

A LADY'S

DANA FARRELL TALKS WITH OUR TOP LADIES

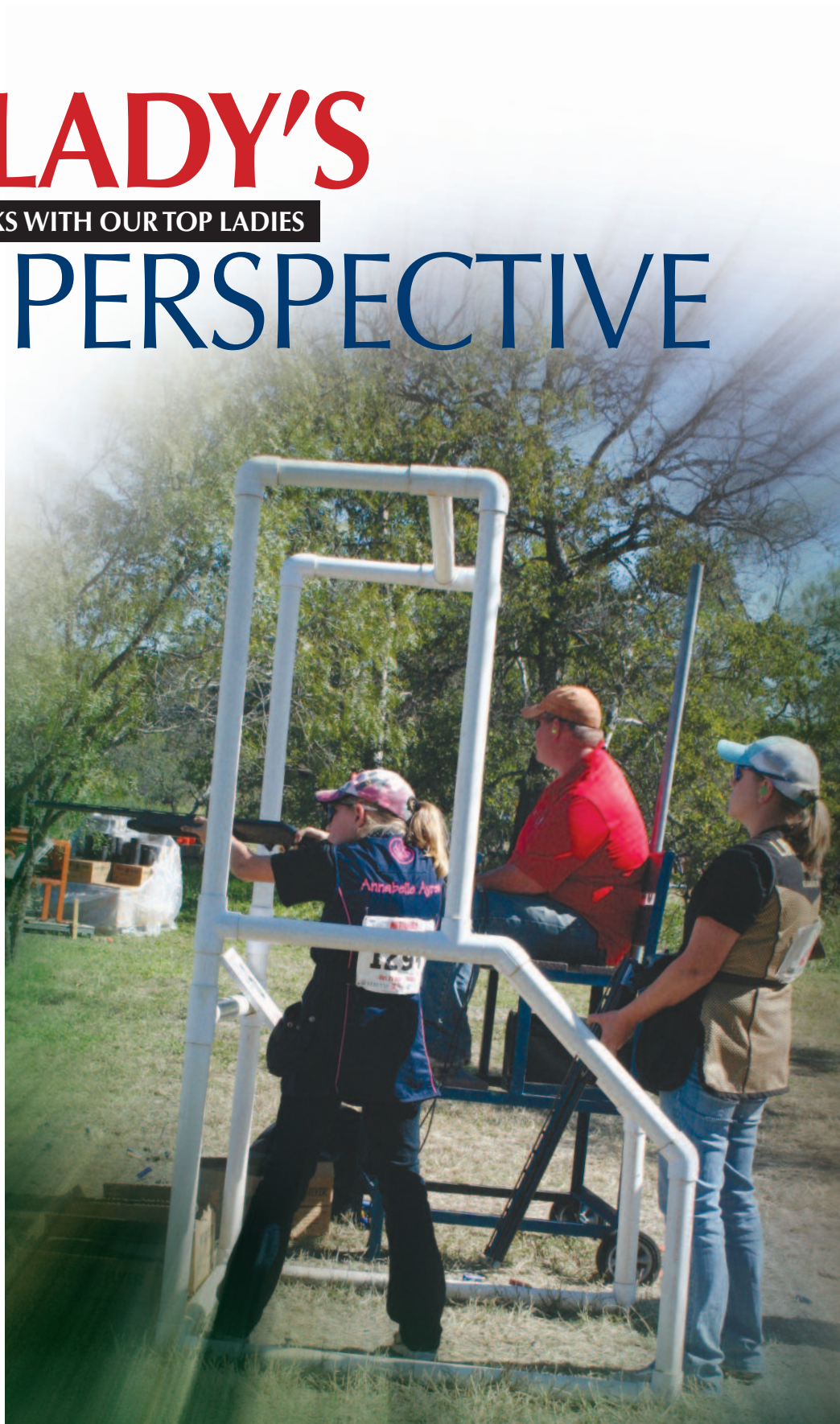
PERSPECTIVE

We shooters like to think that clay shooting sports are equal opportunity games, playable by most anyone, regardless of their height, weight, body style or gender – including those youngsters who may not fit into the team sports mold or be able to make the cut for mainstream school teams.

The SCTP program is proof positive of this, giving scores of young boys and girls the opportunity to compete who otherwise might be sitting home in front of a T.V. watching movies or playing video games.

On any given tournament day we shoot side by side with lady competitors who balance out the shooting rosters in numbers that are proportional to the general population – or do we? According to the NSCA, women shooters comprise only 14% of all registered members – a far cry from the roughly 50% that make up the population. Why such a discrepancy? That's the \$64,000 question.

In this article we will take a look at three lady shooters at the top of the game of sporting clays and get their perspectives on why our sport struggles in its effort to recruit more women to our ranks. Ashleigh Hafley, Diane Sorantino and DeeAnn Massey are three of the sport's best lady competitors and we will hear what they have to say about getting started, guns, clothing, concurrences, attitudes and the NSCA and how its policies and practices affect lady shooters.



Getting Started

Sorantino was just 9 years old when her father, himself an accomplished trap shooter, first introduced her to shotgunning. A 2006 inductee to the Sporting Clays Hall of Fame, her love of sporting clays and FITASC has taken her across the globe and driven her to win 12 gold medals along the way. She, like other lady shooters, acknowledges the stigma attached to a sport that can invoke an inferiority complex in many women. She considers herself very lucky to have such

Massey grew up in a non-hunting, non-shooting family and it wasn't until her husband exposed her to sporting clays that she first picked up a gun. Her husband, Jeff, an excellent shooter himself, taught her how to handle a shotgun and break targets – but they both enlisted the help of Andy Duffy to gain the mental toughness needed to succeed at a higher level. She and Jeff now do some teaching themselves, sometimes holding all-ladies shooting clinics to get women started out on the right foot. Massey, a two time National

stocked in quilted maple by Michigan stock maker Tom Paine – and is stunningly beautiful.

Recoil and Gun Fit

Sorantino, a Team Beretta shooter, thinks recoil can be a real game stopper for many women and chooses to shoot a Beretta 391 Teknys Gold. “Gas guns and light loads are the ticket for a lot of women,” she says, and although acknowledging the fact that many women shoot over/unders, says the whole idea of shooting sporting clays is to have fun – and

“it isn't fun if you're being beat up every time you shoot.”

Although she shoots a 32" over/under, Hafley agrees with Sorantino that gas guns can be an important part of any successful formula for lady shooters – especially those that feature a stock shim system that allows fine tuning of the firearm to the female physique. Hafley, who has two Ladies National, two U.S. Open and a World title on her resume, feels gun fit is extremely important to all shooters, but is especially problematic for women, simply



DEEANN MASSEY

Massey grew up in a non-hunting, non-shooting family and it wasn't until her husband exposed her to sporting clays that she first picked up a gun. Her husband, Jeff, an excellent shooter himself, taught her how to handle a shotgun and break targets

early confidence building exposure to the sport and reflecting on the difficulty many women have breaking into a game dominated by men says, “For me, it was my father who taught me about shooting.”

Often naturally less competitive than men, some women are innately afraid of firearms and most things associated with them – noise, recoil and the potential to make a dangerous gun handling mistake. This understandably makes them hesitant to step out of their comfort zone and into the unfamiliar territory of the first time shooting experience.

champion, is sponsored by Browning and for years shot a Browning Gold autoloader but recently has switched to their Cynergy 20 gauge. She said this move to the over/under was prompted by the decision by Browning to discontinue producing the Gold auto. She loves the way the new gun feels in her hands and is adjusting to the 20 gauge nicely. The Cynergy fits well, is light and responsive and she doesn't think the smaller payloads will be a handicap for her. It is custom



DIANE SORANTINO

because, she says, “Women can’t pick up a single gun off the shelf that fits.” Shooting an S & S Stockworks equipped Zoli, Hafley puts a lot of value in having a gun professionally fitted and thinks this is even more important for women since most guns are built to fit what the firearm companies consider the average customer – the adult male.

Massey and husband sometimes see ladies show up at their shooting clinics outfitted with their husband’s hunting guns and loads. It’s no surprise that some women never take to the sport – shooting an ill-fitting gun and heavy loads the first time out undoubtedly turns many ladies away from having that all important follow-up experience.

The Right Instructor

Hafley says male instructors can sometimes be intimidating and women breaking into shooting must be careful to gain the help of someone who is sensitive to their reluctance to be judged. Many times a person other than a “significant other” is a wise choice when introducing a female to shooting. A husband or boyfriend, although knowledgeable, may just be too close to the situation to provide the patience a new female shooter needs for a comfortable first time shooting experience.

Hafley, like Sorantino, was first introduced to shotgunning before her 10th birthday by her father. After learning basic gun handling safety she started lessons with instructor Marty Fischer. She says as a shooter you can “get there by yourself”, but a good coach will break things down into smaller, easier digestible pieces. Hafley says dad, Mike Hafley, took the elements Fischer first introduced to her and ran with them, reinforcing the lessons at their home range. It obviously paid off – the four time Team USA member punched into Master class at the 2005 Ohio State Championship at age 17 and has been a force to reckon with on the national and international arena ever since.

Clothes That Fit

The lack of choices for ladies shooting clothing is another sticking point that women are acutely aware of. This is a big problem, because women simply like to look nice no matter what they’re doing and shooting clothiers should take note. They aren’t afraid to drop a few bucks to make that happen. Hafley says it’s hard to find something that fits off the shelf, since all women are built differently.

Sorantino feels the situation has improved a little of late, with Beretta and a few other companies making female cut shooting vests and accessories, but there still isn’t a lot out there to choose from. Ten time Team USA member, Sorantino and fellow female team mates, received official Team USA vests one year that she says “came down to our knees”, but the up-beat gold medal winner adds, “we were grateful none the less...” Hesitant to be too critical, she says that it’s easy to cast a critical eye and forget that manufacturers need to be aware of their bottom line, so good business practices dictate they must understandably take a hard look at their target audience – and in the case of registered shooters, that target audience is currently 86% male.

Massey doesn’t bother shopping off the rack when looking for a vest because of the difficulty finding something that fits. She orders her shooting vests from Shoot The Moon, a Colorado company that custom tailors their clothes from measurements provided by the shooter.

Recognition

Does the NSCA concurrent system fairly reward the lady shooters? It seems opinions vary, not only with the general membership but even between the game’s top lady shooters. Massey thinks the concurrents deserve to be better rewarded at many big shoots. Hafley seems torn, saying the system is good in some ways, and bad in others. She says, “Everyone enjoys winning and the concurrent system in some ways makes it easy to be competitive.” However, she says ladies, juniors and the other concurrent categories are often marginalized and underfunded – even at the biggest shoots. She related a particular national level competition when the concurrents were given inexpensive bracelets, compact disk players and digital cameras – awards she feels were not fitting for the status of the competition, while the men (i.e. open division) winners were more appropriately awarded.

Is it fair to criticize the system when, technically, ladies and other concurrent shooters are also eligible for open division prizes? Concurrents, after all, are independent and in addition to the classification award system. Sorantino likes the concurrent system and her perspective is, “No one survives off of their sporting clays winnings.” She also feels she would rather pay full price entry fees and



ASHLEIGH HAFLEY

bolster the prize money than get a break on registration fees because of her gender.

Is The NSCA Doing Enough?

There are differing opinions about whether the NSCA is doing enough to attract ladies to the game. Some feel because they are the governing organization, the NSCA should be held accountable for weak recruitment. Their web site doesn't have a mission statement but a site search reveals the following, which is the closest thing to a mission to be found: *"We keep records of our members' scores in competition, register shoots for the clubs and associations, hold the National Championship each year, and provide a myriad of awards for outstanding achievements."* Nothing is said about promotion of the sport or recruitment of new shooters.

Some, like Massey, feel it is each and every one of us – the

shooters – who should be taking the bull by the horns to solve this problem by exposing new people, particularly ladies, to the sport whenever we get the chance.

What's the answer to this dilemma? Hafley has an idea. She thinks the NSCA should sponsor 10 clinics each year for kids and ladies at premier shooting locations around the country. She's willing to bet that the gun clubs would meet them half way and together they could make positive strides. Volunteers would likely be an invaluable element in this scenario – and that's where we shooters enter into the picture. Maybe she's onto something.

Whatever the answer may be, the problem certainly isn't going to solve itself. If we can hope to make a difference, the solution will take a lot of creative thought and effort and likely we will all – shooters, club managers and the NSCA alike – ultimately have a hand in it. ■