THE RIGHT GUN FOR THE JOB

Choosing the best gun for you is an important part of the overall package says Stephen Nutbeam

Here's an interesting question. Is your current level of performance achieved because of your gun or in spite of your gun? I ask because many people seek out my help when they feel their shooting has reached a plateau. After a period of steady improvement they are finding it hard to move on to the next level.

Most often, particularly with shooters who are largely self taught, there are fundamental flaws in their technique that simply prevent them going much beyond their current level. Shooting is a sport that allows anyone with good natural ability to reach a reasonable level quite quickly, even with poor technique. Winning on tougher courses and in the higher classes is, however, a different matter altogether. Top course setters will punish poor technique and instinctive hand-eye coordination can only get you out of trouble so often.

In some cases however, the fundamentals are sound and it is the gun that is holding the shooter back. We all know the importance of good gun fit and it may be that all that is needed is some alteration to the stock to unlock the shooter's full potential. The most common problem I see is shooters with guns that are too low in the comb, causing them to lift their head on certain targets. Bending the stock to reduce the drop can bring dramatic benefits in terms of greater consistency.

Even a gun that fits perfectly may not be the right one for that individual and here there are many more factors to consider. A light, fast handling gun in the hands of someone with an aggressive style will be a nightmare because control goes out of the window immediately. The shooter who really likes to attack his targets will be much better off with a heavier gun that offers some built-in inertia to smooth out the swing and keep the gun moving on track. That lighter gun will suit someone with a slower more deliberate style because they have a much lower tendency to pull the gun off line or stop the swing.

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class results — in the right hands. Picking the right gun for you can, as a result, be a problem. There is so much choice, so where do you start? Even when looking at two guns from the same maker, one may be perfect and the other will always have you struggling for consistent results. One of my jobs is to help clients work out what works for them and what is holding them back so they can get the right equipment. Let's look at some of the factors we should consider:

• **WEIGHT** Putting a 9½ lb gun in the hands of a lightly built shooter is unlikely to be a good move, although much will depend on how the gun is balanced. Too much weight will lead to tiredness and tired shooters miss targets.

• **BALANCE** Many people pick up a gun and immediately test for balance by seeing where the mid point is in relation to the hinge pin. This gives you some information but not all. A gun's handling is much more dependant on the way the weight is distributed throughout its length. Taking an extreme case, a gun with a heavy recoil reducer on the stock and extended chokes in the barrels may have an identical balance point to a similar model with fixed chokes and a plain stock. Their handling is likely to feel very different however, as one will have more weight at its extremities, while the other will have a higher proportion in the mid section. On some guns even the difference between the fixed and multi-choked versions can be significant.

A GUN'S HANDLING IS MUCH MORE DEPENDANT ON THE WAY THE WEIGHT IS DISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT ITS LENGTH. TAKING AN EXTREME CASE, A GUN WITH A HEAVY RECOIL REDUCER ON THE STOCK AND EXTENDED CHOKES IN THE BARRELS MAY HAVE AN IDENTICAL BALANCE POINT TO A SIMILAR MODEL WITH FIXED CHOKES AND A PLAIN STOCK.

Barrel weights can have a similar affect. Some makers have considerable differences in their barrel weights from one gun to another. Within the normal production range it may be possible to specify tubes at the lighter or heavier end of the spectrum and again the difference can be dramatic. One popular gun performs much differently (and in my view better) with barrels weighing 1600+ grams than 1400g. The lighter barrels are much easier to stop and stopping the swing is a sure symptom of someone whose scores are inconsistent. Very often it is only certain types of target that show up the problem and any changes should be tested on those bogey birds.

• **BARREL LENGTH** Although this is related to the weight and balance issues, the choice of barrel length is also important in its own right. The general trend over the last 15 years has been to longer barrels, in part a reaction to changes in the type of targets seen in competition. Where once the choice would have been between 28 and 30 inch barrels, 30 is now the norm and a significant percentage of shooters opt for 32 inches. Short barrels suit closer, tight window presentations, the longer tubes are generally acknowledged to be an advantage on more distant targets, particularly the long, floating crossers that are common these days.

• **DETAILS** Issues such as weight, balance and barrel length are what I would call 'make or break' points. If they are wrong there is little that can be done to put them right and it is sensible to look elsewhere. There are however minor details on every gun that can be changed, often with dramatic results:

• **GRIPS** Gun makers have different ideas on grip shapes, some favour very pronounced pistol grips, others a more open radius. All build guns with an 'average' person in mind and your hands may be a long way from average. An unsuitable grip will compromise performance because it will put the hand in the wrong position. It may induce tension in the forearm muscles. A badly positioned palm swell could have the same effect. A good stocker will be able to do a lot to change the grip to suit your hands, or a new custom stock may be the answer, leaving the original unaltered and protecting the resale value of the gun.

• **TRIGGERS** Many guns have adjustable trigger blades that can be set in different positions. Getting it right may seem a small detail but it can add a few percentage points to your score. Similarly trigger pull weights are often overlooked but a heavy, dragging trigger pull does nothing for consistent timing. For most users something set between $3^1/_2$-$4^1/_2$ lbs is about right and it is easily checked with a spring pull gauge. Very light triggers should also be avoided, not least because there are safety implications, but also by anyone who tends to 'slap' the trigger rather than squeeze it.

• **BEADS/SIGHTS** This is an issue that tends to polarise opinion. On the one hand there is the 'none is best' approach (Richard Faulds being the most famous example), on the other many favour the ultra-visible fluorescent types. I lean towards the minimalist approach but feel uncomfortable with nothing at all, so I opt for just a small white or brass bead. The high visibility types can be a problem for anyone with a tendency to shift focus from the target to the muzzle, a basic but common fault.

MYTH OF THE MONTH

"20-bores have a shorter range than 12-bores"

No matter what the bore size, all guns deliver their shot load at the same velocity, so the pellets will fly just as far and have the same impact energy whether they have been fired from a 12-bore or any of the smaller gauges.

Small gauge guns are however firing lighter loads (in terms of weight of shot) and they will therefore have less dense patterns. At longer ranges this loss of pattern density may be sufficient that consistent kills cannot be guaranteed. The answer is to tighten the choke a point or two to keep sufficient pellets in the effective area of the pattern.