

## **March 2002 - Just who are the best shooter's?**

I always marvel at the rivalry between the different factions of shooters. The international shotgun, rifle and pistol shooters believe they are the elite, as they command a world stage. The purist hunters always argue that they are using firearms for their intended purpose and the combination of their marksmanship, stalking and hunting skills makes the hunter the sport's true aristocrats. Sporting clay shooters tend to believe that the constant variety that their sport throws at them makes them the real shotgun masters, as they have to be accomplished at numerous distances, angles and backgrounds in the one round. The champions in DTL shooting of course believe they are the shooting sport's yardsticks because they tend to have the largest number of competitors at their national titles competing for the largest prizes and often just one mistake for the day is enough to separate the winners and the losers. So, who really is the elite in the world of shooting?

I have tried most forms of shooting in some capacity and found that they all have their technical difficulties to come to terms with. However, out of all the events that I have tried, I found 50-metre free pistol to be the hardest for me technically. I don't find it terribly exciting to compete in, but the extremely high mental aspect combined with the steadiness of hand and body required makes me appreciate these marksmen's ability more than most.

I am amazed at how they can perform in an Olympic final, where most people's hearts would be racing at more than 150 beats per minute. Despite the pressure, they still manage, for the most part, to hit a one-cent coin at lengths equalling an Olympic swimming pool.

The skill required by a 1000-yard full bore shooter to drift their projectile in by a couple of metres to score a bull in a crosswind has always fascinated me too, as does the smoothness that a good rapid fire pistol shooter has under pressure. These techniques are more impressive to me because I am basically a shotgun shooter and these are skills that I have never had to worry about developing.

In the shotgun world, the argument about who is the best will never be settled and I won't try to settle it in this article. Shooting any moving object is a skill in itself, but as to who makes the best shooters under pressure is open to wide debate. Some say it is easy to go out into a duck swamp and shoot wildfowl because there is no real pressure. I agree the pressure may not be the same as an Olympic final, but does this make the sport any less skilful? My father used to tell me stories about his father shooting in the depression years of the 1930s, when two or three shot shells would be all that most people could afford at one time; therefore, the thing that determined whether you ate or not that night was how accurately you used those cartridges. That is really shooting under pressure. It is my guess that many ducks were taken on the water back then.

I have shot hundreds of thousands of rounds at DTL targets during the years and although I find this sport very mentally draining, in terms of coaching it is probably one of the easiest to teach. This is a game of repetition, where the winner will be the one who will

be distracted the least. Does this make it any less skilful? DTL does not have the variety in its targets that Olympic trap or sporting clays have, but, unlike both of those events, one mistake and you are out. There is no doubt that mental toughness under pressure is definitely a skill.

I would think that it is the variety of not only the targets, but of the ranges where these targets are shot that has throughout the past decade made sporting clays the fastest growing shooting event in the world. There was talk at one stage of introducing a standard '5 Stand' type of event onto the Olympic program, but sadly that has now all but disappeared. It is the vast array of targets that this event offers that convinces me beyond any doubt that it requires a greater amount of gun control than any other competition shooting event.

With 60-metre crossing targets and others bouncing up and down on the ground in front of you and everything in between, sporting clays requires much imagination and various techniques to master. Very few have even come close to perfecting it and this is precisely the reason it continues to grow in popularity.

The Olympic disciplines are based on a mixture of everything, with the emphasis based on fast reflexes under extreme pressure. It is the speed of these targets that unfortunately makes the Olympic disciplines of trap, double trap and skeet at the highest level a young person's sport. By young, I mean that it is rare to see many competitors older than 40 even competing at the Olympics let alone winning medals.

Does this test of reflexes under pressure constitute a greater skill level than sporting clays? Mentally, overall I would say definitely yes. Gun-skill-wise I would say definitely no. In double trap you have only 1.4 seconds to shoot two targets travelling away from you at nearly 100kph and this requires a great deal of mental toughness under pressure. If you are thinking about the wrong thing, both targets will be lost within the blink of an eye. I haven't seen too many sporting targets that require that type of reflex, but once you have the basic technique mastered for the Olympic disciplines, the rest become, once again, games of repetition.

So, in a perfect world, what would make the ideal shooter? I believe it's the steadiness of a free pistol shooter, the perceptiveness of a full bore shooter or serious hunter, the smoothness of a rapid fire marksman, the gun controlling capabilities of a sporting clay competitor, the concentration powers of a DTL shooter and the reflexes of an Olympic shotgunner. If you know anyone who possesses all of those talents, please let me know. The shooting world will be theirs.

Safe shooting until next month.