

*San Francisco Examiner*  
July 23, 1901

*Study of Physical Traits of Men Who Shoot the Best*

Whenever men do things with head or with hand, a pardonable curiosity is aroused, and thus it is with the big men of the Bundesfest. Who are they? What are they like? How and why do they do these things? Are there not facts to generalize from? Can we not learn some of the qualities which enable a man to shoot his way to pre-eminence at the butts?

This is the tenor of the questions asked by other men who do not line up at the butts or expect to line up, but who nevertheless would like to know. In answer one can only say that the facts are many and oftentimes contradictory. The nationality of the crack sharpshooters varies; likewise experience with rifles and targets. Some are old and some are young, while some seem to be all nerves, and others to have no nerves at all.

S. C. Ross for instance, the first king of the National Bund, is a slender brunette of medium height. He is native born and his clean-cut features are not distinctive of any particular race, but portray rather the cosmopolitan admixture of diverse races which is common of the American.

He has an eye, black, with clear whites, and quick of movement. When it comes to rest, which it rarely does, it betrays that peculiar piercing quality as though he gazed right through one. In repose his face sometimes takes on a sad expression, which is quickly put to flight by the least human occurrence around him. He has a bright smile, quick to come and quick to vanish; nor is he slow to acknowledge a greeting or pass the good word along. His mind, as his eye, travels everywhere and is alert, eager, quick to see the point and cap it with another.

Quickness characterizes him. He seems to be a bundle of nerves, to have more than his share of the American kind of nerves—the kind that makes men get up and dare things to the ends of the earth—the high-tension, finely strung, concert pitch kind—the kind that cannot brook defeat and fight to the death on a stricken field.

But for all that, Ross possesses restraint, control. When it comes to holding a sight on the target no man petrifies more solidly than he. His powers of concentration are likewise large, and necessity seems to have developed them. When he is shooting he is shooting, and that's all there is about it. He'll see you later; but just then, no. And it is an emphatic "no."

William Hayes, the reigning king, is a medium sized blond, and notwithstanding his fifty-four years he has not put on flesh. He is slow of gesture and occasionally his speech lapses into a just perceptible drawl. Looking him full in the face and listening to him talk reminds one in a vague sort of way of Mark Twain. There must be something temperamentally akin in the two men. His full blue eyes move slowly and steadily, without haste, but with certainty, and dwell upon whomever he is talking with or upon whatever his hands are doing. Severe in repose his face and eyes break into the most winning of smiles. These smiles have a habit of lingering, and in this respect are quite unlike those of Ross, whose smiles come and go in a flash.

Steadiness seems to best characterize King Hayes. Not that he is slow, though. He conveys an impression of potency, of powers to do, and while there is less nervous waste one feels in that wiry figure all the quickness of a cat.

Like Ross, he is no big-game shot and has had little field experience, though a veteran at the target. He is native born and first began to shoot in 1869. He has been at it ever since, having attended most of the important contests of the intervening years.

W. W. Yaeger, the crack Colorado shot, is also native-born and a blond. But he is a big-game shot as well, and wind and sun have bronzed his fair skin and put upon it the weatherbeat common to men who live in the open. Further, and worthy of comment, he is the only one of the big marksmen who really shoots offhand. He is remarkably slight of figure and weighs but 114 pounds. His cheek bones are prominent, with large hollows underneath, and altogether he has a wan and cadaverous look. After a cursory glance one would deem Yaeger to be the most nervous of men. But, on the contrary, if ever a man was devoid of nerves, he is. He has all the steadiness and solidity of poise and carriage one would expect to accompany 250 pounds.

His movements are very slow and very deliberate. Nothing shakes him. There is never a quiver or tremor, and it is a joy to see him handle a gun. There is no flash to the eye or haste in his actions. It simply appears that he has something to do and is doing it. He may be characterized as deliberate, or, rather, as the nerveless incarnation of deft deliberateness.

But what ever generalizations may have been arrived at so far are knocked in the head by Adolph Strecker, the heir apparent to the Schützenfest crown. He is the last man in the world one would pick out as a sharpshooter, much less as king of sharpshooters—that is, until he faces the target. His record extends over a quarter of a century. Crowned king of American riflemen in 1874 at Baltimore, his star has shone brightly ever since, but never so brightly as today. And still he does not look like a marksman.

Long and lean of limb and tall, narrow-shouldered and narrow-chested, with grizzled iron-gray beard and hollow cheeks, his forty-nine years have weighed far more heavily than have the fifty-four of King Hayes. The latter looks much the younger man. Strecker is also blue-eyed, but a native of Germany. His face is sad in repose, even melancholy, and when he smiles he looks boyish to a degree. He appears far from strong, and one wonders that he was capable of the prolonged strain of firing 160 of his king shots in a few consecutive hours.

His eyes are unlike those of the other fine marksmen. They are not keen and sharp and piercing, but seem filmed over with a dreamy softness of the kind one would expect in the eyes of a maid. Yet those are the eyes that out of 200 bullets guided 197 into the bull's-eye.

But when he faces the target he undergoes a transformation. He becomes cold, absolutely cold, as though cast in chilled steel. His whole nervous organization seems to stiffen and harden. And there lies his power. Nothing fazes him, startles him. He has that peculiar ability to utterly forget the world and he can call upon the last least shred of his strength and knowledge and concentrate it all upon the work at hand. On the day he did his remarkable shooting the rest of the sharpshooters ceased firing and joined the spectators at his back. The excitement grew intense. Every time he raised his rifle hundreds of eyes were focused upon him, boring into him, and he knew it, but did not permit it to affect him. In fact, the more he fired the better he scored, and he was grieved when the lists closed for the day.

By the way, Strecker is extremely conservative, and never goes in for improvements until he is forced. He was the last crack shot to give up the old-style muzzle-loading weapon, and he only gave up then and purchased a Winchester because the progressive men were overtaking him.

Then came the Pope sharp-shooting rifle, with the Pope system of loading, and the progressive younger element invested and began to catch up with him. But Strecker fought shy until his record was in peril, and until the thirty-two caliber bullets were rattling in the worn barrel. Then he sent the old Winchester back to the Pope Firearms Company, had it bored out to a thirty-three caliber, and built over to accommodate the Pope loading system. This is the gun with which he did the work at the present Bundesfest, the same old Winchester he first used, all battered and worn from over ten years' service. It reminds one of the small boy with the bent pin and piece of twine catching the biggest trout in the stream.

Ittel, the Pennsylvania expert who cropped up late in the fest and came within three of beating Strecker, is native born, but of remote German ancestry. Strecker is the only one of the very big experts who is foreign born. While the majority are of German descent, in from two to half a dozen generations, Hayes traces back to the little green isle and Ross' name speaks for itself.

In looking over these men one striking thing is manifest. None of them is unusually tall or stout. The men big in stature or girth, while they have done good work, have not done the very best. On the other hand, the men who have done the very best are of medium height or under, and are prone to leanness. This is hardly a coincidence. There must be some reason for it, biological or psychological, or otherwise.