

August 2003 - Using your eyes

Not long ago I touched on the use of colored shooting glasses in fading light. In that article, I was critical of the way many competitors believe that yellow lenses will help them see targets more clearly when the light starts to deteriorate. Most optometrists will tell you that your own natural eyesight will serve you better. While that is true, I would urge all shooters to wear glasses no matter what, when or where they are shooting, if for nothing else than protection. This month we will look at the single most important instrument in shooting: your eyes.

I have experimented with dozens of different lens colors during the years, but because 99 per cent of the targets I shoot at these days are fluorescent orange I really only use three different shades of lenses. On summer days with plenty of strong, bright sunlight I chose to shoot in dark red or 'bronze' colored lenses. In the winter months with weaker sunlight I chose a lighter red or 'vermilion' color. Both of these reds take the glow off fluorescent targets. When the light is changing or in overcast conditions, I shoot in clear lenses. If it looks like rain, I don't wear lenses at all. I believe out of all the colors that I have tried in dull or changing light there is no better substitute than your own natural eyesight.

Probably the worst mistake you can make while you are competing is to change anything in the middle of a round. If you get caught in a rain storm and your glasses are getting wet, you may be tempted to take them off if you have no prescription in the lenses. In my experience you are better suffering with wet glasses and keeping them dry rather than taking them off and starting again, particularly if you have begun the round with colored lenses. Your eyes take quite a few minutes to make the changes needed to adjust to different light intensities. By changing colors in the middle of the round you are tricking your eyes and therefore your perception of the target will change.

Lens color is a very personal choice. Popular shooting glasses like Decot, Bollè, Oakley and Randolph Ranger offer an enormous selection of shades. Some react better than others with different color targets. On days where the sun may come into play, I believe that some form of dark lens is necessary to prevent squinting. How dark depends on the individual, the background and the color target. Try a few different lenses, make your mind up and then keep the variations to a minimum.

Once you have decided on the color and type of frame you want to shoot with, the most important factor in determining accurate marksmanship is how you use your eyes. You can have the best style, equipment and physique, but if you don't use your eyes correctly you will probably end up with less than average scores. In clay target shooting, where hand-to-eye co-ordination determines everything, your focus of the eyes before moving the gun to the target will often dictate the forthcoming result. The correct use of your peripheral vision is essential to make the initial move to the target. At the time of release, your eyes should be 'softly' focused in the area where you know the target will be heading. After you have identified the target's exact direction, your eyesight should begin to narrow, sort of like pulling the strings tight on a duffle bag. When you pull the trigger

your target should appear 100 per cent clear. Don't panic if you don't see it clearly initially. You shouldn't. Panic if you don't see it clearly the moment you pull the trigger.

In clay target shooting one of the single most fundamental mistakes that both novice and experienced shooters make is to move the barrels of the gun before the target has appeared. Your barrels should be rock steady on your starting point until the target has appeared. Any gun movement before the target appears is likely to result in failure. A method I use to check anyone I am coaching is simply to disconnect the release mechanism to the trap without the shooter's knowledge just before they call for the target. If they call for the target and automatically move their barrels, then their eyes are not working with them. If their gun remains rock solid after they have called and no target has appeared, I can quickly ascertain one of two things: I have a future champion on my hands or I have got a totally blind pupil before me.

It doesn't matter what technique you are shooting your targets with. Whether it is pass through, sustained lead or pull away lead, you need to identify the speed, height and direction of your target before you start to move the gun. In time your eyes will simply become an extension of your barrel. Barrel length, height, sighting beads or rib height will all become irrelevant the moment you decide to pull the trigger. How often have you seen farmers who have grown up with shotguns all their lives turn up at a picnic shoot and amaze everyone with a single barrel, ribless, extra full choke, single shot snake gun? They do this because they are naturally just seeing the target and shooting it. They have never had their brains infected with too much technical knowledge that they forget the basic fundamentals.

Your eyes are wonderful machines. You can make them work for you or against you. If you visualise positive thoughts and smooth moves before the target is released you will have more than half a chance of hitting something. If you let your brain override things and start to think negatively or predict what, when and where the target will go without really looking for it, then you will have no chance.

Until next time, keep your eyes open and your barrels still.