

## **December 2002 - Recoil pads**

In terms of surface area, a shotgun's recoil pad touches the shooter's body more than any other part of the firearm, but for many people this is the most neglected part of the gun. This month we will have a closer look at pad types and trends.

Most shotgun manufacturers offer a variety of configurations in pads, depending on the intended use of the firearm. Virtually all field, skeet and sporting shotguns will have a thin, flat and firm pad fitted when offered for sale. Any shooting discipline where the gun will not be mounted to the shoulder in a 'ready' position does not warrant anything other than a flat pad. Many manufacturers offer a special flat pad that is smooth and rounded on top to make the pad slip into the shoulder with greater ease. These are of great benefit when quick gun mounts are of the essence.

At one stage, nearly all trap shotguns on the market were offered with a curved pad of varying degree. The greater the curve, the more the pad will align itself with the shoulder. This is probably true, but is it promoting correct technique? There are two schools of thought here. The American fundamentalists suggest it does promote correct technique and the Europeans say it does not.

Beretta and Perazzi, the world's two biggest producers of competition shotguns, offer most of their trap models with flat pads or ones with only the slightest of curves. Their argument is that a shotgun should be mounted on top of your breastbone to greater align itself directly under your eye. By using a curved pad, it will encourage you to mount the gun further out on your shoulder and arm, as the curvature of the pad will not allow it to sit comfortably on the fleshy, flat part of the upper breastbone. Hence, most American shotgunners have more cast in the bottom or heel of their stocks than Europeans. I have tried flat and curved recoil pads and won world championships with both.

So, which is better for the target disciplines? There are advantages and disadvantages with either. The curved pad will definitely promote mounting of the gun further out on the arm, but because of its curve it has the advantage of causing the gun to be mounted in the same place every time. In target shooting, especially under pressure, consistent gun mounts are paramount for success.

Pushing the stock further away from the alignment under your eye can cause many other problems. Recoil is definitely absorbed better when the butt of the gun is on the main torso of the body instead of the shoulder or the arm. The trend towards flatter pads has been mainly for simplicity and comfort. Most people can mount a gun with a flat pad and find a comfortable place to position it on their body. Some people find it impossible to do so with a curved pad.

If you were teaching a new shooter, then I would suggest that the correct technique of gun mounting should be on the top of the breastbone in the socket that is formed by your shoulder muscle. This is the same whether you are shooting with the gun in a mounted or in a 'gun down' position. A flat pad makes this technique much easier and more

comfortable. The disadvantage of the flatter pad is that it can be mounted in many different positions on your shoulder if you are inexperienced or under pressure. Some dedicated gun-mounting practice is often all that is needed to overcome this.

The biggest innovation in recoil pads during the past decade has been not in their shape, but in their composition. A recoil absorbing substance called 'sorbarthane' was introduced some time ago, which definitely made the recoil of the gun to be perceived differently. These pads, however, were softer and that can lead to other problems, particularly the amount of barrel realignment that may be needed after the first shot due to the spongy pad. This causes the eye to come off the centre of the barrel before the second shot can be fired.

Custom fitted recoil pads are a huge business. Two of the most popular brands are both American: 'Kick-Eze', which tends to be the most popular with trap shooters, and 'Pachmayer', which offers a huge variety of all types of compositions and shapes for all disciplines of shooting. I have tried both and a few others throughout the years with varying degrees of success. I have always gravitated back towards the firmer pads ahead of the softer ones because of the precision and speed required between shots in the disciplines that I shoot. Many of the international skeet shooters decide on no pad at all because of this reason. Bear in mind that these shooters are generally only firing 100 rounds of 24-gram shotshells per day, so recoil does not tend to become an issue. I would never suggest that novice or field shooters forgo recoil pads, as shoulder bruising will eventually become a problem, particularly with some of the larger 32- and 36-gram hunting loads.

The softer pads are very popular among trap shooters in the United States for a few reasons. Firstly, 32-gram shotshells are still the most commonly used for clay target shooting, thus the recoil is generally greater, even with their 'extra light' reduced velocity loads. Secondly, the Americans generally shoot at 200 to 300 targets per day and finally, the majority of their target shooting is with one shot only so the realignment problems caused by the softer pads does not become an issue.

The recoil pad is just as important a decision as stock fit or barrel weight and length. There is no single pad that will suit all conditions; however, if you are indecisive about what you should be using, then I would suggest a flat pad of reasonable firmness. Any width from 10mm to 20mm should provide enough cushioning effect to avoid bruising if the correct pitch or angle has been built into the butt of the stock.

Like most things in shooting, it will take a fair bit of trial and error to find the combination best suited to you.

Good shooting until next time.