

Sporting Clays

Getting My Eye Back at the Greenbrier Gun Club

By
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Photos by Richard Kevorkian

My neighbor cut his corn last December just in time for the late dove season. On the last day of the year, I sat down near his field by the James River with Boomer, my aging yellow lab. After a lot of gunfire and nothing to show for it, I told Boomer those carpetbagger doves must be wearing flak jackets. After my next miss, Boomer

For years my more senior hunting buddies had been talking up sporting clays as an off-season way of avoiding the loss of the muscle memory and hand-eye coordination so needed to keep shooting straight. I hadn't paid much attention (denial is a wonderful thing), but maybe it was time to start acting my age, at least when it comes to shooting, if only for Boomer's sake. So

shooting sport in the US. It has been described by some as "golf with a gun." Another more intriguing description is that it is "the most fun you can legally have with a shotgun."

History: Sporting clays started in England over eighty years ago. It was developed as a way for hunters to tune-up for a day afield. The emphasis is on realism where the shooting requirements simulate a variety of field conditions, the kinds that hunters face with upland game and waterfowl. It wasn't until the 1980's that sporting clays came across the pond. Now we have over two hundred official sporting clays courses and three million shooters taking part each year for fun or in tournaments.

Trap, Skeet and Sporting Clays: Trap and skeet have been popular for generations of shotgunners. There is no question that both are challenging in their own ways, but both are also somewhat predictable. Trap's going away targets vary in height but always fly within a 22 degree arc left or right of center. In skeet every target follows the exact same path, and shooters compensate for changing target angles as they move to new positions. In sporting clays, as in hunting, you seldom know where the target is coming from or going to.

The Sporting Clays Course: The course often meanders through woods, across



The instructor watches as the author takes a shot.

turned his head back over his shoulder and gave me a long-suffering look: "Boss, I don't know how many seasons I've got left, but they're sure going to be more fun if you get back your shooting eye."

I made a New Year's Resolution to give sporting clays a try.

Sporting Clays Basics

Sporting clays is the fastest growing

fields and up and down hills to simulate a variety of hunting situations. Along the way the gunner could encounter ten shooting stations with several traps operating at each. The traps may be hidden behind trees, high up on hills or right under the gunner's feet. Station names may hint at the shooting situation, such as Pheasant Fencerow, Wood Duck Pond or Rabbit Run. Over the course gunners shoot at targets flushing, crossing, incoming, scampering or barreling high overhead to list a few. While all trap and skeet ranges are laid out exactly the same around the world, no two sporting clays courses are the same.

Taking Shots: The gunner takes 50-100 shots as he or she follows the course. Only two shells in the gun with the stock held low below the shoulder as done in the field. When a target is called for, it may come in any of four ways: a *single* flying on its own, a *report pair* where the second target is launched as soon as the first shot is fired, a *following pair* where the first target is followed quickly by the second, or a *true pair* where both targets are launched simultaneously. If you are shooting for practice, you can call for the shots you want. There is no point in trying difficult pairs until you are consistently breaking singles.

Targets: In trap and skeet and often in sporting clays, the target has the familiar dome shape and measures a little more than four inches in diameter and an inch in height. Other targets in sporting clays make the shooting more interesting - *midis* are a quarter-size smaller than regular targets; *rabbits* have a hard edge so they can bounce across the ground without shattering; *battues* are razor-thin and can be broken only when they flip up and show their face; and half-size *minis* may remind the gunner of hunting grasshoppers with a Daisy BB gun in earlier times.

The Greenbrier sporting clays course winds through a woodland setting.



Guns and Ammo: Tournament sporting clay enthusiasts often use specialized guns, usually over-and-unders with easily removable chokes so they can quickly adjust to different shooting distances at different stations. Field gunners who shoot sporting clays for practice should use the same gun they use during the season. Low brass 7½s, 8s and 9s can all be used. A field gunner can select lighter or heavier shot to match the target distance instead of changing chokes.

Scores: Top notch trap and skeet shooters usually break over 90% of their targets, and perfect scores are not all that unusual. But those same shooters may be quite satisfied with 75-80% on a challenging sporting clays course.

A field gunner who hits 35-40% on his or her first try at sporting clays should feel just fine. A 50% average for a field gunner is a decent goal.

My First Time

I was a bit nervous when I pulled into the Gun Club parking lot at the Greenbrier. I hoped my shooting instructor would be easy on me since it was my first time at sporting clays. Two months after the dove season, my shooting confidence was in the pits, and I didn't need any character-building humiliation.

Alan Williamson, my instructor, is a National Sporting Clays Association certified instructor who often coaches children and novices and therefore was well pre-

pared to take good care of me. He is also a Federation of Fly Fishers instructor and Director of Outdoor Pursuits at the Greenbrier Sporting Club, the residential development within the resort.

My instruction began on the front porch of the Hunt Cabin, the rustic structure that serves as his office. I talked about my shooting “issues” just as you might talk with your doctor about new aches and pains during your annual physical exam. Before we headed off to the course, Alan emphasized safety - always wear eye and ear protection, never load up until you’re at the firing line.

Sweet Singles: Alan started me off at stations that simulated the hunting shots I knew well. Straightaways like the flushing pheasants I grew up with in Michigan. Incoming floaters like the mallards dropping into my honey hole off the James River. I didn’t smoke every one but hit enough to raise my morale. Thank you coach!

Cursed Crossings: I fell apart on crossing shots at the next stations. I missed them from the left, and I missed them from the right. Alan watched me punch holes in the sky until I confirmed his diagnosis. “You’re on the right sight plane, but you’re locking your shoulders just as you pull the trigger and are shooting behind the bird. Swing through and then fire.” His comment reminded me that I had taken a soft header off a mountain bike last summer and had a stiff neck for a month. Maybe I was still holding myself back.

Getting My Eye Back: Alan’s diagnosis did not lead to an instant cure. There is a lag time between knowing what to do and doing it. But as we moved on to the back five stations, my average crept upward. On the second to the last station I was feeling confident enough to call for a report double. I swung through a left crossing bird,



The author on the firing line with shotgun held low in the sporting clays position

smoked it, and was able to swing back and catch up to a bird rising up the hill through the trees and shattered it as well. I was hot! Until I saw the final station.

My Last Best Shot: Station 10 is the Gun Club’s signature station, the one that wakes you up groaning or grinning in the night. The target comes out of a trap set high on a hill too steep to climb, nearly fifty yards above the station. Alan let me watch two fly before shooting. I didn’t see the first one at all and barely glimpsed the second as it sailed away over the treetops. “It’ll be high and fast, so swing past it at least ten feet before you pop it.” *Sure thing, just like that*, I thought to myself. I called “Pull!” and picked up an orange streak in the sky. I must have looked like six o’clock when I fired, an absolutely straight line running plum down from gun muzzle to boot heels. No, I didn’t smoke the target - but it did break into three neat pieces and counted as a hit.

I declined Alan’s offer to try the high flyer at Station 10 again. I wanted to go out feeling like a winner so I could come back

feeling the same way. And I definitely would be back for more sporting clays since I still had a ways to improve before the September dove season. Besides I owe it to Boomer.

If You Want To Go

The Greenbrier is a great place to go anytime, but in late July there will be a special Holland & Holland weekend featuring the venerable gun maker and outdoor pursuits including shooting, fly fishing, and off road driving as well as fine wines and gourmet dining. Couples will enjoy the weekend since there will be activities for both spouses. If you go, make time to learn more about the Greenbrier Sporting Club and see the premier residential sporting community dedicated to “living the active life.” For more information, contact Alan Williamson (304) 647-6118.

For a sporting clays course near you, check the *Shotgun Sports Clay Shooting Guide* at www.shotgunsports.com.

The author is an outdoorsman, farmer and international management consultant whose travels often take him to the far edges and borderlands.