



NICK SISLEY IN CONVERSATION WITH

JOHN HERKOWITZ OF PACIFIC SPORTING ARMS

It was more than a few years ago that John Herkowitz was burning up the skeet circuit with one 100 after another – shot at some of the nation’s biggest events. Although he had always shot well, when he went on that

100-straight-rage it was like he’d had an epiphany to anyone not close to him. I remember at the time asking him, “To what do you attribute all these 100s of late?” Turns out this clay target buster had not only acquired a new

shotgun, he had its stock built to his personal dimensions. It was a Perazzi MX-8. I recall him telling me that this was the first shotgun that truly hit “where he looked!” But those are all past days and though Herkowitz still shoots

skeet (including lots more 100 straights), he is also very much into sporting – selling sporting clays shotguns at his Pacific Sporting Arms emporium in Southern California.

Early Days

After college, Herkowitz went to work for the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). He took early retirement in 1995. He was already enjoying shooting by then and for more than four years he shot skeet or sporting practically every day, until the hunting season started. Then he hunted upland birds most every day. What a life!

Bird hunting days were often spent with Joe Shiozaki, one of his closest friends. Shiozaki started an outfit called JS Air Cushion stocks, building stocks to customer's specified dimensions – installing an air cylinder in the butt which collapsed upon firing, thereby significantly dampening recoil. "Joe's shop was in Azusa, California on West Foothills Blvd," recalls Herkowitz. "In 1999 the building next door became available for lease and he suggested I lease the spot, install a gun safe, shoot clay targets all morning, then open up the shop in the afternoon – and that's how and when Pacific Sporting Arms was started. I was already buying and selling shotguns at the time, so setting up shop next to a close friend seemed a no-brainer."

But the story of Herkowitz and Shiozaki goes deeper. While still working for the LAPD, Herkowitz had to go to the shooting range every six months and 'qualify' in handguns, rifles and shotguns. While at that range, he noticed the thousands of Winchester AA 12g spent hulls around. He bought them (and many more) for about a 1/2 cent apiece – and filled his

garage to the ceiling with those boxes of once-fired AA hulls. It must have been an unbelievable sight. They were then sold for 5 cents a piece! Herkowitz told me, "I bought a K-80 with the money I made." He'd go back to the LAPD range every six months to truck home another huge supply of those AA hulls. The profit went into a 'kitty' and once bird season arrived, that's the money he and Shiozaki used to hunt upland birds all over the Southwest.

With his start of Pacific Sporting Arms, Herkowitz had about 10 Remington 1100s and 10 Browning Citoris that he already owned. These were the guns he put in his safe in the shop next door to JS Air Cushion. From this small and inauspicious start, Herkowitz has graduated to a current inventory of \$2 million.

You know from his magazine advertisements that he sells not only sporting guns from the top makers – but he carries some very high grade models from Perazzi, Krieghoff, Kolar, Blaser, Beretta and others.

Looking Forward

What does Herkowitz see regarding trends in clay target shooting? "Skeet and trap are dwindling in numbers. This, no doubt, has to do with both our economy as well as the actual costs involved in shooting. However, I don't see sporting clays numbers declining," says Herkowitz.

"Sporting clays is the evolution of the game. When skeet came along the number of trap shooters declined because at that time skeet was the evolution of the game.

Further, both skeet and trap are strictly 100 straight games. With sporting clays you can miss a couple of targets and still have a good chance of winning. When my skeet shooting buddies ask why isn't *so and so* shooting skeet anymore, I tell them to just go to a sporting clays shoot – you'll find your old friends there."

What about the clubs? How are they fairing in this economy? "The clubs that listen to and cater to the shooter are doing fine, at least the ones I'm associated with. When money is tight, shooters go to where they know they will get the best bang for the buck." He went on to say that, "clubs that are only interested in the volume of targets they throw are having a rough financial time. This game is all about customer service."

Herkowitz went on to illustrate the point with this interesting story. "The Moore & Moore shooting club has been in Southern California for about 25 years. Late last year they came to me and asked for some help, ideas on how to garner more (and new) shooters – as well as some Pacific Sporting Arms sponsorship. They decided to go with the idea of a 'fun' sporting shoot once a month – which they have dubbed The Big Bonanza Blast. The idea was to keep costs down and get more folks shooting. Here's the deal – they shoot 100 targets in the morning, pay \$35, and that price includes lunch. In the afternoon, those who shot in the morning can shoot 100 more targets in the afternoon for only \$20. Additionally, there are prizes. But there's more – each time a shooter pays for 100 targets he gets a ticket. Every six months there's a drawing from among those tickets – the winner taking home a new shotgun that we at Pacific Sporting Arms sponsor."

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JOHN HERKOWITZ (L) DISCUSSES TITANIUM CHOKES WITH CURTIS LESSEL WHO OWNS EXTREME CHOKES.



JOHN HERKOWITZ WITH A FAVORITE SPORTING CLAYS GUN – SHOOTING AT THE MOORE & MOORE SPORTING RANGE.

The Moore and Moore club is already getting 120 shooters at these Big Bonanza Blasts – every month. Many of them are new shooters, many come back to the club to shoot at other times during the month, and some have even taken up registered shooting. “It’s pie in the sky to think that first time shooters are interested in registered shooting,” says Herkowitz. “First you have to show a new shooter how much fun it is – and soon enough he’ll graduate to registered competition from there.”

Shooting registered skeet, trap or sporting is almost always a two or three-day deal. “With the state of the economy, such a commitment is just too much for many.” But in Southern California Herkowitz says he can shoot 100 sporting clays targets in the morning, sometimes registered, have lunch at the club and be back in his office by the afternoon – or lunch at the club and shoot in the afternoon. Perhaps more clubs should look at the opportunity of offering such options.

Sponsors

Does Pacific Sporting Arms sponsor any shoots? One example is a major sporting clays shoot held at the Dallas Gun Club – a one day shoot of 200 targets. At the last event 277 shooters showed up. Pacific Sporting Arms also sponsors some State shoots and the Western Open – probably the biggest skeet shoot in the western

part of the USA. “It’s very important to give back,” says Herkowitz, “and it’s great publicity for the company.”

What about youth shooting and growing those numbers? Herkowitz has been impressed with the SCTP numbers that just keep growing. But he also points out that clay target shooting is expensive. “Most youngsters can’t afford sporting unless they are supported financially. While everyone should support the SCTP, I’m also in favor of trying to reach potential shooters who are in their late 30s and 40s. These guys and gals can’t play football, basketball, soccer and other physical sports anymore, plus at this age many are gaining a bit financially. However, the unanswered question is how do we attract such people?” He welcomes suggestions, but he’s convinced it’s all about marketing. The Moore & Moore Big Bonanza Blast is evidence of such good marketing. “I grew up very close to the Detroit Gun Club. Despite racing motorcycles at a track almost in the gun club’s shadow, I never knew that particular gun club was there. Even at a young

age I yearned to shoot clay targets, but never knew where or how to get involved in the sport. More marketing is essential.” He continued, “Get folks started correctly with an early lesson and a welcome attitude. Many potential shooters are intimidated about going to a gun club for the first time. They think those they meet have probably been shooting clay targets for years – or decades. We need to be more aware of such concerns and be more welcoming.

What about the NSCA? How are they doing attracting more shooters to the sport? Herkowitz thinks the NSCA is doing great, but believes the membership could be more proactive in introducing new shooters to our sport. He then told me his ‘cigar’ story.

“A small group of us meet most Wednesday afternoons. Conversations run the gamut in the smoky room, but eventually these cigar buffs discovered I was a clay target shooter. Not only did I tell them about clay shooting, I took them to the gun club and showed them the how-to. The point is, how about meetings you have that aren’t shooting related?”



JOHN HERKOWITZ OF PACIFIC SPORTING ARMS WORKS WITH A CLIENT DURING A GUN FITTING SESSION.



DOING GUN FITTING WORK.

These can often be the perfect place to begin talking about

shooting, and then hopefully inviting one or more of those non-shooters to your gun club.” Herkowitz goes on, “Every shooter and every gun club has a responsibility to bring in new shooters – not just the NSCA.”

What about getting local sponsors – maybe those not related to the shooting game? His advice on this one is to start early. A year ahead of time is not too

early because most companies have budgets. To stay solvent they have to stick to those budgets. Also, you need time to convince them to become a sponsor – you have to show them that there is a benefit to sponsorship.

What about getting television involved in shooting sports? Some sporting shooters may not be aware that a trap shooter, named Bill Martin, contributed \$100,000

to the Grand American purse in 2010. This year his contribution is \$300,000 – and the TV folks will be there. Herkowitz chimes in, “If bass anglers can have million dollar tournaments, mainly through sponsorship, why not shooting?” But can a camera pick up the action? With some of the latest TV camera equipment, it’s becoming more of a reality that shotgun sports can be televised in future.

More Competitive

Suggestions for the future? Herkowitz made it into Master class with his first 300 registered targets. Consequently, one of his suggestions would be to make it more difficult to graduate to Master class. “Registered shooting needs to be more competitive in every class,” says Herkowitz. “On a positive side – you can’t go play golf with Tiger Woods or Phil Michelson. But you can enter a sporting clays tournament and shoot in the same event as George Digweed, Brad Kidd, Anthony Matarese Jr., Wendell Cherry et al. I think this is a major attraction for sporting clays.” Herkowitz concludes that there’s probably demand for a ‘professional class’, shooting for bigger purses, that might attract the attention of TV sports channels, “but the sport must not become elitist. It’s the mid-class shooters that support our tournaments, together with new entrants to the sport. These are the shooters that we need to encourage to keep enjoying our favorite sport.” ■

Nick Sisley has been writing about the outdoors full time for 42 years. His thousands of articles have appeared in scores of magazines. He has authored eight books, is a Level I NSCA, NSSA Shotgun Instructor as well as a Certified NRA Shotgun Instructor. Nick can be reached at nicksisley@hotmail.com
