

# KEEP THE PERSPECTIVE

*SO, THE U.S. TEAMS DIDN'T FARE SO WELL AT THE UK-US MASTERS IN ENGLAND, AND WITH THE NOTABLE EXCEPTIONS OF GREGG WOLF AND JOE CANTEY, NOR AT THE WORLD FITASC IN GERMANY. NOW THE CRY IN THE HOMETOWN IS "TOUGHER TARGETS! WE'LL NOT BE MADE FOOLS OF AGAIN." I SYMPATHIZE WITH THE SENTIMENT, BUT IT "AIN'T GONNA HAPPEN," SAYS DAVE HOLMES.*

For ranges to exist they have to make a profit. To make a profit they have to throw targets that suit their clients. While we may pat ourselves on the back for the growth of sporting clays as a discipline, the fact is that registered sporting shooters are just a drop in the bucket as regards clay target shooting generally.

From Ann Meyers, director of the NSCA, comes the figure of 4,541 mid-year classification reviews of shooters with 300 or more registered sporting targets. That comes out at an average of not quite 91 shooters per State. Now you may better understand the story of a sporting clays range owner who won the lottery – when asked what he was going to do with his winnings, he replied that he would keep throwing targets until he was broke again!

There were just over 12 million registered sporting targets thrown last year. Close on two million of those were thrown at the Open and the Nationals. That leaves 10 million for all other registered shoots. A quick perusal of shoot results will show that many registered shoots only pull 15-30 shooters and some less than that. Those numbers make throwing registered shoots an act of charity on the part of many range owners. Do you want them to now commit

fiscal suicide by throwing the tough targets that a minority of shooters in Masterclass need so that they can compete on a level playing field in Europe or are we better off if every range is financially successful?

Don't get me wrong – I would like to shoot better targets and certain it is that poor targets will not make better shooters. But those who frequent the clubs up and down the country, not interested in registered averages, are quite content with what they have. They don't travel to shoots, could not care less about registering a target and don't give a rat's butt about how U.S. shooters fare in international competition. They just want to go out and break a few targets.

They aren't unlike the registered shooters who don't really want to contribute to the pot so that a Masterclass shooter can have a HOA pay day. Most everyone out there wants to spend their money and time making their game better, shooting well and having some fun. An extra \$20 on top so that a sponsored shooter can win more represents four boxes of shells that they could buy and shoot themselves. They aren't going to win anything, so where is the incentive?

In a country of 300 million, we



had 4,500 registered shooters who had shot 300 or more sporting targets by mid-year. There are three million NRA members. One out of every 666.6 members (if all the NSCA members are NRA members) shot 300 or more registered sporting targets by mid-year. More to the point, only about one out of four NSCA members shot enough targets to qualify for mid-year reclassification. Why should we expect shooters to join our Association and flock to registered shoots if most of the existing NSCA members don't support registered events?

In 1998, just over 54,000 ATA members shot 82.5 million registered targets – an average of 1,500 per shooter. By mid this year the NSCA membership had mathematically averaged 750 targets each, yet only 4,500 shot 300 or more targets. Houston, I think we have a problem! We have a few shooters shooting a lot and a lot of shooters shooting a little. The quickest way to grow this sport is to get members shooting more.

So what is the answer to the growth issue? I wish I had a crystal ball – but the answer isn't throwing 60 yard battues on every range in the country so our teams can perform better in Europe! Sorry guys. If any group needs to suffer for the growth of the sport, it has to be Masterclass. Having said that, we

equally need to be proud of our US teams and have peers to look up to. I don't dispute the need for our cadre of top shots to be rewarded for their efforts (inward sponsorship from industry) or the need for world-class dedicated training facilities so that they can compete and win – but neither can be provided from the existing infrastructure of Sporting. It's a major problem that must be addressed if we are not to lose our top shots to other sports.

But getting back to the point as regards the growth of Sporting in general, there are two areas to address – one is the growth of sporting clays as a discipline and the other is registered events.

There is no doubt that Sporting is growing at a respectable pace. The ranges in my neck of the woods are evidence of that – new shooters come out all the time, shoot lousy scores, try it again and keep coming back for more. The targets don't change much over the course of the shooting season (one range is shooting the same targets they did last year) so eventually everybody breaks a few clays and goes home happy. They don't have to travel too far and it isn't too expensive.

How many of these people are, or become, NSCA registered shooters? My guess is maybe 5% – but I wouldn't bet on that. (Did you know that the Minnesota Horse

and Hunt Club had 850 league shooters last year? That puts the 1,069 shooters at the US Open in perspective in a hurry, doesn't it?)

How do we grow the number of registered shooters? Keeping it as cheap as possible could be one way. That tilt doesn't do much for Masterclass shooters, but if we keep trying to support the top end of that class out of entry fees rather than outside sponsorship, what is the incentive for the lower class shooters? Top shots, many sponsored, travel and shoot a lot. Most guys only get to shoot a little. Name another sport where the minor leagues are asked to support the major leagues?

Low cost shoots will encourage more shooters to participate. Entry fees make a difference. Look at some of the comments that were made when the die-hards found out that Minnesota Horse and Hunt was charging sales tax at the US Open this year. Guys who were taking a week's vacation, spending a grand on travel, meals and rooms, \$400-\$500 on entry fees and \$100 on shells, balked at the thought of paying \$30 in sales tax. We all have limits.

The number of shooters with \$500 a month of disposable income to shoot is limited and may become more so in the future. The number



CLUB SHOOTERS ENJOY THEIR SPORT

of shooters with \$50 a month to shoot at a local range is much greater. One step that might increase the number of registered shooters is to increase the number of registered shoots at local clubs where none are currently being held. We need to approach these range owners in a helpful manner and encourage them to have a registered shoot or two. Costs must be kept down so that local shooters can hardly tell the difference between the registered shoot and the regular week end stuff. We need volunteers to help organize and assist with running the shoot so that the range owner stands a good chance of making a buck. We need to see more 'names' winning. We need top shots and good coaches attending these events, spending the day trying to show someone else how good they can become. Open doors.

We've got to keep it fun. We don't need over-competitive shooters aggressively ruining everybody else's day arguing with

referees over a lost target. Why should Ladies want to shoot when they see grown men acting like spoilt kids over something that really doesn't affect anyone's life in a threatening way? I love the game dearly, as do you. I want to do better, as do you. But if it isn't fun, we're missing the point. For many people, probably the majority, this is recreation combined with a healthy dose of dedication and competitive spirit. It is not life itself. Breaking 60 yard battues is a kick, but the course of human events will not be changed if another one is never broken.

The truth of the matter is that it doesn't matter to very many shooters how we fare in international competition. To those who are deeply concerned with the future growth of sporting, may I suggest that the best way to get

better shooters is to get more shooters to more shoots. Get that Nebraska farm boy who hasn't missed a pheasant in two seasons thinking it is just as much fun to hit clays. Get the retired guys who chase doves and quail every winter in Arizona thinking they might as well use those shotguns all year. Try to recruit two or three new shooters for the local range this season. Encourage the NSCA to make it easy for range owners to join in – making registered shoots look profitable and appealing, instead of like a trip to the dentist. If we do not encourage growth in Sporting, how many shooters do you think will be getting mid-year or year-end reviews in 2008?

If we had those extra shooters, would the odds improve that we might find more top shots to compete on the world stage?



Maybe. Would we be a much more viable economic force, attracting more attention and sponsorship from industry? Certainly.

Or would we be better off if we cranked up the springs, tightened up the chokes and ran half the shooters we have off into the bushes while we set the stage for less than two dozen shooters to

beat the world? Chew on this: Those Europeans didn't get good trying to beat the world. They got good over many years of trying to beat each other. It takes time – let's not rush things.

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*This article, by Dave Holmes, is based on his experience in the sport while working for Fieldsport of Michigan.*