

GUN CLUBS THAT ARE EXPERIENCING TOUGH FINANCIAL TIMES MIGHT WANT TO TAKE A LOOK AT MINNESOTA HORSE & HUNT CLUB – TO SEE HOW THEY ARE CURRENTLY ADDRESSING THEIR BOTTOM LINE.

Randy Travalia and his partner, Bill Urseth, are the owners of the Club, acquired in 1985. Previously, the facility was called Wilderness Inc. The grounds were much smaller, plus that club's philosophy was very different – they were only interested in bird hunting for its members.

Early Days

Right from the get-go, Travalia and Urseth had a different philosophy for their newly named Minnesota Horse & Hunt Club. They could see that as a business this new venture would not make much profit if it was used for only a few months in the Fall

for bird hunting – leaving the property sitting idle the rest of the year. So, the first thing they did was map out a serious financial plan. No doubt that plan has been changed, been augmented and been revamped more than once since 1985, but Travalia is adamant that a realistic and comprehensive financial plan was essential to the club's financial success.

1985 was excellent timing for this new venture in Minnesota. Sporting clays (or rather hunters clays at that time) had just hit our shores. The two partners saw the game as a way to expand the club's activities throughout the year. So, Minnesota Horse & Hunt Club became one of the first in the country to offer sporting clays.

The first ever Minnesota State Sporting Clays Championship was held on these grounds in 1986 – three years before the formation of the NSCA. In 1987 the club created the first U.S. Open Sporting Clays Championship – and that same shoot was repeated on these grounds in 1988. In 1989 the first ever National Sporting Clays Championship – sanctioned by the NSCA – was held here, though San Antonio has become the venue for that championship ever since.

League Shooting

But as important as Big Blasts have been to Travalia and Urseth, their success has come from a



NICK SISLEY TALKS WITH RANDY TRAVALIA OF MINNESOTA HORSE & HUNT CLUB

much different philosophy. “We’re in the entertainment business,” Travalia begins. “We have stressed that from the very beginning – and we have never wavered. All our employees are trained with this basic thinking. We want the people who come here to have fun and we try to make that attitude as pervasive as possible.”

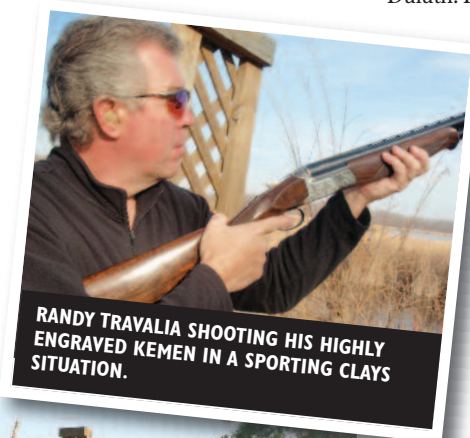
One of the biggest success stories at this club has been the development of sporting clays league shooting. But how did they get the leagues started? “We didn’t go out and spend a zillion dollars to get folks interested in league shooting,” Travalia explained. Rather, they essentially built their leagues the old fashioned way. They talked with shooters in town and asked, “Why don’t you come out and try this new clay shooting game? I know you are going to love it.”

Further encouragement came through, “If you (an individual) bring a team out to shoot in the league, we’ll pay for your league fees.” These leagues were a success right from the start – but they kept building. Today there are Spring and Summer Leagues – the Spring League runs from April through sometime in July – and includes 900 - 1000 shooters. The Summer League, which runs from sometime in July through to mid-September, has about 600 participants. Leagues shoot

Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, but shooters come out to “make up” their league shooting on other days as well – like when they cannot make their regularly scheduled times. These leagues don’t represent intense competition, but rather the fun, fun, fun of competing – as well as the enjoyment of socializing with other teams. Perhaps that’s why some league shooters have been coming back year after year.

Personal Background

Randy Travalia was born in Lethbridge, Alberta and shot his first goose when he was only 9 years old – and that was at a time when Canada geese were far less prevalent than they are today. Hunting was a way of life for him in those formative years – as was ice hockey. He played all the way



RANDY TRAVALIA SHOOTING HIS HIGHLY ENGRAVED KEMEN IN A SPORTING CLAYS SITUATION.



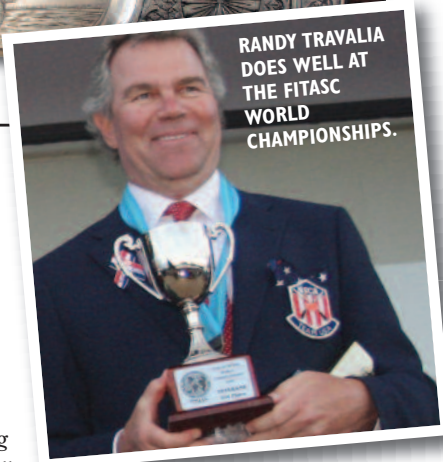
AT THE MINNESOTA HORSE & HUNT CLUB THERE ARE MANY TEAMS, ALL CONTRIBUTING TO A LENGTHY SHOOTING SEASON AT THE CLUB.

BELOW: RANDY’S KEMEN RECEIVER BOTTOM – WITH THE LIKENESS OF DALTON – ONE OF HIS BLACK LABRADOR RETRIEVERS. BOTTOM: CLOSE UP OF RECEIVER.



through school, including professionally, and ended up in Minnesota where he went to Minnesota University in Duluth. He graduated in 1975 – and then went on to law school at William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, graduating in 1979. Travalia still practices law, but while the Minnesota Horse & Hunt Club started out as maybe an avocation, it has turned into pretty much a full time responsibility.

What gun does Travalia shoot? Our interview took place just after he had returned from the World FITASC Championship in Australia. That’s where he shot his Kemen KM 4 with very personalized engraving of one of his dogs, as well as some of his original wildlife paintings. He shoots a standard Kemen KM 4 when hunting. At the FITASC World Championship he won the



RANDY TRAVALIA DOES WELL AT THE FITASC WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS.

individual Veteran Bronze medal. With such a great result, combined with high finishes in three other sanctioned FITASC events in 2009, Travalia was awarded the Veterans World Cup.

Getting back to the original business plan that got Minnesota Horse & Hunt Club out of the starting gate, Travalia offered, “We are not farmers with birds to offer hunters, men who were maybe farmers of the land primarily. Instead we knew we were in the entertainment business. We knew that a good percentage of the population around here – and all over the U.S. – has a certain amount of discretionary dollars to spend on golf, bowling, travel,

movies or whatever. And this is the way we have always looked at our business – we want to make it attractive for people to spend discretionary dollars at our club.

“When we started I had the sense that skeet and trap shooters were not devoted social shooters, but I sensed that sporting clays was so new, I hoped that we could bring new people to the sport with the thought that they were going to have fun and enjoy the social aspects of shooting.”

Premier Hunting Club

Another facet of the original business plan was that the partners wanted the Minnesota Horse & Hunt Club to be the premier hunting club in all the Upper Midwest. Since this was so important to their business plan, they have never wavered from this belief. This was accomplished in several ways, but this club pioneered ‘Tournament Hunting’, which is designed to showcase bird dogs, hunting savvy/know how and shooting.

One of their most successful tournament hunts is the U.S. Open Pheasant Championship. This hunt is now bringing in 800 - 900 participants, with the winners taking home some significant prizes. This hunt has been held every year since 1987 and the club’s emphasis has always been on being fair and honest – the winners being the most deserving. Urseth owns and publishes the magazine *Menz Tournament Hunter*. “Customer service isn’t just a statement with us,” Travalia emphasizes, “It’s a way of life here.”

Another part of their business plan has been soliciting corporate outings – and the club



has enjoyed virtually hundreds of such profitable events. Many corporations return every year for “their outing,” but seeking new corporate partners is never ending. Fund raising events are also very important to the club’s financial ledger, so plenty of time is spent seeking sponsors for those types of outings. Wedding receptions have become

increasingly important – the club hosts 40-50 of those every year.

Club Facilities

The restaurant and bar at the Club also contribute significantly to dollar income – and this is year around income. The gun shop is always busy and additionally sells shooting accessories and clothing – for both clay shooting and hunting. The club boards horses (no wonder in view of the club’s name) and has indoor and outdoor training facilities/rings. The horses are mainly hunter/jumpers and a retired jockey professionally manages this aspect of the club’s activities. There are about 50 horses boarded or trained at a time. Bird dogs are boarded,

trained and breed year round as well – primarily German shorthair pointers and Labrador retrievers.

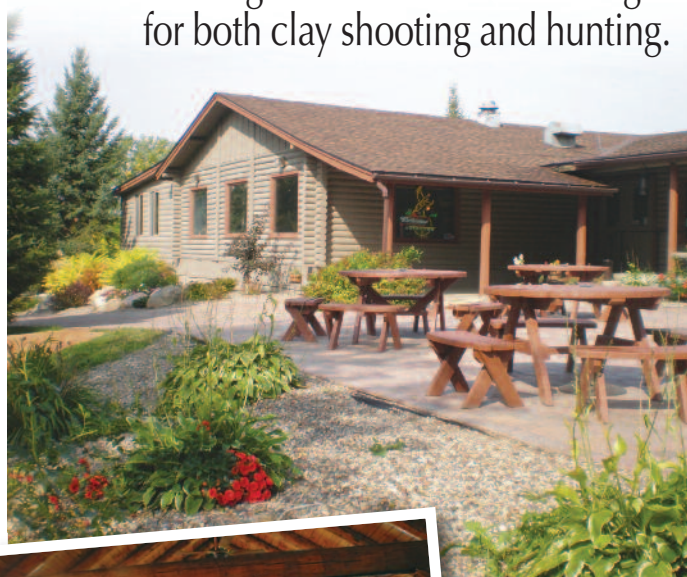
Membership

There are three different types of membership – Sporting Clays, Gun membership (which gives access to both clay targets and rifle and pistol ranges) and full Hunt memberships that gives access to hunting and all shooting. It’s not necessary to be a member to shoot sporting clays here – but membership or guest status is required for the other services.

To assist new sporting shooters the Club has developed a Handicap Shooting System. If you think this aspect of their financial plan isn’t important, consider the fact that the entire state of Minnesota only has about 460 NSCA members, while the club alone has 1000 sporting clays members.

There are five 50-bird sporting clays courses here – one that’s user friendly, two of moderate difficulty, one of tournament quality and one of top competition standard. All targets are changed frequently. Further, Travalia and his team are always trying to come up with new fun presentations, oddball targets and any type of target that spells F-U-N for their clients. If the shooters laugh and joke about a new target presentation, the staff has done a good job. The club also has Skeet, Trap, 5-Stand and FITASC fields.

The gun shop is always busy and additionally sells shooting accessories and clothing – for both clay shooting and hunting.



ABOVE: MAIN LODGE AND IT’S SURROUNDINGS. LEFT: CLUB HOUSE INTERIOR.

The Future

What about the future of our sport? “It should be incredibly bright,” Travalia began. “There are four to five million casual or recreational shooters in the USA – a great percentage of these could become NSCA members if we present our sport to them properly. To have

this happen, NSCA has to develop a business plan.

“Big corporations are not going to become advertisers, sponsors and supporters of an organization with only 20,000 members. But with an intensive business and marketing plan we can grow the organization to 100,000 members, maybe then 200,000, even a million. With a membership of 100,000 or more we’ll start to turn the heads of main street corporate America brand owners – like the car manufacturers, truck manufacturers, men and women clothing makers, shoe makers, travel destinations and others. Only when this happens can the very accomplished shooters make a living from their shooting.

“But this can only begin to happen when NSCA becomes a marketing driven organization – and I see signs that this might be beginning to happen. A well

thought out business plan to make it happen would be the start.” ■

*Nick Sisley can be contacted at
nicksisley@hotmail.com*

**LOOKING OUT OVER
ONE OF THE BEAUTIFUL
STATIONS AT MINNESOTA
HORSE & HUNT CLUB.**

