



ONE TO

WITH **WES LANG**, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF CAESAR GUERINI USA

ONE



IN THIS NEW SERIES OF ARTICLES, NICK SISLEY GOES 'ONE TO ONE' WITH SENIOR INDUSTRY EXECUTIVES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THEIR PERSONAL BACKGROUND, THEIR COMPANY AND THEIR VIEW OF OUR FAVORITE SPORT.



WES LANG SHOTS BOBWHITES (RIGHT) WITH HIS AD AGENT ROB FANCHER. OBVIOUSLY, BOTH ARE SHOOTING CAESAR GUERINI OVER AND UNDERS.

A 'JERSEY BOY', WES LANG WENT TO HIGH SCHOOL IN VINELAND AND THEN ON TO GLASSBORO' STATE, ALSO IN JERSEY, WHERE HE RECEIVED HIS DEGREE IN MARKETING. BUT WHAT DO YOU DO WITH A MARKETING DEGREE, HE ASKED HIMSELF BACK THEN. OBVIOUSLY, HIS LIFE COULD HAVE TAKEN ONE OF MANY DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS.

Before or shortly after Lang graduated, he remembers seeing a University study that tried to delve into the common denominators that helped hundreds of successful millionaires accomplish so much. Lang found it interesting that there were no common denominators – though the study had looked at many possibilities. But when those millionaires were interviewed, all of them said essentially the same thing. Whatever business they became involved in, they loved what they were doing. They had an intense passion for that business. With that love and passion for what they did – success and wealth eventually came. Though perhaps not so much interested in making millions, that study did set Lang on the path of life. Determined to be in a business he loved – he selected the gun trade.

But let's back up a little. Lang's Grandfather was an ardent trap shooter, and became President of the New Jersey Trap Association. He took his grandson shooting almost every weekend. When Lang was in Junior High School his grandfather died, but his interest in guns had been established. Around 1986, sporting clays came to New Jersey, and Lang's Father got hooked on the game. He told his son that it was great fun – and that he ought to try it. Already a gun lover, it took his Dad four or five months to convince him to give the then new shooting sport a try. The youngster was

immediately hooked and has been at the game ever since. Sadly, his Father died in a boating accident at age 43, convincing Lang that life was too short to work at something he hated – no matter the money.

EARLY BUSINESS YEARS

So right out of college he went to work for RSR – a major firearms and firearms related products distributor in Florida. He spent 2 1/2 years with RSR. "It was a great education and taught me a lot about the gun business."

But Randy Mitchell at Seminole GunWorks, also in Florida, pried Lang away. With Seminole, he was able to attend shoots every weekend and worked in the factory during the week – another great learning experience that lasted three years. Next, he moved on to Accokeek, Maryland as Beretta's Product Manager and Marketing and Advertising Manager.

Subsequently, one of his bosses at Beretta left to run SIG Arms in New Hampshire and within a short time convinced Lang to join him. That's where he met Giorgio Guerini and his brother Antonio – who at that time were working for Batista Rizzini. The two SIG Arms shotguns at that time were the SA3 made by Zoli and the SA5 made by B. Rizzini. To improve gun sales Lang helped start the Aurora line – which eliminated shiny stocks and



WES LANG.



bright metal receivers. Sales were great, but then SIG Arms was going to be sold and word had it that the company would divest itself of the shotgun business under the new owners.

So Lang took his advertising and marketing experience to E-MAP – which had purchased the Petersen magazines in southern California. But as advertising Group Manager there, Lang was a fish out of water. He had gotten away from his passion of guns.

In 2001 Giorgio and Antonio Guerini started their new company and asked Lang to come on board to run Caesar Guerini USA. Lang explains, “The ‘machinery’ that makes guns is very much the same, no matter the company. It’s the people and their passion for making a great product that can allow a company to surpass others in the same business. This is the difference and the clue to market success. Giorgio and I talk at length every week, and we are dedicated to both helping and satisfying customers.”

CURRENT MARKETS

What does Lang think of the current status of affairs in sporting? He told me that he now sees a bit of a drop off in local shooting, but hard-core shooters are “still at it.” Further, he sees that local ranges (he lives on Maryland’s Eastern Shore) are not seeing as much business. “But sporting has never been an inexpensive sport. Even the hard-core shooters are no doubt griping at the increased costs, but they are still shooting – probably as much as ever in many cases.”

Interestingly, shotgun sales at Caesar Guerini are up over last year, not down. “That isn’t to say that our company couldn’t be doing better. In fact, I know we would be doing even better if the economy was better and if shooting costs hadn’t increased so much.”

A big shot in the figurative financial arm for Caesar Guerini has been the introduction of their high-tech trap models – sales have been extremely good. But Lang

confirmed that sales of sporting guns are also up, while hunting gun sales have been stable. For those readers not aware, the company markets several models aimed at trap shooters, even more models aimed at sporting clays buffs, and offers numerous hunting models in all gauges.

Once the economy gets back on track, will the numbers enjoying this sport make a comeback? “There’s no way of knowing, particularly in view of the current collapse of the economy and loss of confidence in the financial institutions, but as the economy improves in the future so will the numbers that enjoy clay target shooting.” But Lang is quick to point out that there’s no guarantee of this. When shooters are lost to some other type of entertainment, they could stick with that new found entertainment and not come back. “Hopefully, it’s not so much that shooters have left the sport, but that they have simply cut back on their shooting because of financial pressures on family budgets. As their financial position improves, I’m sure it’s these shooters that will come back to sporting and other clay target games – as well as to hunting.”

TARGET DIFFICULTY

Are sporting targets too tough? “The reality of the situation is that we need a good mix of softer birds, those of medium difficulty and the tough stuff. Each has its place at Club, State, Zone and National level. Sadly, I’ve seen a few shoots where participants are paying \$1000 and more in total costs for the weekend and a significant percentage of them were breaking less than 50 percent! One shooter at a Big Blast a year ago, scored in the single digits – that’s for 100 targets! He’s probably given up

and no doubt we’ve lost some of those who shot less than 50 percent.

“There’s a mentality that has crept into the sport that competition targets need to be challenging. My view is that sporting is supposed to be fun. To achieve that, a competition layout needs a few straightforward stations, coupled with a majority of birds in the medium-difficulty range, and a couple of stations with difficult targets to challenge the best of shooters. But all this has to be presented in a balanced, creative and entertaining manner. It’s not easy to accomplish.”

THE FUTURE

Young shooters – are they the future of our sport? Lang thinks so. “But it’s often a very long-term investment to get youth started in shooting. That’s because such a large percentage of them leave shooting for a variety of reasons – schooling, job, wife, sons and daughters and their offspring’s education. However, passing on the tradition of shooting and hunting to our youth is critical.

“But we need to try to bring everyone into the sport, not just the younger folks,” Lang suggests. “The sport needs to capitalize more on those that attend corporate and charity events. They undoubtedly enjoy these events but is the sport doing enough to encourage them to take up the sport on a regular basis.” He would also like to find more ways to convince women to shoot.

PERSONAL CHOICE

What gun does Lang shoot? As 2008 Zone II Sporting Clays Champion he knows which end of the gun to shoot – not just which end of the gun to sell! He shoots their Maxum Sporting model –



THE ENGRAVING ON THE MAXUM SPORTING IS DEEP AND STUNNING.

right off the shelf – with 34-inch barrels (a gun and barrel length that’s available to everyone. Both 30 and 32-inch barrels are also available in the Maxum). The only thing different with his personal Guerini is a longer stock (adjustable) at 15 1/2 inches (he’s 6’ 5”). “I’m shooting this gun better than any other that has ever been in my hands.” The Maxum model has sideplates with extensive deep relief Gothic scroll engraving. No matter the barrel length, Caesar Guerini Sporting models balance approximately just in front of the trunnions.

SPONSORSHIP

What about industry sponsorship at shoots? Lang admits this is a real dilemma. “From a business point of view this is not a great way for a gun company to invest their money.

It’s very easy to tie up thousands of dollars in shoot sponsorship – for which you will probably not get much of anything in return.”

For most shoot sponsorship deals a company will get a logo in the program. At one of the stations their banner will be hung. “Ask ten shooters where the such-and-such banner was hung the day after the shoot and how many do you think will remember? With a registration bag containing the shooter’s back number for his or her vest – does he or she take any serious interest in what else is in the bag such as items provided by the sponsors?” Lang thinks not.

What he does think is of value from a sponsors standpoint is being at the shoot – answering questions, offering demo guns to shoot, talking about his guns. Many gun companies don’t have the time or inclination to get so involved.

Attracting sponsorship from outside the sport is even harder, “Let’s say you want to get a \$10,000 advertisement in your shoot program from a car company’s advertising agent. Once you tell the agent that 300 people are going to attend your event that attracts no spectators, the next sound you will probably hear is a loud click as the ‘phone goes down. Big-time advertisers are simply not interested in small numbers.”

So how do we gain greater exposure? Lang says “NASCAR has tremendous public relations (PR) experts at work. The same goes for golf. Other than the wrecks, how interesting can NASCAR be to the uninitiated? How many two-foot putts have you watched during a 4-day golf tournament? This stuff can’t be all that interesting – but because of great PR the purses in both sports have become tremendous, and that’s how the big money comes in. Some say sporting clays or other forms of clay target shooting can never be a big spectator sport, but maybe that’s because we’re not thinking outside the box.”

Lang wonders if we need a full time staff of public relations experts at NSCA, NSSA and ATA. If a highly motivated expert PR

staff is going to get paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to improve the dynamics of the sport (or lose their new jobs), we might see a lot more outside-the-box thinking. If something like this ever happens, Lang suggests that the industry will support it – because the industry can’t really make the sport grow on its own.

So how could this be achieved? “Maybe the PR person at NSCA could find ways to wine and dine Ford or other sponsors. Perhaps inviting country pursuit and lifestyle magazine editors to important tournaments would be another way to start, but we would have to help show those editors what’s interesting about our sport for their readers and how they might take up the sport.” Industry might back the costs of doing this Lang thinks. He firmly believes that there are thousands of potential shooters out there who have never been exposed to clay target shooting. “I just know many of these folks would love this sport. Public relations experts have been instrumental in making NASCAR the biggest spectator sport in the country. We need those experts to do the same for shooting – we need those talented people and will have to pay for the privilege.” ■