

June 2001 - Shotguns standing the test of time

I have been sponsored by Beretta, the world's biggest manufacturer of competition shotguns, for more than 13 years now and one thing that I have come to notice in clay target shooting is that there have been only subtle changes in the technical aspects of the shotgun. If you consider some of the other major sports in the world, such as tennis, golf or even F1 motor racing, the technological changes in equipment have been enormous.

In shotgun shooting, the same basic gun that was used to win a world championship in the mid 80s is still being used today. There is no way you'd see Pat Rafter using a wooden tennis racquet or Tiger Woods using anything but an oversized state-of-the-art metal golf club to tee off with at a 500 metre par five. The question then must be asked, why in shotgun shooting has time stood still in the continued development of the gun?

In December 2000, I was flown over to the Beretta factory in Italy to attend a dinner for all the Olympic medallists who used a Beretta shotgun. While I was there I spent a couple of days within the factory being fitted for a new SO5 under and over, which I plan on using in the future. My old SO5 now sits in the foyer of the MCG museum with my world and Olympic medals. During the fitting process I asked one of the chief designers and gun fitters at the factory why gun design is still very much as it was 20 years ago. Is there no longer money to support new technological developments in the firearms industry? Well, the answer to my question is very simple. Never before at any stage in Beretta's 400-plus year history has more money per capita been spent on research and development.

Beretta, and most other notable gun manufacturers, believe that basically they have had the ideal design of a shotgun right since the 70s. Sure, there are always minor innovations within the industry, but often these are dictated by the ever-changing rules within the sport and not major technological breakthroughs.

One of the biggest problems any gun manufacturer has to overcome is the long-term effects of recoil fatigue. Internationally, since 1993, only 24 grams of shot has been legally allowed in competition and thus much of the recoil problem has been eliminated. However, any recoil is still a problem.

While I had the attention of Beretta's top people, I asked why they do not produce an overbored barrel, particularly for down-the-line shooting where any gimmick or fad seems to be tried. There have been plenty of people within Australia suggesting that Italian proofing laws have stopped companies like Beretta from trying this. The actual answer is that Beretta does produce this overbored barrel and it is currently available in their new DT10 variable-choke sporting model.

Why then have they not followed some of the other companies that use this type of barrel as a marketing strategy? Again the answer is simple. They have tested and retested their proven barrels of 18.4 +/- .1 constriction as opposed to the recent trend of 18.7 and have only found that the 'perception' of recoil changes as opposed to the 'actual' recoil. The

same physical results of recoil and patterning can be achieved by using a shotgun cartridge of a slightly lesser velocity through the tighter constricted barrel.

It all comes back to the simple and basic laws of physics. If you push something out of your barrel of a certain weight and at a certain speed, then, depending on the weight of your gun, you will feel an adverse effect on your shoulder. Gun designers, gunsmiths or gun 'magicians', as some of these after-sale alteration specialists like to call themselves, cannot alter the fundamental laws of physics.

Gun manufacturers like Beretta and Perazzi are in the business to win medals. They gain millions of dollars worth of free advertising worldwide by having people win medals for them at Olympic Games and world championships. If they even remotely thought that any of these recoil gimmicks would help their shooters win a medal, then don't you think they would make these men and women use them? Every gold and silver medallist at the Sydney Olympics used a stock standard gimmick-free shotgun. One of the women bronze medallists used an adjustable comb in her stock.

What all of this comes down to is if you want to improve in any sport or anything in life for that matter, honest and simple hard work is required. There will always be shortcuts offered through gimmicks, but it is my belief that these gimmicks will only provide short-term relief to your current problem.

All the medallists that got up on the dais in Sydney had one gun similarity between them. They all had a gun that fit them like a glove. In this area there can be no negotiation. If you are having gun-recoil or mounting problems, see someone who knows what they are doing to overcome this immediately. Once your gun fits, then your enjoyment, in what is technically a very easy sport, will spiral astronomically. Once you enjoy your shooting, it becomes just a matter of setting some goals for yourself and learning from your mistakes along the way. These are two of the topics I will touch on in my next article. Straight shooting until then.