

In shotguns, as in life generally, what goes around comes around. This year's latest 'new' thing, the Browning Cynergy, has a stock design similar to that first introduced by W. W. Greener in the 1880s – and as for long barrels, what's so new about them? Read the gun makers' marketing material and you would be forgiven for thinking that some important breakthrough has been made that will automatically turn us into better shooters. 34" barrels, they tell us, are what we need and we need them now.

Well, as Gershwin might have said, 'it ain't necessarily so'. Firstly

there is nothing new about long barrels – Krieghoff were offering 34" barrels back in the mid '70s. Secondly, that same gun trade has spent much of the last century or more telling us that shorter is better. So do you need to trade in your 30 or 32 immediately or is it just a passing fad?

Let's take a quick turn through history first to get a little perspective. The earliest sporting shotguns would have been fowling pieces in the early seventeenth century, usually around 16-bore and with barrels up to six feet in length (now that would silence the crowd at the next championship!).

Wingshooting, or 'shooting flying' as it was known, would not take hold for nearly another century, with the development of the flintlock into a reliable tool. Those early guns would probably have had barrels 32" or more – the theory being widely held that the charge would not develop sufficient velocity through shorter barrels because of the relatively coarse and slow burning powders of the day. The development of better black powder and then modern nitro powders rendered this argument obsolete and throughout the 19th century we see barrel lengths reducing on

weight for a 12-bore of around 6½lbs became a widely accepted standard. Interestingly, the literature of the time contains very little discussion on the relative merits of different barrel lengths. Greener covers the whole topic in about half a page (this in a book over 800 pages long), while Teesdale Buckell (*Experts on Guns and Shooting*) is equally unconcerned, merely stating that anything between 26 and 30 inches will give the required results.

This is the norm as we enter the 20th century, with longer barrels than 30" a rarity and confined largely to specialist

**RICHARD RAWLINGSON** LOOKS AT THE TREND TO EVER LONGER BARRELS AND WONDERS IF WE HAVE FINALLY REACHED THE LIMIT

# HOW LONG IS ENOUGH?

sporting shotguns.

The driving force for this however had little, it would seem, to do with any practical advantage to be gained from shorter barrels, and much to do with weight saving. The classic game gun as it evolved in Britain got lighter throughout the century, until a

wildfowling guns designed for heavy loads and extreme range. In fact the next trend is towards shorter still, thanks to the energetic campaigning of Robert



## THE SHOOTER'S VIEW – GEORGE DIGWEED

Multi World Champion George Digweed is uniquely placed to comment on the validity of 34" barrels. George won the first of his titles shooting 30" Beretta 682 guns. When he switched to Kemen in the mid 1990s he quickly realized that the faster handling characteristics of the new gun were much better suited to 32" tubes and he stayed with this configuration when moving to Perazzi a few years ago, becoming the first man to use one to win a World Sporting Championship. Since then George has experimented extensively with the 34" Perazzi barrels but has returned to his original set up. He told us why:

"Having tried the longer barrels I became convinced that they caused as many problems as they solved. While I felt they gave me an edge on certain targets such as long, floating crossers, during a complete competition they were not as effective as the 32s on the general mix of targets we have to shoot – even though the gun balance was perfect. One option would have been to carry a spare set of 34" barrels but I found the sight pictures different between the two and it was difficult to keep switching from one to the other. I have gone back full time to my 32" barrels for all my competition shooting.

"The one area where I appreciate longer barrels is for game shooting. They are brilliant for really high driven birds and I use them all the time. It does not interfere with my competition shooting because I keep the seasons separate, not shooting clays during the winter months."



GEORGE DIGWEED AND HIS 32" PERAZZI.

Churchill and his famous 25" XXV guns. As persuasive a salesman as he was an accomplished shot, Churchill managed to convince much of a whole generation of British competitors that they would shoot better with barrels that we would today consider impractically short. His influence lasted right through to the 1960s. Look at old photographs of the period of competitors shooting early sporting clays competitions and you will see many of them

wielding short barreled side-by-side game guns!

Even as the over-and-under gradually usurped the traditional style for competition use, barrels were typically shorter than we would consider normal today. Browning's Superposed was a popular choice with those who helped turn sporting clays into a serious competitive discipline and although the factory offered 30" barrels, these were most likely used on trap guns while their

standard barrel length was 27½". Top British shooter John Bidwell won the first of his World FITASC titles with one of these guns and as recently as 1990 had this to say in his book 'Move, Mount, Shoot':  
*"The trend (to shorter barrels) was short lived and the pendulum quickly swung from 25 and 26 inch guns back to 28 and 30 inches. Some champions are even using 32 inch guns now, but unless you know exactly what you want in a sporting shotgun it is best to steer well clear and play safe."*

What quickly became apparent was that this trend to 32" that Bidwell was referring to was no passing phase but something of more substance. Among the great champions, shooters such as A. J. Smith were producing world beating performances with the longer barrels. Smith used the European specification Winchester 6500 guns, which in 32" were superbly balanced despite the extra length. Although they were to soon go out of production, the design philosophy of those final Winchesters would have a great influence on sporting clays guns during the 1990s.

The situation now is that 30" guns are the base line for competition. Generally, dealers don't want to know 28" guns, yet a decade or so ago there would have been equal numbers of 28s and 30s on the rack. An increasingly high proportion of new sales are 32" models and then there are those 34s...

So what has changed, if anything, other than perceptions? I think there has been a sea change in the type of sporting clays targets that are now the norm week in, week out. Shooting standards are higher and the level of difficulty is increasing to reflect this, particularly in major competitions. International (FITASC) sporting, in particular,

has become much more accessible and many target setters work across the disciplines, bringing the kind of stiffer presentations common to FITASC across into sporting clays. Thus we see greater use of distance and a preponderance of report targets taking over from true pairs and close, short window stuff. Automatic traps have removed many of the shackles from target setters, who no longer have to be primarily concerned with trapper safety.

Shooters have responded by seeking out guns with different shooting characteristics. 'Skeet in the woods' courses were admirably suited to skeet-type guns, short-barreled and open-choked. Long crossing and edge-on quartering birds on the other hand demand a different shooting style. Many English shooters in the early 1990s converted 32" trap guns, altering stocks and converting them to multi-chokes to give just this kind of handling. Manufacturers saw the signs and produced 32" guns with similar characteristics straight out of the box.

With such fierce competition for new gun business it would be inevitable that some should try to steal a march by pushing the envelope even further. The difference I see between the 32" revolution and the 34" phase we are in now is that the former was shooter-led, the latter is a marketing initiative. It is why I believe 34" barrels will not gain a great hold on the market. I see no real evidence that another two inches brings any real advantage to the party and for makers, distributors and retailers there are real downsides in terms of inventory control working against them. I may be wrong (it won't be the first time) but for most of us, I think 34" barrels are indeed fad, not fab. ■