

LOOKING

RICHARD RAWLINGSON LOOKS AT THE TECHNIQUES FOR TOWER TARGETS

UP!

IN OUR LAST ISSUE WE TACKLED TARGETS THROWN BENEATH THE SHOOTING POSITION. THIS ISSUE WE ARE LOOKING UPWARDS AT TARGETS THROWN HIGH IN THE AIR.

Some shooting grounds are lucky enough to have natural features such as steep hills, cliffs or old quarries from which to throw high targets, but for most some form of artificial tower will be needed to get the extra distance. If you shoot in international competition you will certainly need to be able to cope with this kind of presentation for the high driven or crossing target is a favorite of European course builders.

By 'driven' I mean a target that starts from in front of the station and passes directly over the shooter's head. In fact, the driven tower bird was the original sporting clays target. The shooting schools that sprang up everywhere in England in the late 19th century built their towers to simulate the driven pheasant and partridge game birds their clients would shoot in the field. If you ever visit the famous West London Shooting School – the oldest still operating – you will see the original towers still in use.

Towers are not just used for high incomers however. Crossing targets thrown from a high elevation simulate testing passing shots at wildfowl or doves and present specific problems that need to be overcome in order to score consistently. We will look at this type of presentation later, but first the classic driven.

CHURCHILL OR STANBURY?

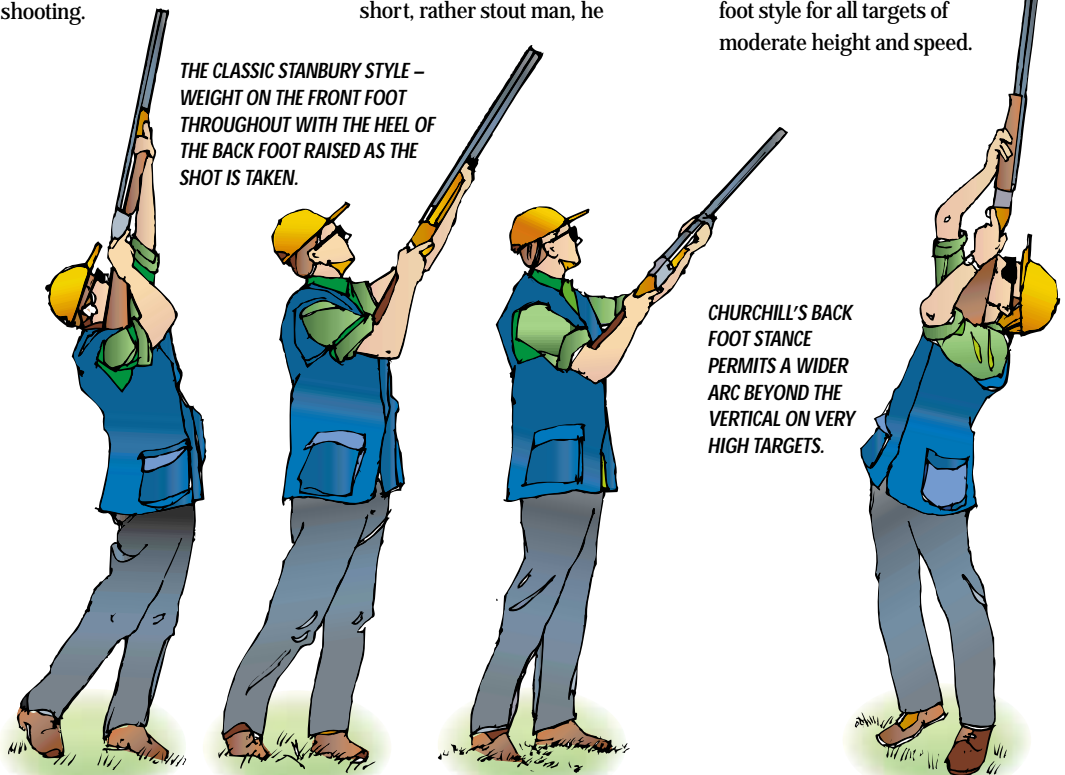
The driven target and the techniques for tackling it created one of the longest running debates in the sport. If you read the old time text books you will see references to the Churchill and Stanbury styles. Robert Churchill and Percy Stanbury were two of the most influential English coaches of the middle period of the last century, and they gave their names to two distinctly different styles of shooting.

Essentially the debate is about weight distribution and whether the driven bird should be shot with weight over the front or back foot. Stanbury's style was the more classical; a tall, slim man, he was an elegant shot who made the process look both simple and graceful. For the direct overhead target he would be in the perfect position, upright, back arched and with his right heel raised slightly off the ground.

Churchill was quite different – in both physique and approach. A short, rather stout man, he

advocated keeping the weight firmly on the back foot. He was also an advocate of short-barreled guns and a fast instinctive swing, but that is a topic maybe for another time.

So which is correct? Neither, is the short answer. Both methods work well, provided that all the other fundamentals are in place and indeed some shooters may switch from one style to another as circumstances dictate. One is double World Champion Richard Faulds who advocates the front foot style for all targets of moderate height and speed.



On very high and fast birds however he will switch to a stance with the weight on the back foot. This allows him to extend the arc of the swing beyond the vertical, gaining valuable extra room on targets that can need a surprising amount of lead.

THE SET UP

For the direct overhead shot the classic 'five after three' foot position is ideal. This allows a free swing through the line, with eyes, hands and shoulders all working in the same plane. More often than not, however, the target will be angled slightly off to one side – in many cases as the second bird of a report pair – and it is essential to make an adjustment to the stance to allow for this.

For a right handed shooter, shooting a bird angled to the left, the stance will need to be opened up, the front foot pointing to 12 o'clock or even 11 depending on the angle. Similarly the clay angled right will dictate a more closed stance, with the feet at perhaps 'ten after four'. The key to this shot is that the front hand points out the target and controls the line of the swing. To do this requires free and level movement of the shoulders. If you attempt to shoot the angled target from the 'straight ahead' stance the tendency will be to try to follow the line by dropping the shoulder, pulling the gun off line.

SWING THROUGH

Almost without exception, the true driven target is a swing through or pull away shot. Closer, fast

targets will require a single faster swing through from behind; on the really high ones a more conscious application of the forward allowance will probably be required. The shared characteristic is that both methods involve coming from behind the target. Maintained lead styles will not work because you cannot read the line of a target that is obscured by the barrels.

What is critical, however, is the insertion point of the muzzles. The ideal is to insert just behind the clay, leading to a much more compact swing and far greater control. Chasing across ten or twenty feet of empty sky throws control out of the window and makes reading any subtle nuances of the line much harder. The chances are that you will also run out of swing before the shot is complete, leading to a miss behind.

The old pheasant shooter's

mantra: 'butt, belly, beak, bang' still holds good for high tower clays. Imagine your target with a long tail and extended head. Swinging through from tail to beak gives you the line; firing as you pass the head gives you the lead.

TO TURN OR NOT TO TURN?

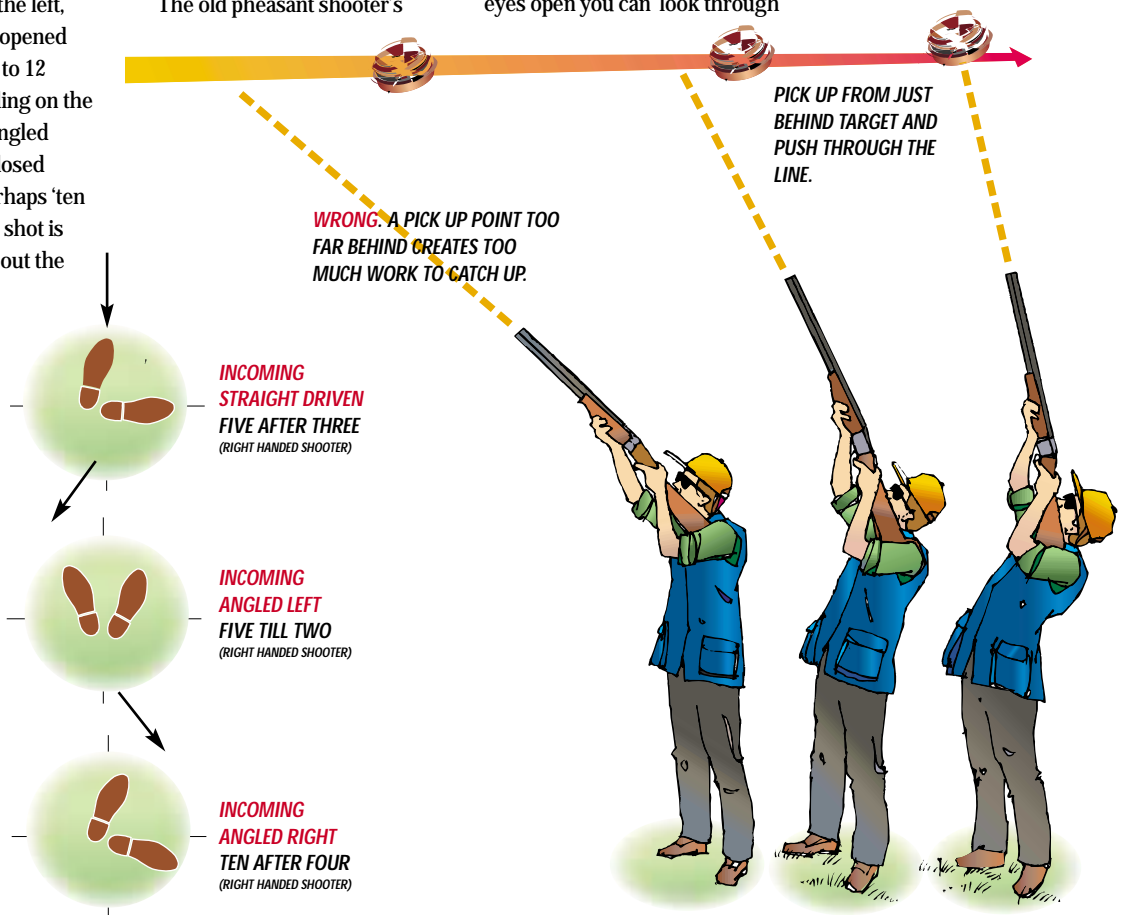
Any experienced coach will tell you that the head-on driven target is one of the best for showing up any master eye problems. The shooter will think he is pointing straight at the clay but the dominant eye will pull the muzzles off to the side. Those shooters who combat cross dominance by dimming or closing the master eye will always find driven birds harder. Swinging through to establish the lead means that the target is obscured for the one-eyed shooter, whereas with two eyes open you can 'look through'

the gun to keep it in view.

The answer for many is to use any deviation in flight from the dead straight line to their advantage by turning sideways on to the line and effectively shooting the target as a directly overhead crosser. This allows the clay to be kept in view all the time and it is a very effective method (I speak from personal experience). The danger is that variations in the line are not uncommon – not every target leaves the trap on the same trajectory – so you can find yourself facing the wrong way and desperately leaning backwards to get on line. That aside, this can be a very effective tactic.

THE TOWER CROSSER

Which brings us on neatly to the tower target thrown as a true



TURNING SIDWAYS TO THE TARGET LINE MAKES A DRIVEN BIRD INTO AN OVERHEAD CROSSER.



crosser, for me one of the great presentations in sporting clays. The thrill of hitting targets over 100 feet up, targets that seem to need a truck length of lead, still creates a buzz of excitement.

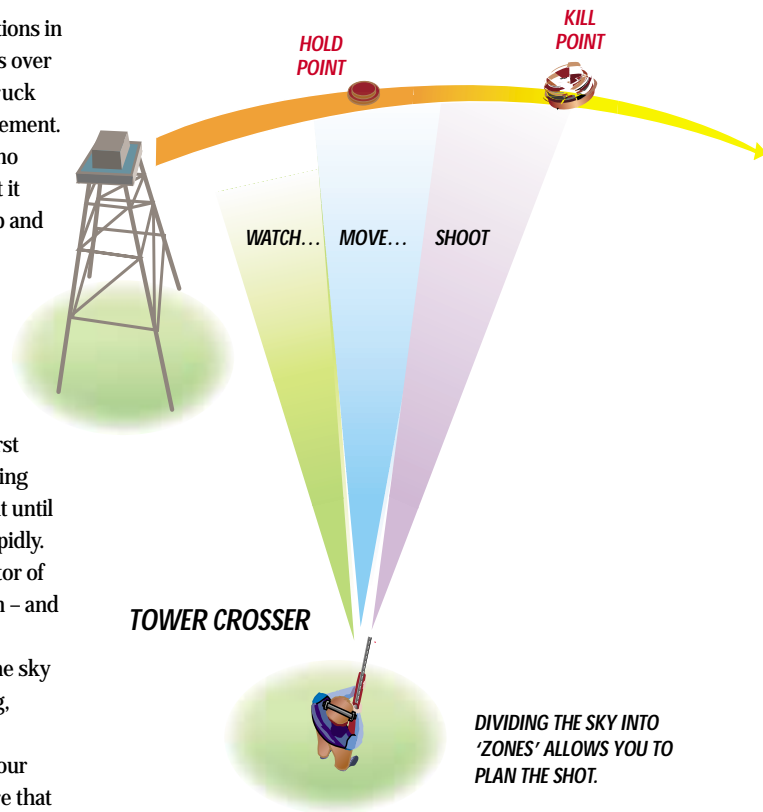
Essentially the high tower crosser is no different to any other crossing target, but it does put extra demands on correct set up and also poses a specific technical problem.

From a set up point of view, the main problem is that the target seems to be in view a long time. So where do you shoot it? Not, I would suggest in the early part of its flight.

The clay is traveling faster over the first third of its flight and is probably still gaining height. Nor, ideally do you want to leave it until late when it is losing height and speed rapidly. Somewhere in the middle will be the sector of steady speed and fairly constant elevation – and this will be your sweet zone.

Several top coaches talk of dividing the sky into three sectors for this shot – watching, moving and shooting.

The watching zone is the area from your gun hold point back to the tower. It is here that you first pick up the target clearly. As it enters your moving zone the leading hand inserts the muzzles into the flight line to initiate the gun



DIVIDING THE SKY INTO 'ZONES' ALLOWS YOU TO PLAN THE SHOT.

CORRECT GUN PATH

BEWARE OF THE RAINBOW!



DIPPING THE SHOULDER IS A COMMON FAULT CAUSING THE GUN TO DROP OFF LINE.

mount. The insertion point is a personal choice; all three shooting methods will work on these targets, so it does not matter whether you mount behind and swing through, on the target and pull away, or in front and sustain the lead. With the mount complete the shot is taken as the target enters the kill zone.

Breaking the sky into segments like this helps you visualize the shot and have a tempo in your mind before you call for the target. You will not be playing catch-up with a bird that has jumped you because you were lined up facing the tower, nor will you have a 'dead' gun waiting for it to get to you.

I spoke of the particular technical problem of a high elevation crosser and it is related to poor set up and not identifying the kill zone correctly. For right handers the problem will be more apparent on left to right targets, the reverse for lefties. Coaches call it 'rainbowing'. When you are stretching to apply extra lead in the direction that takes the gun away from the face, the natural inclination is to drop the leading shoulder and roll off the line. This will result in a miss. The cure is to ensure that you turn from the waist, not roll from the shoulders. ■