

YOU MAKE IT LOOK SO EASY

YOU KNOW HOW IT IS – YOU’RE NEXT IN LINE TO SHOOT BEHIND ONE OF THE BIG NAMES. HE RUNS THE STATION WHILE YOU STRUGGLE. WHAT IS WORSE IS THAT HE MAKES IT LOOK SO EASY. IF ONLY YOU COULD ASK HIM THE SECRETS OF HIS SUCCESS. BUT FEELING A BIT EMBARRASSED AND NOT DARING TO DISTURB THE GREAT MAN IN THE MIDDLE OF A TOURNAMENT, YOU MOVE ALONG WITH YOUR QUESTIONS STILL UNANSWERED. STAY WITH US AS WE PIN DOWN BOBBY FOWLER, JR., TO ANSWER THOSE QUESTIONS YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO ASK.



I recently attended my first major championship – nerves got the better of me and I know I should have shot better. You never seem to get nervous – so is it something that comes with experience or is there a secret for staying cool in the heat of competition? You must at sometime have been in my position. Any tips to control the nerves would be helpful.

Actually, I get just as nervous or more so than the next guy. I usually get sick to my stomach right before a major shoot - this

signals me that I am ready to pour it on. Getting nervous or anxious can be a very uncomfortable feeling, but I have learned how to harness it and turn it into quiet energy, using it to my advantage. The first thing to do is accept the feeling of anxiety, don't try to turn it off (this will cause it to worsen). I have my own pre-shot routine established; this is something every shooter should have. It allows you to calm down and think about the task ahead.

The nerves continue right up until it's my turn to shoot on the first station. Accept that you are uncomfortable, take a deep breath

and think about the shot you are about to attempt. Ask yourself all the questions (where is the bird traveling, where should my gun hold point be, where's the kill point). Shut out everything around you, it's just you, your gun and the target.

By the time you've completed the first station the nerves should have settled and you're on your way. But that's not always the end of it! On those magic days when you're in the zone and shooting well, you suddenly realize that with two stations to go you have a target in hand to win your class or the competition outright. Suddenly

those nerves return – but this time they're mixed with excitement and anticipation. The danger now is that you tighten-up and start to try too hard with the inevitable result of a missed target. Stay relaxed, keep focused, don't rush your routine, take nothing for granted and with luck you'll come through as a winner.

At all competition levels I see numerous competitors change chokes from one shooting station to another – or change shot sizes. I've read all the articles and marketing leaflets about the benefits of chokes, shot strings and tight patterns but just how beneficial is this to improving scores.

There are reasons to change both your chokes and your shot size during a tournament. Provided you've done the groundwork and patterned your gun and matched the right shotshell to your gun you can maximize the advantages offered by shell and choke choice. Shot size is important based on the distance of the bird – remember that the more BB's the bigger the pattern, but not as much energy, because the BB's are smaller. So for a 20yd shot use a #9 (large pattern, but less energy). At 20-40yds, use a #8 with a little smaller pattern but that has a little more energy (you need more energy when the targets are further away). At 40yds use a #7^{1/2}, this has an even smaller pattern, but more energy than the #8.

When using the correct shell choice you gain some advantage, but it is choke size that gives you the advantage of controlling the shot pattern. At 20 yds, use an open choke, this will give you a large pattern. At 20-35yds, I

suggest Improved Cylinder or Light Mod – it's not as open so the BB's do not spread until the shot is further out. At 30-50yds use a Modified choke, this will give you an even smaller pattern. 50yds and out use full choke, giving you a much smaller pattern for those longer shots.

One word of caution – don't let things get over complicated to the extent that at every station your shell and choke choice becomes a distraction. In truth, most registered sporting courses could be shot with Modified and #8 provided you put the pattern in the right place! The right shell and choke selection will always give you an advantage but should not be viewed as a solution to the lack of ability. If you miss a target because of poor concentration or bad technique you miss it regardless of shell or choke choice!

I never know how to set myself up for difficult pairs. Should I try to move my feet before the second shot or should I stay in one place? Should I favor one bird rather than another or go for a half-way position that is not quite right for either?

Most of the time I set up so that my position for the first shot will be acceptable for the second. I shoot with an open stance – if I break a bird at 12:00 o'clock then my feet are set a 10:00 and 3:00 o'clock with my chest turned toward the break point. However, you should be aware that an open stance does have its limitations, particularly in FITASC. For a right hander you have plenty of swing on a right to left crosser, but on a left to right crosser you run out of swing much sooner – the body can't turn far enough – unless you



FROM MY OPEN STANCE I HAVE PLENTY OF SWING TOWARD MY LEFT WITH NO REAL NEED TO MOVE MY FEET.

SWING TO MY RIGHT IS RESTRICTED. NOTE DROPPED RIGHT SHOULDER. I SHOULD HAVE MOVED MY FEET.

MY NORMAL OPEN STANCE POSITION FOR THE 1ST SHOT WILL OFTEN BE ACCEPTABLE FOR THE SECOND SHOT.

move your feet. (For a left hander the swing to the left is restricted with an open stance).

The course designer knows this and he uses it to put the shooter into an awkward position for the second bird, in the hope you'll miss the target. In this instance you must move your feet – if you don't, the chances of a miss become more likely. What ever you do, the rule must be to ensure that for each target you are comfortable so that your shooting style and swing remains fluid.

I can't help noticing that top shots, like golfers, seem to make it all look so easy – they have so much time compared with most of us that are, for example, forever chasing fast crossers. Is this just natural ability or is there a knack that we could all learn?

It's all down to technique. For sporting clays I shoot gun up with sustained lead most of the time – this gives the appearance to the onlooker that my gun movement is minimal and not rushed. Before I fire my gun, I first decide where I am going to break the target, then I decide the gun start

position, then I look back for the bird. As a general

rule my hold position is about half-way between where I first see the bird and the kill point. I then look back toward the pick up point and as soon as I see the target I start my swing, moving the gun gradually, letting the bird catch up to the gun (always keeping the gun ahead of the bird). When I see the right picture, I fire the gun.

Sustained lead is not the only shooting method – and not all targets are suited to this method. To be a winner you must be an expert in all methods to counter the many different types of target presentations.

So, to answer your question – the appearance of 'more time' is particularly noticeable when a shooter is using sustained lead than compared with someone shooting 'come from behind the bird and push through'. The latter will have a long smooth swing while a top shot utilizing sustained lead will have a short swing and often appear to shoot with a stopped gun.

I'm often told not to keep counting my scorecard! Whilst

I quickly lose count, I bet you know exactly how many targets you are 'away' throughout the championship. Doesn't that affect your concentration?

Scorecards and scoreboards are just another distraction – and for most competitors I can understand the suggestion that they should not keep checking their scores. It's a personal thing – I like to know what I have to beat and where I am at all times. This forces me to stay focused on what I need to do. Other top shots don't like to know scores, believing that it puts them under pressure – particularly if there's already a 95 on the board!

If you're a lower class shooter, keeping your score in your mind is more complicated than for a top shot that tends to count backward from 100 – hopefully only missing a handful of birds. So here's a tip. If you want to drive yourself toward a score of 70 on a 14 station 100 birds competition then set a bench mark of 5 kills on each stand (like a par in golf). Forget about keeping track of your total score, just keep track (plus or minus) of par 5 on each station. If you make par you've got your 70 – or for 85 its plus or minus from a par of 6 on each station. This should be easier on the brain, less of a distraction and will give you a benchmark to aim at. Anything you can do to keep totally focused on your shooting must be good.

Practice makes perfect – or so they say – but I seem forever doomed to be scoring mid-60s to mid-70s ex-100 and can never crack the 80 barrier, or 90 for that matter. I try to get regular coaching and shoot at least two competitions a month. Should I be putting in more time and shells on the

practice range if I want to break through to the next level? If so, what should my practice commitment be?

When a good shooting buddy of mine won the World FITASC Championships he was shooting about 50,000 shells a year in practice – with competition on top of that! So yes, sustained and constructive practice is helpful – after all, there's only a certain number of target angles and presentations possible and as you say, 'practice makes perfect'.

As to coaching this is a more complicated subject. There's a difference between coaching an up and coming top shot to take his average from 90 to 94 and become a champion, compared with coaching someone like yourself that is striving to raise his game from the mid-60s average to mid-70s or 80s. In your case I suggest you hire a proven professional, someone that competes and can shoot consistently in the 90s. But most importantly, that person must be a good communicator. He or she could be a great shot, but can they put into words and convey the messages that will provide the key to your sustained improvement.

Your coach will re-evaluate and perhaps correct the basics and then establish a practice routine – he/she will know how to do this, because he/she has done it themselves. Your coach should then help you set goals for the upcoming year.

As often as possible, shoot with someone that is better than you are. It may even be helpful on occasions to pay your coach to shoot with you in a tournament; this is a great way for you to learn all the little things that make a difference when competing. You as the consumer need to make an

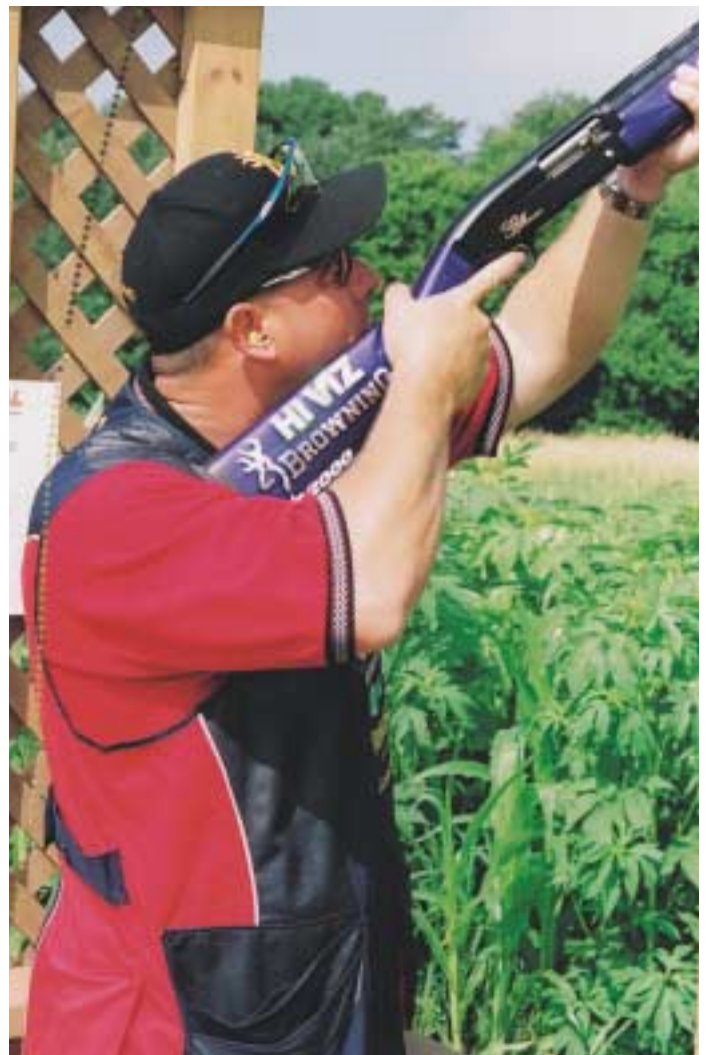
intelligent choice when hiring a good coach.

Ever noticed that us lesser mortals struggle when we get a no-bird? I will hit the first pair and then get a no-bird on the second pair. Taking the pair again, it's just as likely I'll miss the first target out – worse still, I have been known to miss the pair! How do you cope to ensure you don't give away a target you've already hit?

It happens to us all! In effect, a no-bird has broken your train of thought

and routine. The only solution is to take your time, do not immediately call for the bird again. Slow down, take a deep breath and start your routine again. If you shoot an over and under, break the gun to create time to regain control and start all over. Finally, be sure you are ready before you call again – there's no rush.

How do you maintain concentration throughout a 4-5 hour round? By half-way I am normally mentally drained and I know I miss more targets in the second half of my rounds than in the first.



TAKING EACH TARGET IN TURN I THINK OF EACH STATION AS A SEPARATE COMPETITION – THINKING ABOUT ONE THING AT A TIME.

Only focus when you need to. Relax a little in between stations – let your mind rest. Mental fatigue can actually be more wearing on the body than physical fatigue, so don't over analyze your shots. If it's hot, ensure you are drinking plenty of fluids.

The ability to turn your concentration on and off comes with experience and an established routine. That routine is particularly important on a station where there may be a backlog of shooters. Don't get over anxious – relax and wait your turn.

When the shooter in front of me enters the stand, I ensure I'm ready and stand directly behind him. I then start assessing how I'm going to shoot these particular targets – this routine signals to my brain that its time to concentrate. When it's my turn to

shoot I'm ready and fully concentrating. Taking each target in turn I think of this station as a separate competition, thinking about one thing at a time – hitting the targets (not how many pairs I have left). I never count the pairs, I just think about where my hold point will be, where to look and where to break the target. I block out everything else that's happening around me – I just keep concentrating and shooting until the puller tells me to stop. Then its time to relax. If you've missed a target – forget it. You can't have it back so why mentally beat yourself up?

What is the advantage of shooting with a pre-mounted gun?

With the exception of FITASC, I shoot pre-mounted most of the

time. This works great for me. I like to pre-mount because it allows less room for error. With proper coaching of the technique you can actually shoot the targets faster in the proper place and there is no rush to mount the gun.

However, on occasions, such as a fast target, I'll start with my gun just out of my shoulder, so that the movement of mounting helps generate the extra speed of swing required to sustain the lead I need to kill the target.

My gun is a standard model from one of the well-known makers. Am I fooling myself thinking I can become a champion with a \$2,000 gun or do I need to bite the bullet and trade up to one of the top brands the pros endorse?

When it comes to model, weight,

balance, feel and price, only you can decide what gun is best for you. I happen to prefer an Auto. Remember, it's not the arrow, it's the Indian that fires it!

Most important is gun-fit. Spend time and effort getting that right and it'll pay handsome dividends in the long run. If you've got the gun of choice, that fits, don't blame the gun for your performance – the way forward is to now spend time with a good coach and establish a meaningful practice routine.

If you have questions for Bobby Fowler, Jr. address them to us at ClayShootingUSA or directly to him at Elite Shooting School. Tel: 281-313-3309 or e-mail: elitegun@aol.com