

How can we ensure our sport grows and is attractive to newcomers and corporate sponsors if we don't offer them the facilities they expect? For a number of years now we've all been aware that the competition for the recreational dollar is tough – and that competition is not just the next gun club along the road, it's all the other recreational pursuits available that are chasing the same dollar. Golf, tennis, baseball, equestrian, swimming, football, and many others, all offer a typically higher standard of facility than the *average* shooting range.

Although sporting clays has been called 'golf with a shotgun', if you think about it, it's a bit of an insult to golf! The *average* golf course today costs in the region of seven to nine million dollars to build – and with some areas reaching course saturation that figure is much higher. The important point to note here is the word '*average*'. At least golf *has* an average.

Among the shooting fraternity there are those that want to build 'something really nice' – but with widely varying budgets from tens of thousands of dollars, and, believe it or not, others with millions of dollars. With those ends of the 'standards spectrum' so far apart, it's difficult for those of us in shooting sports to talk about an *average* shooting facility.

If there is any desire to achieve some sort of *average* design and development standard to justify the golf analogy and attract newcomers to our sport, we need to take a methodical approach to designing future facilities (or upgrading existing facilities) that must include a detailed analysis of all potential zoning, environmental and development approval issues to result in the improved industry standard needed. Although this might sometimes be expensive and

CHASING THE Recreational Dollar

RAY FORMAN OF CLAY-SPORT INTERNATIONAL INC DEBATES THE NEED FOR IMPROVED SHOOTING FACILITIES TO ATTRACT NEWCOMERS TO OUR SPORT.



time-consuming, the approvals process cannot be ignored if range and club owners want to protect their investment and have 'relative' peace of mind in the years to come.

The approvals process aside however, the first step in successful facility design should be to define who you want to entertain. In other words, who will

fit the user profile? Will they be content with a basic range, or will they expect to find a manicured, well constructed and maintained standard of facility which they are accustomed to with other popular outdoor activities? Will they be tournament shooters, corporate executives, hunters, resort guests, non-shooters? To define the

customer profile further, take a close look at the local demographic factors influencing the potential of the project – such as population size and distribution, socio-economic levels, local industry, existing sports facilities, access to the property. Then determine if the project should be clay shooting only, or if there are opportunities

to integrate other (inexpensive) recreational activities into the overall conceptual layout plan – thereby creating additional profit potential.

Regardless of profile, since each of these individuals and customer groups have different expectations of facility standards, it is those expectations that will determine to a great degree the motif and overall cost of the project, as well as what activities are to be offered.

MULTI-USE BENEFITS

Let me use a personal example to illustrate this point. A client in Texas was interested in a typical sporting clays range, but after reviewing with him the location of his site, its natural aesthetics and the local population demographics, we felt that by just offering sporting clays and relying on the walk-in shooter for business his chances of success were pretty slim. After much discussion, we discovered that he had a very impressive network of relatively young corporate contacts.

Consequently, we drew-up a rough conceptual layout plan and budget for discussion. The primary profile we were now looking at, while still accommodating the walk-in shooters, was active, young to middle-aged corporate executives and professionals looking for corporate entertainment. The new plan now offered sporting clays, fishing (on a man-made lake), mountain bike riding, 3-D archery, bird hunting, ATV riding, tennis, basketball, and after all those exertions, great relaxation and dining with wonderful on-site overnight accommodation to end the day. And yes, he is very busy!

INTIMIDATION FACTOR

With the majority of the public being non-shooters, it's an obvious

market to consider – but how do you get them out in significant numbers? I have been convinced for many years that incorporating different skill levels on the same sporting clays course (like the tee-box arrangements on a golf course) can overcome the 'intimidation factor' for beginners and benefit the range owners, their customers, and eventually, the sport. Over ninety percent of shooters are introduced to shooting by a shooting friend, relative or spouse, and considering the 'intimidation factor' inherent in shooting, the beginner usually ends-up feeling inadequate after shooting at the same targets as their experienced friend. Having a multi-skill level design, where the beginner can shoot and achieve greater success while their friend is entertained with more difficult targets is a worthwhile concept. Nevertheless, it took quite a few years to persuade some of our clients to incorporate this into our designs for them, but we now have a number of facilities offering this to their users. Husbands and wives, or whole families, or corporate executives and their clients are now able to shoot with one another at each stand without fear of intimidation. Also, to maximise utilisation and potential revenue for the facility, this concept allows a number of different groups to enjoy the facility simultaneously, but separately. It must be the way forward to introduce more people to our sport.

TEAM WORK

Looking at the political difficulties our sport faces today and the poor image created by a generally biased media, the task of attracting the non-shooting public is becoming ever more difficult. In order to overcome

these difficulties, improve our image and attract bigger numbers of new shooters, we must make the sport more attractive. Golf courses, equestrian centres and multi-use sports facilities have all demonstrated quite clearly that much of their appeal is their standards and aesthetics. As shooters we may be content to accept *average* facilities. However, when you invite your non-shooting, golf-playing buddy to leave her or his ten million dollar golf course to try shooting for the first time – they may have fun once, but will they return?

To compound this, we're not working together as a team. Throughout shooting sports it seems that everyone is not moving together in the same direction, and consequently, the sport is not being promoted as effectively as it could. If you think of the available market share of the sport as a pizza, and everyone has their own slice, it appears that everyone wants their slice to be bigger by taking a piece off someone else's – hardly progressive is it? I think we should simply bake a bigger pizza so that everyone's slice, even if it remains the same percentage, will be bigger!

The sport is making progress however. There are now numerous shooting facilities which offer a construction standard and level of service comparable with any of the other highly visible outdoor sports, and which the non-shooting public and media cannot fail to be impressed by. However, is this too little too late? Who knows? I don't have the proverbial crystal ball, but with the current international political stance on gun control, I really don't think we have much time left for debate – as a sport we need to keep investing and providing ever improved standards.

Nevertheless, I shouldn't finish on an apocalyptic note. I'm confident that as we gradually reach that broader cross-section of the public, thanks in part to improved range and club standards, it will, in the future, be difficult for the policy makers in government to ignore the honest and fair treatment that the sport starts to attract from the media.

And, if we do manage to bake that bigger pizza, I'm quite sure there'll be plenty of room for different toppings to suit everyone's taste.

MASTER LAYOUT PLAIN FOR A MULTI-USE FACILITY

