

IT'S REFRESHING TO SEE MORE AND MORE OF THE FAIRER SEX TAKING UP CLAY SHOOTING.

The key to this sport is simple hand to eye co-ordination, so given the right start, the right equipment, some practical instruction and the determination to practice, there is no reason why women cannot compete on equal terms with men.

Introduction to the sport usually follows from encouragement by a parent, partner, or boyfriend, while others

discover the sport through corporate entertainment or wanting to simply join their partner at the Gun Club at the weekend. Whatever the route of entry to the sport, it is essential that the first introduction and experience of shooting is enjoyable and educational – and most importantly, successful.

It is often the initial introduction to the sport that proves most difficult for women. Far too many ladies are put off by an unsuccessful and or painful start. This is easily avoided with an understanding of the challenges the majority of women face at the outset and how to overcome them.

First Lesson

The majority of women have a natural apprehension of shotguns – so first impressions can be

unfamiliar and intimidating. This unfamiliarity with guns is the first hurdle to overcome – but approached correctly, the foundations can be laid for a smooth introduction and steady progression in the sport. Interest in the sport often follows a period of being a spectator. While there is then a temptation to ask a partner or friendly club member to “*teach me how to shoot*”, the best route is to seek out a qualified coach that has experience of teaching women – that coach may also be a lady. The first lesson is all important – safety, the shotgun and its operation is explained. Correct stance and posture – initially with a pre-mounted shotgun – is followed by how to shoot a moving target. When this is grooved off range, and the instructor is confident of success, these skills can be taken to the range for the first experience of live firing.

Eye Dominance

Women are multi-taskers, usually able to carry out several activities at one time – nature pre-programmed them this way. In the brain, the corpus callosum is a network of nerves that transmits messages between the right and left halves of the brain. It is better integrated in women than in men, enabling women to use both sides of the brain at one time. However, this ability has a downside – approximately 70 percent of women are either cross-dominant or have central vision.

It is essential that eye dominance is checked and then double checked. In a perfect world, if you are right handed you should be right eye dominant. However, this is often not the case. If eye dominance is opposite to the

BELOW L TO R: JUDY RHODES, CHRIS BATHA AND CHERYL LONG.

FIT FOR A LADY

A REVIEW BY CHRIS BATHA



shoulder you would like to shoot off, then the options are to swap shoulders to align with the dominant eye or obscure the dominant eye to allow shooting off the preferred shoulder. There are disadvantages to the obscuring of one eye in spatial vision, so swapping shoulders at the outset is always the best long term option. If the diagnosis is central or fluctuating vision, then there is little option other than to obscure one eye to ensure the gun shoots where you look. Either way, eye dominance must be established (and action taken) early on in the teaching process to avoid a future set back in years to come.

Gun Fit

Generally, gunstocks are built to fit men. Alteration is required to make them comfortable for most ladies. Stock fit for the fairer sex is not simply a matter of a shorter stock. Ladies have a different skeletal shape to men and are often lighter and more petite – everything is scaled down, including bone length and diameter and muscle mass. This means ladies move differently (compare the actions of a man and a woman throwing a ball).

These differences impact on a woman's choice of gun, its fit and the gun mounting action. High cheekbones and a long neck requires a gun to have a high comb to achieve proper alignment of the eye and rib without having to drop or roll the head. With many women, a Monte Carlo stock works very well.

Smaller hands mean that the thick grips and forward trigger placements of some modern competition guns are not suitable for ladies. A slimmer, semi pistol grip is needed to give proper comfort and control – with a

trigger that is adjustable forward or backward.

The shape and soft tissue of a woman's chest requires careful adjustment to the pitch (angle of the rear portion of the butt that contacts the shoulder) on the stock. Too much pitch and all of the recoil forces are concentrated through the toe (bottom of the

butt) of the gun. Not only is this painful and bruising, but can result in twisting or canting the gun or, worse, placing the butt of the stock out onto the bicep. This fitting problem can be further compounded by the adjuster or buckle on the bra strap. This clip is often exactly where the toe of the gun rests, adding to discomfort and bruising.

A minimum of 6 to 8 degrees of pitch is recommended, along with a sports bra with no strap adjustments and a recoil pad to further displace recoil. While it is not possible to lay down any hard and fast rules, years of gun fitting have given me these yardstick dimensions for the average lady shooter:

Length of Pull – 12³/₄ inches to 14¹/₂ inches with negative pitch of six to eight degrees

Drop: At precisely where the face (cheek bone) contacts the top of the comb – 1⁵/₈ inches, give or take 1/₈ inch

Cast: 1/₈ inch at the heel, 3/₈ inch at the toe.

Gun Weight

"It's so heavy!" is one of the most common comments I hear when ladies take their first lesson. Yes, the sporting shotgun is heavy – designed to be carried little and shot a lot. The average 7.5 to 8 pound shotgun, combined with the unusual position to both hold and

body to counter (cantilever) and support the gun's weight.

The length of the gun impacts on its perceived weight. If the stock is too long, the weight of the gun is pushed farther from the axis of the body, increasing the subconscious need to push the hips forward and transfer more weight to the back foot to counter-balance the weight of the gun.

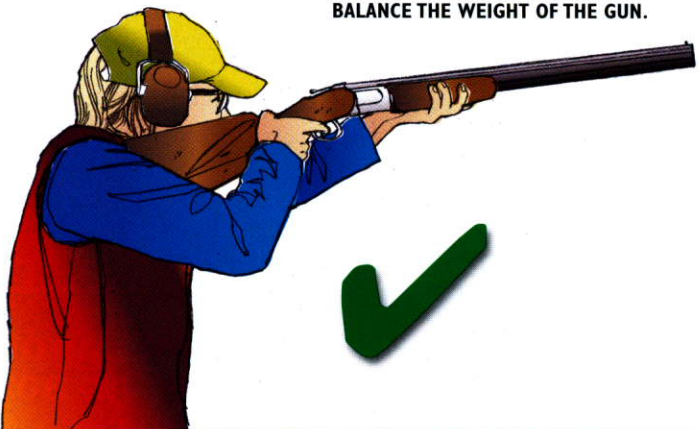
Proper posture is required to absorb recoil, create better access to the cheekbone and create a good pocket for the gun in the shoulder. This calls for a slight inclination or angling of the body towards the target. Simply shifting the hips backwards achieves this proper posture. Exercises may be required, aimed specifically at the shooting action. This will increase strength and teach the lady shooter to mount the gun firmly and consistently into her cheek and shoulder.

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support that weight (at arm's length) makes ladies shoot off the back foot, pushing their hips forward and using their upper



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Gun Selection

Gun selection is critical. A 20 gauge semi-automatic shotgun, particularly with an alloy action, when combined with a light cartridge, is a great choice for a first lesson for a lady. It offers reduced weight and recoil, allowing better concentration on the correct movement and hard focus to break the target. However, if strength will allow, a light 12 gauge with a suitably light cartridge would be my recommendation.

Cartridge and Recoil

Recoil is controlled by the combination of the gun's weight and cartridge velocity. Use the heaviest gun that can be comfortably controlled with the most efficient soft shooting cartridge.

Recoil anxiety is always an element of that first experience or lesson. The anticipation of recoil can cause as many flinches and trigger freezes as the actual recoil. The control of recoil is achieved by a suitable gun that is properly fit, lighter cartridge selection, correct posture, good positioning of the hands for control and grip and a solid gun mount. Repeated dry firing with snap caps can help cure recoil anticipation and encourage smooth trigger pulls.

Clothing and Accessories

Most shooting vests are designed to fit the male, with ladies' models simply coming in smaller sizes and brighter colors. This makes no allowance for the fit required for women to be comfortable and to perform at their best. The typical cut of the average vest – big in the shoulders, adequate across the chest, then falling straight to the hips – does not accommodate the shape of the female form.

This poor fit at the waist and torso means that surplus cloth is gathered under the armpits when a lady attempts to mount the gun – making it snag or hang up. However, there are now several companies that offer shooting clothing and accessories especially for women so it's not too difficult to ensure you have the correct accessories that offer the best fit and the most comfort.

Final Word

The most important initial requirements that let a lady take up the sport, enjoy it and progress to compete on an even playing field with the men includes: a structured introduction, learning and understanding the fundamentals, the correct choice of gun and fit, a soft-shooting cartridge, then exercising and practicing to achieve a smooth and controlled move to the target. ■

SHOT Show Gun Fit

It's a small world! While walking the halls of this year's SHOT Show, I received a call from Guy Bignell, President of Griffin and Howe. "Batha, call this lady and arrange a gun fitting", was the royal decree. "I met her at a trade show and she impressed me so much, we're going to sponsor her with a custom Zoli shotgun".

Judy Rhodes started the Dallas Divas with a mission to encourage more women to participate in sporting clays and outdoor activities. What started out as a handful of enthusiastic lady shooters has expanded worldwide to over a thousand members. For more than ten years, through successful women and youth clinics throughout the USA, they have introduced over 3,000 women to shooting sports. I immediately recognized why a prestigious pair of companies like G&H and Zoli would be so keen to offer sponsorship to this sporting clays ambassador extraordinaire.

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Good fundamentals are essential to a good gunfitting. Judy was easy to work with, working through the fitting and helping her choose the Zoli model she most preferred – a 12 gauge sporter with 30 inch barrels. I have to admit that with her good friend Cheryl Long, both glamorous and attractive in their Diva outfits, the fitting attracted its fair share of attention!



JUDY RHODES AND CHRIS BATHA.