

OLYMPIAN STUDENT

A WORLD CLASS ATHLETE TAKES UP THE SPORTING CLAYS CHALLENGE. A REPORT BY **KATHLEEN BANGS**

Alexei Yagudin is an Olympic Gold medalist and four-time World Champion figure skater. I challenged my Russian powerhouse friend to a duel at a sporting clays range recently, away

from the ice, because, well... I can't skate, and thought it would be fun to 'level the playing field' by putting such an accomplished athlete into a completely unfamiliar environment – shotgun sports –

and see how he fared as a first time student!

But Yagudin is always game for new challenges, and having someone to compete against, in this case me (a very amateur shooter), would surely bring out the determination in his personality that made him one of the most famous and accomplished skaters in the world.

We chose the historical Hartford Gun Club in East Granby, Connecticut, which is probably the nation's oldest – with roots back to the Colt Hammerless Gun Club founded in 1884. In addition to 5-stand, the Hartford Gun Club offers skeet, trap and plans to unveil a Mick Howells designed twenty-station sporting clays course on it's lushly forested 142 acres in early 2005.

Club Manager, Marshall Lussen, was our instructor for the afternoon and said that working with an athlete like Yagudin would make his job easy – because he always tries to relate the basics of shotgun shooting to any sport his students participate in.

THE TECHNIQUE

"Almost all new shotgun shooters, especially without instruction, will instinctively fail to follow-through on a shot" said Lussen as he set us up to start the lesson on the skeet field. "I've found that if you can find a sport a student enjoys – any sport at all – and relate the elements of shooting to that, they will pick it up much faster". He continued,

"whether it's tennis, baseball, skating, or even billiards, everything has follow-through and balance, and a thought process that must be performed before you do the task. Shooting is no different."

Lussen said he likes to work with beginners on the skeet field first because of the predetermined angles and target consistency. "The targets are going to the same spot every time, so the skeet field teaches the student everything he'll need to know, no matter what game he chooses to go with from there."

Yagudin took his initial live ammo trigger pulls at a few stationary ground targets to get a feel for the fit and recoil of the Remington 1100 and was then ready to try for his first moving target. "I enjoyed starting out at station seven low house because it gave me an easy line to work on – it was basically a straight-away that wasn't too fast." said Yagudin. His results? Demonstrating exemplary motor skills, he broke the very first clay on his first attempt. Now the competition was on as I realized this was not going to be the walk in the park I had predicted!

What helped Yagudin accomplish good results all afternoon was an innovative technique Lussen uses to assist beginners in figuring out where to put their gun barrel in relation to the clay – he starts on the ground! Piling two short stacks of targets four-and-a-half feet apart on one of the center concrete pads of the



skeet range, Lussen had us walk the semi-circle raising and lowering our guns, simulating one ground stack as the flying target, and using the other as a guide to the prime location our barrels should be when firing. "It's hard to explain lead," said Lussen. "What the student might think is one or four feet, could be quite different in reality. There is no natural instinct for lead – it has to be learned. If I simply say to a new student, *crossing targets require more lead*, it doesn't mean he'll comprehend what that looks like. But as we walk the station's semi-circle, wherever he stops, he can see how far to be in front of the target." Lussen continues, "The angles are changing from an overhead straightway, or a straight incoming target to a quartering away – it's giving you a different sight angle, you can visualize the lead and it makes sense right away."

"Seeing the changing angles as we moved around, and just how much a four-foot-lead actually is, or what the sight picture should be when told to be 18 inches under the target on a certain shot, really helped me," said Yagudin, "other wise I would have been just guessing."

QUICK START

"I think Marshall did a great job by having us shoot right away. After learning the safety rules of gun handling, he didn't spend too much time talking – and what he did say was to the point, and what I needed to know," said Yagudin. "I'd bet with the wrong instructor you could get what happens with golf lessons – they take forever to even let you swing. The golf instructor spends so long overloading you on stance, grip, keeping your head down and a thousand other details, that by the time he says, *Okay, just*



KATHLEEN BANGS, THE AUTHOR OF THIS ARTICLE, WITH ALEXEI YAGUDIN.

relax and swing you're thinking. Relax? You've got to be kidding – I'm twisted up like a pretzel!"

"Alexei, not surprisingly, got the hang of skeet pretty fast, so we moved on to 5-stand and introduced him to our condensed version of sporting clays," said Lussen.

"At first," said Yagudin, "I felt hampered on the 5-stand because of the high boards that run up the sides of the station but maybe," he laughed, "that's my excuse for having such a hard time on the overhead shots. I couldn't hit the

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springing teal at all because I was trying to cover the target with the barrel and I was shooting way behind or way over it. I felt too closed-in, but then Marshall pointed out that a sporting clays field is wide open and that the station will actually help force me to focus – making me cut my swing short and really focus on what's happening out front."

"When you're competing on an Olympic ice sheet, it's a huge surface. Yet, I always preferred to jump right next to the barrier – the boards – because it would force me to focus and tighten my rotation because I had limited space. Now I look at the 5-stand set up in a similar way – it's a tool that forces focus."

Yagudin had his best results with the targets that presented the same sight picture that he'd seen earlier on the skeet field. He could recall and reproduce the sight picture that simulated his first crossing targets. After that, Lussen cranked up the difficulty to report pairs and then a few true pairs. And the man who will go down in Olympic figure skating history as having more perfect scores than any other had this to say: "Just when I thought I had a chance, you had to go and launch doubles!" But Yagudin didn't have to hang his head solo – any perfect scores from me would have to wait for another lifetime.

Lussen concluded, "For a first-time shooter, he was a natural – as I would expect of an Olympian. He has excellent motor skills, but also because he listens and really absorbs any instruction given. It was a pleasure to work with him and I look forward to shooting with him again."

NEXT STEP

"I've been shooting a few times now and would like to get fitted for

my own gun. Maybe it's because I'm so used to getting a feel for my own skates, but I want to have a shotgun that is right for me. Of course I realize I have a lot to learn – and it's not just the equipment that makes the shooter," said Yagudin, "just as great skates do not make a champion."

"I like to get into what athletes call 'the zone' – where even though you're in an arena full of thousands of screaming fans and TV cameras, you relax, close your mind to the outside world and focus inward," said Yagudin. "A huge part of that focusing in figure skating is going through the full program in your mind – element by element. You imagine it, feel it and picture the successful outcome. This works the same way for me in shooting. I picture the target in the air, picture my gun barrel swinging through the target and visualize taking the shot right through the target. In skating you imagine gold medals," he smiled, "and in sporting clays I imagine orange dust!"

"What I like about sporting clays is either you hit the target, or you don't. My own sport of skating is very subjective. Sporting clays is exact, and although it can be frustrating at times," said Yagudin, "it feels really great when you see a target disappear in a ball of dust!" ■

Note: The Hartford Gun Club is located near the capitol city of Hartford at 157 South Main Street, East Granby, Connecticut, and is immediately adjacent to Bradley International Airport. The club is open everyday except Mondays, and nonmembers are welcome. Guns are available on loan, ammunition for purchase and there is also an on-site pro-shop. Visit their website at www.hartfordgunclub.com or phone (860)-658-1614. Writer Kathleen Bangs can be reached at: Starflyers@hotmail.com