

September 2001 - Joining forces

For the past 16 years, I have been a member of the Australian Clay Target Shooting team. I have been fortunate enough to compete in virtually every continent on earth and visit more than 50 countries. The shooting sports have gone through enormous changes even in the relatively short time I have been on the international circuit.

When I first competed for Australia in 1985 it was at the Grand Prix of Nations event at Montecatini in Italy. This was a three-day event over 200 targets at a shooting range that was widely regarded as the Melbourne Cricket Ground of shooting. It had 13 Olympic trap fields and countless live pigeon rings. It is within walking distance from the town centre, which is considered one of the most popular and prestigious holiday destinations in Italy.

In 1986 the pigeon rings were closed and this year the clay target ranges ceased operation due to lead and noise pollution problems. Here was a great shooting range that hosted all of the world's greatest shotgun events forced to close in a country where shooting is regarded as a national pastime alongside soccer and cycling. Everybody used to tell me that the grounds of Montecatini were considered sacred and untouchable.

In 1985, as I mentioned, the events were conducted throughout three days and we were allowed to use 32 grams of shot to break clays. Since then we have seen 29-gram loads introduced and now 24 grams is the limit. Talk of 20 grams is now commonplace and you would have to be very naive to think it won't eventually be introduced. Three-day competitions are a thing of the past, with double trap and all women's events being reduced to one day. Trap has also been earmarked to be radically reduced to a one-day event and, worst of all in my mind, there is plenty of talk about it eventually becoming a single barrel event in line with all other forms of International Clay Target games.

All of these changes are the direct result of the increased pressure mounting from both noise and lead pollution. In some parts of Europe it is already compulsory to use steel shot for clay targets.

One thing that I have noticed develop worldwide is the introduction of centralised national shooting venues. Italy has gone from four or five major clubs capable of holding world-class events down to one, Lonato, located in the northern heartland of most of the country's gun manufacturers. To combat its pollution problems, Lonato is surrounded by a huge dirt mound covered in green shade cloth, which collects all the lead pellets and prevents the shot from settling in the soil.

The United States can really only boast the military's range at Fort Benning, the Olympic range in Atlanta and the Olympic Training Centre in Colorado Springs as fully international ranges that cater for all forms of Olympic discipline shooting. There are no privately owned ranges that cater for centralised national shooting venues. Great Britain has none, Germany two, France none, Spain one, Russia one and Finland one. That is all that I know of in Europe. Australia can consider itself very fortunate to have one of the

most state-of-the-art facilities available at Cecil Park in Sydney. The range in Belmont, Brisbane is also unique. Even though it may not have the latest equipment available, it caters for virtually all types of recreational shooting, not just the Olympic disciplines. In my mind Belmont would have to be the largest shooting range on earth in terms of area and its accessibility to the central business district and international airport. It is second to none in terms of venue location.

The amalgamation of shooting ranges has some very obvious benefits. These venues can be used as both training and competition facilities for national teams. The capital cost of some of the equipment that is now required to have an Olympic-standard shooting range can be at least spread through amalgamations. Hopefully our sport's administrators in Australia can come to some form of agreement with the operators of Cecil Park so the real legacy of our Olympic Games can be enjoyed by the next generation of up-and-coming marksmen.

No longer should any shooting team be holding trials for the national teams in remote rural areas on makeshift ranges with farm machinery being substituted for clay target throwers or target retrievers.

In Australia, we have been lucky to have a shooting range of some description within virtually every municipality. While for many of us it has saved us tremendous costs in travel time and fuel, it will in the end ultimately cost all of us the chance for better facilities or even the chance to compete at all unless there can be some form of strategy put forward as to the long-term combining of clubs and sharing of joint facilities.

These days, the problems of trying to open any new range in Australia are mind blowing. Just meeting the Environmental Protection Authority's noise guidelines for a new range are on the verge of being impossible. Existing clubs are nowhere near as harshly dealt with and clubs wishing to amalgamate within the same geographical area are usually encouraged and often financially supported by local councils. Often the first hurdle, and most difficult obstacle, can be sorting out the internal politics of the joining clubs. As a sport, we need to be bigger than this if we are to survive.

Shooting will never be the most 'politically correct' sport in many people's eyes, but there is no doubt in my mind that if the sport is to survive for the long term in Australia, we will need to follow the trends developing overseas. Instead of opening new ranges, we need to combine the assets of existing venues and join forces. Shotgun, rifle and pistol clubs need to all start working together under the one banner so we can all enjoy a prosperous future.