

SKILL BUILDER: PATIENCE, PRACTICE, PERSISTENCE

Three top tips for improving your shotgun skills.

By Heidi Rao

Of all the shooting sports, shotgunning may be one of the most difficult to master. Picking up a fast-moving target with your eyes and developing the proper lead and follow-through are skills that take a lot of patience, practice and persistence. Whether shooting a bright orange clay bird on a skeet, trap or sporting clays course or a real bird on opening day of dove season, your skills depend on practice.

The good news is there is always room for improvement. The bad news is there are no shortcuts to shotgun shooting success.

Gil and Vicki Ash of OSP Shooting School in Houston offer these tried-and-true tips that are being adopted by hunter education programs across the country and the National Shooting Sports Foundation.



Tip #1: Get to know your shotgun.

The best place to practice is at the shooting range (find a range at www.wheretoshoot.org). If you cannot get to the range regularly, continue to handle your shotgun as often as you can. After work or school, or whenever you are home, take your unloaded shotgun out of its case and handle it. (You must still follow all gun safety rules, of course. This rule surpasses all others: Keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction.)

Practice mounting your shotgun. Work on your stance, swing and follow-through. Move around in different positions with your unloaded shotgun, depending on how you expect to be shooting. If you are a waterfowl hunter using layout blinds, lie down and practice sitting up to take the shot. If you will be in a blind or in an open field, practice sitting in a chair with your unloaded shotgun, then stand up to take the shot.

When shooting at a target, your shotgun becomes an extension of your arm. Finding and focusing on a target takes practice. Once you have mastered the skill of target location and focus, your shotgun should automatically locate the target because that is where you are looking — at the target. This reaction takes only a matter of seconds. If you have handled your shotgun frequently, this becomes automatic and instinctive.

Tip #2: Practice your gun mount.

A proper gun mount is critical to successful shotgun shooting. Practice often at home in a safe place, free of distraction and with plenty of room to move around. Mount your unloaded shotgun to your shoulder and cheek, over and over again. You're trying to accomplish a fluid, smooth motion to the shoulder and cheek, with your eyes aligned naturally down the barrel, focused on the target without having to think about it.

One helpful exercise is to focus on the seam of your wall where it meets the ceiling. Imagine the seam as the path a clay target or live bird travels from left to right, or right to left. Next, insert a small flashlight into the barrel end of your unloaded shotgun and turn it on. Beginning at one corner, intensely focus on the seam. As your eyes slowly travel across the seam, raise your unloaded shotgun to your shoulder and cheek as you continuously move your eyes to the opposite corner of the ceiling. Swing your shotgun, following the "target," as your eyes travel the line.

Continue this exercise slowly and with precision, so the movement of bringing your shotgun up to your shoulder and cheek embeds itself into muscle memory. This exercise is very revealing in showing how smooth — or not — your gun mount is.



Tip #3: Focus on the target.

Those four words seem so simple but are the main reason we miss. We lose focus on the target. When you identify a target and begin your gun mount, your brain has the remarkable ability to recognize the target you are seeing. Your brain judges its speed, flight path and distance, then predicts where it is going. If you let your brain do what it is supposed to do, as you continue to focus on your target and mount your shotgun, your chance of success is great.

Any visual distraction away from the target interrupts the message your brain is receiving about the speed, path and distance of the target, and you miss. Looking at the barrel is the top culprit. Oftentimes, when shooters mount the shotgun, the movement of the shotgun barrel catches their eye and for that moment, they look away from the target, then quickly try to relocate the target, chasing it across the sky with their barrel. They miss every time.

Here's an exercise you can practice to not get distracted by the movement of the shotgun barrel. Place three targets (cups, balls, shotgun shells) on a ledge or counter about 8 to 10 inches apart. Stand with your unloaded shotgun and focus on the center target. Keeping your eyes on that center target, slowly raise your shotgun and mount it to the left target. Lower your shotgun. Continue to focus your eyes on the center target. Slowly mount your shotgun to the right target. Repeat often. This exercise forces you to "accept" your shotgun in your peripheral vision rather than taking your eyes off your target.

Know your shotgun, perfect your gun mount, focus on your target and let your brain do the rest.