

April 2003 - Choosing the right barrels

Nowadays it is possible to purchase a variety of different barrels from most of the major gun manufacturers for their most popular shotguns. If you were a field or skeet shooter 20 years ago you were offered nothing more than a fixed choke 71cm (28") barrel. If you shot trap or anything else, you got the same in 75cm (30"). Generally, bore constrictions were only 18.4mm +/- .1mm. These days it is not uncommon to see anything up to 85cm barrels on the trap or sporting ranges, with overbored barrels up to 18.7mm now a major option with variable screw-in chokes thrown in. A variety of ribs and porting are available too. It's hard to imagine how boring buying a new gun must have once been - sort of like life before mobile phones.

With all these improvements and modifications to barrels, it is sometimes hard to understand what will help or hinder your shooting.

Barrel Lengths

Lets start with barrel lengths. Naturally, you need to tailor your barrels to the type of targets you are going to shoot. In general terms, shorter barrels were originally made for shorter shots and longer barrels for longer shots. There has no doubt been a trend around the world to try longer barrels for all disciplines of shooting.

Recently I was in Finland for a competition and I watched several shooters shooting fast and very close international skeet targets with 85cm (34") barrels. Nobody 20 years ago would have tried anything else but 28" tubes. I watched the world's best sporting clays shooter, George Digweed from England, using his new 34" barrel with ease when he was in Australia earlier this year. The majority of the world's international trap shooters still use 30" barrels, but with the increasing success of many shooters with longer barrels, it won't be long before the trend catches on. Many, like George, like the longer sighting plane that the lengthier barrels offer and now, with the high quality steel that most barrels are made with, the weight is not excessive and does not destroy the balance of the shotgun.

One of the best target shotguns I have owned was a standard 32" Beretta 682 with reasonably light 1.51kg barrels. In 1992 at a competition in Tamworth I hit an Australian record of 1177 trap targets in a row with it. I have been convinced with the increased accuracy of the longer barrels since that day.

Variable Chokes

Barrels with variable chokes have been around for some time, but now virtually all models have this option. In clay target shooting this has become a necessity because of the diversity of the different types of events available these days. Many competitors, with the aid of an adjustable stock, want to shoot trap, skeet and sporting with the same gun. This would involve shooting targets from five to 70 metres, making a fixed choke far from ideal. Barrels that have variable chokes as an option from the manufacturer are

obviously more marketable. Custom choke companies like Briley have been able to cash in on the fact that many shotgun manufacturers took quite some time to produce barrels with variable chokes.

Bore Size

The internal bore size of barrels has been a subject of much debate with fundamentalists of the shotgun sports. There are two differing views from both sides of the Atlantic. The Europeans argue that their barrels of 18.4mm (I am talking 12-gauge barrels) have been perfect for hundreds of years so there is no need to change them. The Americans have been 'overboring' since the invention of the electric drill and have stressed that barrels with internal bore sizes of up to 18.7mm produce better patterns and recoil less than the tighter constrictions.

I am not going to enter into that debate here. All I can do is put forward my personal observations. I have had two sets of overbored barrels to try during the past year: one from the manufacturer and one from Briley. Both were bore sizes of 18.6mm. I have no problem saying that recoil is perceived to be less than that of the tighter constrictions. Both patterned very well also. And as a competition shooter, all I am interested in is recoil, patterning and results.

Some Italian manufacturers are now producing the larger bore barrels as a standard option. Whether they see it as a marketing tool or whether they are conceding that the bigger bores are better is yet to be determined. (Most barrel bore sizes will be stamped on the barrels under your fore-end.)

Ribs

Ribs come in many configurations these days. My first B2G Browning had a massive 15mm broadrib. The current gun I am playing with has a tapered rib, 10mm at the back tapering to 8mm at the front. I personally like the thinner ribs because the narrower sighting plane gives me the perception of greater accuracy. I will contradict myself here by saying that when I am shooting at my best I have absolutely no idea of what rib or sight I have on my barrel. In shotgun shooting, the only thing you should be looking at is your target.

This fact has been made even more obvious since I was given a 13mm raised rib gun to try. To look at it you would think it is very cumbersome. Most standard barrels have a 4mm raised rib on top. However, the raised rib, when mounted to your shoulder, has exactly the same sighting plane as any other shotgun. I personally like this type of rib for trap shooting because it allows me to shoot with my head in a more erect position as opposed to the lower rib models. It is also a sign that I am getting older and less flexible in my upper back and neck.

There you have it, an array of barrel options to play with. Ribs, chokes, bores and lengths. Remember though, no matter what you choose, there is no substitute for accuracy.

Until next time, have fun experimenting.