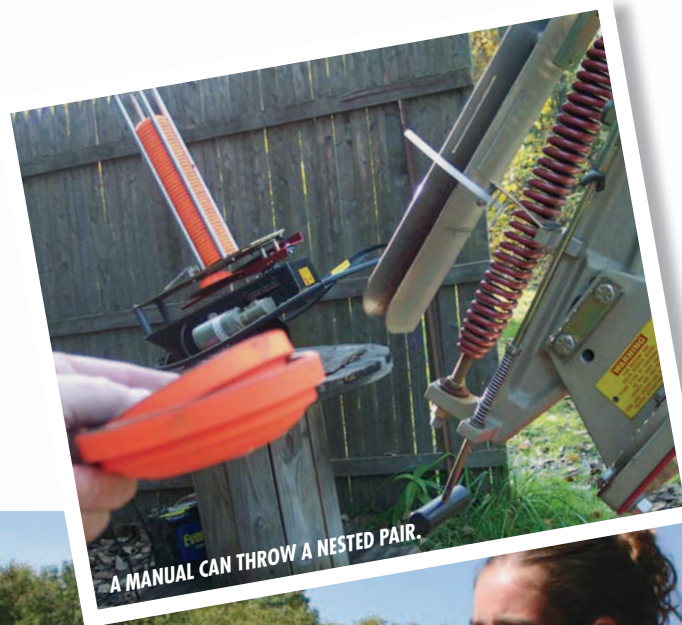
FROM MANUAL TO AUTOMATIC

Ohio's Hog Creek Game Club. "It worked for a short while, but today's kids are too busy with school activities and other interests. We pushed up the pay scale but still had trouble getting enough help. When a kid 'no-shows', a club member has to fill in the gap."

Even the small family owned enterprises are finding the 'help problem' to be a constraint. Kids working for 'tips' rather than wages found the pay to be very

Automatic traps became the logical choice. Other clubs looked to automatics to add sparkle to their course design. "The biggest reason we started getting into automatics," says Indian Ridge's Brian Thompson "was to add some versatility into our target presentations. We couple an automatic with a manual so we can bring a whole new dimension into our course design."

"We kind of followed Indian



A MANUAL CAN THROW A NESTED PAIR.



A LOOPER CHANDELLE IN A TIGHT WINDOW IS THE START OF A REPORT PAIR. RIGHT: MANUAL OPERATED WITH THE RIGHT HAND AND AN AUTOMATIC WITH THE LEFT MAKES A GREAT PAIR.

uneven. It was not uncommon for a trapper to pocket more than \$100 on a really good day when the tips were coming in. But the tip requirement rankled many shooters. A combination of resentment and tough times in the economy meant low tips for many a hard working trapper. Most clubs by now have instituted a trapper's fee into the price of a round of birds.

Like Chinese water torture, each little issue related to trappers – reliability, pay, scheduling, managing, health and safety, conflicts and availability. One by one these issues weighed upon decisions by clubs to do something to get around the trapper issue.

Ridge," says Ekleberry. "One by one, Hog Creek bought inexpensive automatic traps to supplement the manuals. Too often though, we find ourselves just throwing following pairs off one automatic. It hurts the quality of presentations because we either don't have enough expertise with automatics or enough automatics to make it interesting."

It was the introduction of the relatively cheap, single stack automatic traps designed for personal use that cleared the way for the small clubs to move forward with automatic traps. The single stack trap, introduced circa 1999, was an opportunity to equip a

course without breaking the bank. Most trap manufacturers now market a range of machines from the inexpensive stack machine (70 target capacity), a selection of mid range traps (200 targets) right through to the top of the range sporter (400 targets). Target capacity is an important factor when selecting a new automatic – the bigger the capacity, the more expensive the machine.

CHANGING COSTS

When club operators introduce automatics in place of or to supplement manuals, the trade-off they make becomes immediately

obvious. It's like re-reading the list of problems with trappers – reliability, aggravation, inconsistency and attitude problems. "We used to say, with two automatics on a station, there are twice as many things that can go wrong," says Brian Thompson. "Target breakage can be a problem on some automatics whereas a manual can throw targets all day long with zero breakage."

"We will always keep manual traps in our game," says Ekleberry "High volume clubs couldn't survive without automatics. They gain their versatility by using three different traps on one station. We, on the other hand, use our autos in

VERSATILITY IS WHAT MAKES A COURSE INTERESTING. A MANUAL TRAP CAN THROW EVERY STYLE OF TARGET IN THE GAME. TO ACHIEVE THAT WITH AN AUTOMATIC REQUIRES ADDITIONAL CAROUSELS AND A TRAP MECHANIC WITH ENOUGH SAVVY TO MAKE IT WORK.



A MANUAL OFFERS A RELIABLE FUR AND FEATHER PRESENTATION.

places where it would be too dangerous to place a trapper – typically an incoming target. We would sacrifice too much versatility if we got rid of our manuals altogether.”

Versatility is what makes a course interesting. A manual trap can throw every style of target in the game. To achieve that with an automatic requires additional carousels and a trap mechanic with enough savvy to make it work. Try pitching an upside down standard from an automatic! When the manual trap is phased out, we might see fewer stacked pairs, the arguing pair and the variable speed and/or variable sized birds coming from the same trap arm.

Mad River Sportsman’s Club, Bellefontaine, Ohio, sets their course so that half of it is totally automatic and half manual. Members can avoid the wait for a personal trapper during the week or when the club is busy. On registered shoot days they serve twice as many shooters by sending a squad out with a trapper for the first fifty targets and let shooters push their own buttons on the autos from the mid-way point back to the clubhouse.

The simple reality is that labor costs cannot be avoided; clubs that move up from manuals are only shifting their labor needs into different categories. The low tech trapper must be replaced by a higher end mechanic or engineer. Traps still have to be maintained and higher target breakage (if the knife and plate are not correctly set) can be a real cost that clubs have to eat. Automatics also require investment in battery charging facilities. With automatics, breakdowns on the course can be longer-lasting and cause hold-ups.

DIFFERENT PROBLEMS

Monitoring trap performance

requires personnel. When each trap had a kid loading birds one or two at a time, they could keep watch and correct changes in target flight or mechanical problems. An unattended automatic can develop unwanted problems that results in modest changes to a target flight path during the day – a nightmare scenario for the referee to decide when to call a halt to proceedings to correct the target flight. We’ve all seen traps start throwing birds and continue throwing until empty, and we’ve observed incidents where vibration leads to traps “walking” off their base.

The needs of the shooter are not the same as the needs of the club owner. Shooters want an enjoyable shooting experience. Shooters want interesting target presentations and a smooth operation. Cheap is not the major consideration of most shooters. Club owners, with an eye toward profits, will discover finance costs for newer, more expensive automatic equipment cuts into the bottom line or requires major capital outlay. The much heavier automatic machines are more difficult to move than a seventy pound manual. Operational headaches cannot be factored out of a sporting clays club.

For most small clubs, the transition from manual to auto is a given – driven by labor (trapper) costs and availability. The reality is that the transition is not straightforward. It needs thought, planning and investment – but we can be certain that the manual trap will still have its use at most small clubs for some years to come. Ekleberry says, “If you can’t afford to buy enough automatics to do a good job, you ought to reconsider your level of investment or other options. What’s that old saying? *Any job worth doing is worth doing right!*” ■