

## **The 'Ten Commandments' for buying the perfect shotgun**

Following on from a previous article on gun fit, I thought I would elaborate on the ten most basic things to look for when purchasing a shotgun for general use. I stress here 'general use', as there is no one shotgun that will be perfect for every type of competition or hunting situation. However, there are plenty of shotguns available now that have good all-round capabilities.

### **Length of Pull**

A good starting point is the 'length of pull' of the stock or quite simply the distance from the trigger to the back of the centre of the pad. Generally, most manufacturers offer 370mm as their standard, which is, within 10mm either side, what the majority of the world's 'mature male' shotgunners use. Body shape, in particular arm length, is the greatest variable here.

### **Stock Height**

The height of the stock is probably the most important issue that has to be individually addressed. This dimension is measured by running a straight line through the rib of your barrels above the stock. A one-metre metal ruler is best used as a guide on top of your rib and then another ruler can be used to measure the distance from the metal ruler to the top of the stock. Measurements here vary greatly. Trap shooters usually have the highest stocks, with some only having a 30mm drop at the front of the stock. Field shooters can have stocks that go all the way down to 60mm.

### **Drop of the Comb**

The drop of the comb is the decline in height from the front to the back of the stock. A 10mm drop is more than adequate for most people.

The real test to stock height relies on the individual looking down the barrel of the gun after they have mounted it. To tell if the stock is suitable for all-round use, you should be able to place flat a 20-cent coin halfway down the rib of the barrel without the front sight being completely hidden. That is a general rule.

### **Cast**

The cast of a stock is one area where you essentially have to get it right the first time. Cast can be altered after purchase, but this can become expensive and sometimes not practical. When right-hand shooters look down towards the barrels from behind the stock there should be about half as much twist or bend to the right at the top of the stock as there is at the bottom or toe of the stock (the opposite for left handers). Generally, more cast is needed at the bottom of the stock to position the pad better along the shooter's breastbones and muscles. Some twist is needed at the top to position the eye directly down the middle of the barrel rib.

It is easy to work out if the cast is correct by simply mounting the gun and then checking if you are looking directly down the centre of the barrel. If you are unsure, then let a qualified gun fitter or experienced shooter look back down the barrel in the opposite direction (when of course the gun is unloaded) into your eye. If you are not down the centre, then seriously think about avoiding the purchase of the gun.

### Gun Pitch

The pitch of the gun can be easily measured by standing the gun up against a square doorframe. Move the gun up against the frame until the top of the mechanism of the gun hits the frame. This should leave the barrels pointing away from the frame at anywhere from two to ten degrees. It can be measured by the distance the top of the barrel is from the frame, which is normally around 35mm on a 30" barrel gun. As a general rule, larger men with broad chests need more pitch and skinny, lanky teenagers need less pitch.

### Shotgun Pads

Shotgun pads come in a variety of shapes. Flat pads are best, excessively curved pads can promote bad gun mounting habits. The only argument for a curved pad is in trap shooting when the gun is already mounted when the target appears - and even then it is a poor argument.

### Barrel Lengths

Barrel lengths have seen a change in trend during the past decade. Twenty-six inch barrels are nearly extinct and 28" barrels closely follow - except those used by skeet shooters. Thirty inch is the most popular all-around barrel, with 32" making an enormous impact on serious DTL and some sporting shooters. Interestingly, many of the top DTL shooters in the US shoot 34" from the maximum handicap distance of 27 yards. The 36" has already appeared as an option with some of the bigger gun manufacturers. I like the longer barrels, provided they weigh no more than 1.65kg. Anything more than that and you need to start working out at the gym regularly.

### Chokes

The choking of the barrels can take many chapters to go through. It will largely depend on what you want to use your shotgun for, but if in doubt, go for tighter chokes rather than more open ones. It is far better to hit what you are shooting at with too much shot rather than not enough and on clay targets tighter chokes will actually give you a better indication of exactly where you are shooting.

### Ribs

Barrels these days come with a variety of rib types as options. Wide 15mm ribs were once popular to restrict heat haze and then enormous step up ribs were the trend for many competition shooters. Both have some merit, but also plenty of negatives. A plain, flat

10mm ventilated rib is still the popular choice of 95 per cent of all shotgunners in all disciplines at the Olympic Games. Enough said.

## Weight

The overall weight of a standard 12-gauge under and over shotgun has tended to increase slightly throughout the past few years. Better quality steel and walnut has probably had much to do with it. The laws of physics will tell you that, if all other factors remain constant, the heavier your gun is, the less it will knock you around. The weight will also determine how tired your back and arms get from carrying it all day. You cannot have one without the other. Most decent guns these days will weigh 8 to 8½ pounds in the old scale of measurement.

## The 'Ten Commandments'

You will never find a gun 'off the shelf' that fits perfectly. When considering a shotgun, remember my 'ten commandments'. Go for a gun that:

- 1) Feels a touch too short rather than too long;
- 2) Looks a little low in stock height rather than too high;
- 3) Has too much cast on the toe of the stock rather than not enough;
- 4) Has too much front to back drop on the stock comb rather than too little;
- 5) Has too much pitch rather than not enough;
- 6) Has a flat pad rather than a curved one;
- 7) Has longer barrels as opposed to shorter ones;
- 8) Has tighter chokes rather than open ones;
- 9) Has a flat rib instead of a raised rib;
- 10) Feels a touch heavy instead of a touch light.

Most importantly, if you find the perfect shotgun then keep it. Never sell it or lend it to anyone. You will never find another one.

Good shooting till next time.