

November 2002 - For the parents

This is my last article in this series of Around the Traps. I hope you have enjoyed reading my thoughts as much as I have enjoyed putting them in writing. I decided I would finish this series with an article aimed (pardon the pun) at the parents of our junior shooters.

I started competitive clay target shooting when I was 14, after having my initiations with a shotgun on a hand-cocked trap on our property in Ballarat and in the swamps adjoining the Darling River in western New South Wales. When I first started shooting targets I had no idea it would end up taking me around the world dozens of times. I was a very keen footballer and cricketer as a young boy, but at an early age I showed good hand-to-eye co-ordination that a few people, mainly my father, picked up on. After I won my first Australian Open Championship in Perth in 1980, I started to realise that there may be more of a future in this sport than football or cricket. At least with shooting I could get to go to the Olympics. I remember watching Patti Dench win a bronze medal on TV at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and my dream had begun.

All kids dream of going to the Olympics. Some, unfortunately, never have the backing of their own families to follow their dreams. The financial commitment that my family and, I am sure Michael Diamond's family, had to undertake was enormous. Now I am sure they believe it was worth it. We were probably a couple of the luckier ones, with families that could afford to carry that financial burden. However, I remember many juniors I competed against as a 15-year-old who I thought were as good as me and their families wealthier than mine that just seemed to vanish into thin air.

Looking back now it is easy to understand what may have happened. Sometimes the pressure parents can exert on their child, without even really knowing it, is unbelievable. I had never really thought about it until I recently took the Australian junior team away to the Oceania Games in New Zealand. Some of the youngsters did not perform as well as they could have, but the biggest problem on some of their minds was what their parents would think when they got home. That is the sort of pressure I never had to deal with, but I realise now that some of my competitors did. Parents living their own dreams through their children can be the most detrimental thing that can happen to an otherwise potential-filled sporting career.

One of the hardest things a parent can face when coaching their own child is that kids tend to be rebellious against their own parents. To most 15-year-olds, information is treated as suspicious and there must always be an ulterior motive if your parents tell you something. However, if the same information is presented to them by another source that they consider 'cool', then kids learn very quickly. I see this every day I am on the range. It is sad for parents; it can be heartbreaking, but it is the truth today - as much as it was 30 years ago.

When coaching children, I have found that praising their good points instead of focusing on their problems will fast track their learning process. Obviously you need to address any technical problems that the child may have at an early age. However, you should do

this by first talking about the things they are doing correctly and then introducing an idea that will correct the fault. Often all that is needed is to give them a thought that, in the end, will allow them to believe it is their idea to change something for the better.

Praise and self-confidence are huge coaching tools that can be quickly destroyed by over-zealous parents. I will never forget overhearing a conversation in the car park of the Melbourne Clay Target Club. A father was tearing strips off his teenage son because he missed a target near the end of a 100-target event we were competing in. Instead of focusing on the 99 clay targets that his boy had broken, the entire conversation was based on the one bad shot the kid had all day. No mention of the fact that 99 was three points higher than he had ever shot before. I never said anything. Maybe in hindsight I should have because I have only heard the boy's name mentioned once since that day and it looks like I may never see him again.

For quite some time in the mid 90s, the shooting sports seemed to be the most politically incorrect event you could ever introduce your child to. I believe that has changed significantly now. Olympic success started the change, but the work that organisations like the Sporting Shooters' Association of Australia has done behind the scenes has kept the momentum going. It would be a very brave politician who would now publicly criticise the safe and controlled use of firearms as tools of a legitimate sport. It is every shooter's responsibility to make sure that we can maintain the respectability that we currently have in the sporting community. Whether you use your firearm to hunt, compete or just shoot tin cans with, we need to maintain the right to teach our children safe and responsible firearm habits.

The mental skills your child has to master in any of the shooting disciplines is a wonderful springboard to many other endeavours they will pursue later in life. They may end up an Olympian, but it really doesn't matter if they don't. What does matter is that you give them the opportunity to do the very best that they can do. The greatest part about our sport is that it is purely a contest against yourself. You are not relying on somebody to pass the ball to you or the coach to put you on the field to give you a chance. It is entirely up to you how you perform. Everybody gets the same opportunities under the same circumstances and at the end of the day we all get to compare scores. The only goals you need to be setting for your children are for them to try and beat their own personal best, not your personal best or the personal best of other parents' children, just their own personal best. Strive for them to be the best that they can be. If you can keep that simple piece of advice in the forefront of your mind, then the sport will be more enjoyable for everyone.