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GUEST EDITOR GEORGE DIGWEED MBE

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FOREWORD FROM THE GUEST EDITOR

GEORGE DIGWEED MBE

I find myself in a privileged position to be asked to guest edit this issue of *Sporting Gun*. When I started out many years ago, working in the family butchery business in Hastings, I could never have imagined that shooting would take me around the world, introduce me to lifelong friends and give me the opportunity to speak on behalf of a sport that has shaped my life.

Throughout my life, I have had a deep passion for the countryside and for shooting in all its forms. Right now, I believe our sport faces some of the most challenging times I have known. Not only from outside pressures, but also from how we represent ourselves. Too often we find ourselves reacting rather than leading, defending rather than promoting. Shooting has so much to offer – conservation, wildlife management, community and rural livelihoods – yet we rarely push these positives to the front. As a result we spend too much time putting out fires instead of lighting a few of our own.

Country sports must evolve if they are to endure. Change is inevitable, whether through legislation, public perception or environmental responsibility, and we must adapt intelligently rather than resist blindly. Ammunition, sustainability and how we present ourselves to the wider public are all part of that future. Shooting has always been built on respect – for quarry, for countryside and for each other – and that must remain at its core as the sport moves forward.

Despite the challenges, I remain optimistic. Across both game and clay shooting there is still enormous passion, and I see great dedication from those working within the sport every day. One of the most important responsibilities we have is to educate the next generation properly. Young people entering shooting must be taught correctly, not only how to shoot, but how to understand the countryside, conservation and responsibility. This has always been the strength of the shooting community – knowledge passed down, standards maintained and respect earned through experience.

Over many years I have been fortunate to see shooting in many different forms, across different countries and landscapes, and it continues to remind me just how special our sport is. Whether it is a day on the marsh, in a line on a high pheasant



shoot, in a pigeon hide or shooting clays with good company (something which is growing more and more important as I get older), the essence of shooting remains the same: time in the countryside; shared experiences; and the pursuit of doing something well. Those values are worth protecting, and worth explaining clearly to those who may not understand them.

Sporting Gun has always been a magazine for the everyday shooter – practical, honest and rooted in the real world of our sport. It reflects the people who keep shooting alive week-in, week-out, and that is something I greatly respect.

The future of shooting depends not on a select few, but on the wider community that supports it, believes in it and lives it.

If we stand together, promote the positives and continue to evolve while holding onto the values that define us, shooting will remain strong for generations to come.



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SPORTING Gun

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THE TITLE-WINNING COMBO

We all want to discover a secret formula to greater shooting success, and who better to ask for that than George Digweed MBE?

However, George has always been clear that he prefers to use standard, off-the-shelf equipment rather than anything specially made for him. He believes success should come from skill and consistency, not bespoke gear or one-off components.

"I want exactly the same product as anybody can buy," he explains, noting that using widely available equipment removes any suggestion that performance is down to customised wood, barrels or cartridges.

His go-to competition Perazzi – an MX2000S – is set up simply, choked full and full with 32in barrels and a parallel comb, fitted to him but otherwise unchanged from production models.

He also remains loyal to loads which have been reliable and consistent throughout his career: "I use Gamebore White Gold 28g 7½ for almost everything, stepping up to Black Gold Dark Storm 28g 6½ for longer targets," he explains.

Read George Digweed MBE's full gun and cartridge history on page 20.

E ULTIMATE AMMUNITION



LEGISLATION

DEER BILL PASSES WITH WINS AND LOSSES FOR SHOOTING

The Scottish Government has passed the Natural Environment Bill, forcing deer stalkers to undergo compulsory training despite shooting groups saying there's no proof it's needed.

Rural affairs minister Jim Fairlie MSP says he'll consult the sector before training starts, but nobody knows when that'll be, what it'll cost, or whether experienced stalkers will be let off.

BASC Scotland director Peter Clark said: "The decision to impose mandatory training on deer managers and stalkers in Scotland is yet another example of where a policy decision has been taken in the absence of any evidence to support it."

But it's the new powers handed to NatureScot that have really sparked concerns. The agency can now intervene in deer management for 'nature restoration' purposes rather than just stopping damage – a major shift from current law that the Scottish Gamekeepers Association warned will inevitably result in court actions.

NatureScot must try voluntary deals with landowners first, but can impose legally-binding control orders if it believes deer are blocking habitat recovery. Landowners who refuse face fines up to £40,000 or three months in prison.

Still, the shooting sector did claw back important wins. The Bill's wording was watered down so NatureScot "may" use its powers rather than "will", removing a presumption that the state would automatically intervene.

A new venison plan will promote the meat and offer financial incentives for deer managers, whilst changes to grouse moor licensing should make applications more straightforward. Muirburn rules have been altered so land managers don't have to try alternatives before burning heather – backed by York University research showing burning works better than anything else for stopping wildfires.

But the sector's biggest win? Plans to restrict gamebird releases were dropped completely after sustained pressure. BASC's Mr Clark said there had been "a real risk that valuable land management activity would be undermined by proposals driven by greenwashing rather than evidence".

The Bill becomes law once it gets Royal Assent in the coming months.

INVESTIGATION

RSPB UNDER THE MICROSCOPE OVER PROSECUTION CLAIMS

The RSPB has been accused of manufacturing prosecutions and operating like its own private police force in a damning report examining three decades of wildlife crime cases.

The 79-page dossier, commissioned by the Campaign for the Protection of Moorland Communities and published on 20 January, picks apart 14 wildlife crime investigations the charity conducted between 1990 and 2025.

Report author and journalist Andrew Ben O'Rourke claims the RSPB's investigations team has been directing police operations, handling evidence and securing convictions based on flawed science.

The most serious allegation? Raptor breeders, accused of taking and selling wild birds in the 1990s were convicted using DNA testing systems the RSPB reportedly helped develop at Nottingham University. Government scientists later scrapped the technique as unreliable – but the convictions still stand.

Nevin Hunter, who headed the National Wildlife Crime Unit from 2012 to 2014 after 28 years in the police, said he became aware of extensive complaints about RSPB interference in investigations, including taking over from police,



demanding to interview suspects and trespassing on private property.

The report calls for "the absolute closure of the RSPB investigation team", describing its influence as "insidious".

An RSPB spokesperson told *Sporting Gun*: "We strenuously deny all these allegations. The RSPB only collects evidence of criminal activity which is then handed over to the police."

PEST CONTROL

AIRGUNNERS URGED TO TACKLE £4M RAT CRISIS

Airgunners could play a vital role in tackling a rodent crisis that has cost Northern Ireland more than £4 million since 2020.

More than 66,000 pest reports have been made to councils and housing authorities since 2020, with most concerning rats and mice, according to BBC News NI. Business owners in Dungannon, County Tyrone, have reported rats "the size of a small dog" in the town centre.



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The British Pest Control Association (BPCA) told *Sporting Gun* that rodent numbers spike when there's more food, water or shelter available, alongside displacement from flooding and demolition work. Bin strikes have made things worse in some areas.

"Airguns are vital in controlling pest rodent populations," a BPCA spokesman said, though he stressed shooters must get land access and permissions sorted before starting control work. Opportunities are best in peri-urban and rural areas, gardens and community allotments.

"Rodents are considered a public health pest, which makes this a community problem. Good communication between land managers, residents and businesses will help keep rodent populations in check."

The association said airgun use should be part of a wider pest management plan, with training and competency "of utmost importance to ensure that humane control is carried out at all times".

LEGISLATION

SCOTTISH SHOOTS BRACE FOR HIGHER TAX BILLS

Shoots across Scotland are bracing for higher tax bills after the Government quietly axed their business rates relief in a change buried deep in January's budget document. The move, announced on 13 January, strips shoots and deer forests of their Small Business Bonus Scheme relief from April.

Shoots have benefited from the relief since becoming liable for sporting rates in 2017. The only exception now will be those whose shooting rights are exercised "solely" for deer management to prevent damage to woodland or agriculture, environmental management or vermin control. Crofts and agricultural tenancies are also exempt.

But the word "solely" is expected to prove decisive. Shoots combining these activities will lose their relief, meaning those doing the most diverse conservation work are likely to be hit hardest.

Scottish Land & Estates (SLE) warned the policy would hammer family farms and landholdings as well as sporting businesses, including cases where little or no commercial shooting takes place. Chief executive Sara-Jane Laing said the changes would result in "new rates bills of tens of thousands of pounds a year – costs many family-run businesses simply cannot absorb".

The Government will phase in the increased rates over three years, with shoots paying a quarter of the rise this year, half next year and three-quarters from 2028/29.

CONSERVATION

TIME TO GET AFTER THE GREYS

Shooters will be at the heart of a new Government push to tackle grey squirrels after Defra admitted volunteers are already doing most of the heavy lifting.

The Grey Squirrel Policy Statement, published on 29 January, reveals community volunteer groups account for 80% of grey squirrel management in the red squirrel's northern strongholds – and now the Government wants to back them properly.



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTYIMAGES/ DRIHERZ

Defra is funding three project officers to coordinate local control groups in Lancashire, Yorkshire and County Durham, and expanding Countryside Stewardship grant areas for squirrel control. The policy also states landowners should "make use of well-trained, competent volunteers in grey squirrel management across the whole of England".

The plan comes as grey squirrels hammer England's woodlands to the tune of £37 million a year, while the red squirrel population has crashed to just 38,900.

BASC's Ian Danby said: "The role of people who shoot in supporting red squirrel recovery projects and wider grey squirrel management is vital for delivering this policy." His colleague Martin Edwards added that grey squirrel management has already benefited from the shooting community's input and the updated policy "opens the pathway for shooting to do more".

But the policy's backing for pine marten recovery sparked pushback. Tim Weston of the National Gamekeepers' Organisation warned: "Pine martens are not a solution to the grey squirrel problem; active, coordinated management remains essential."

NEWS IN BRIEF

RED-DOT SIGHTS TO BE TRIALLED AT CPSA EVENTS

The CPSA is letting shooters with eye dominance issues use Aimpoint red-dot sights at registered English Sporting and Super Sporting events next season, including at major championships.

The trial could help the 30-40% of shooters who struggle with eye dominance. Anyone using the Aimpoint Acro S-2 or Micro S-1 sights will compete on a targets-only basis and won't be eligible for cash or product prizes – though they can compete for Aimpoint-sponsored awards.

The Acro S-2 mount onto ventilated shotgun ribs and gives shooters a visual reference point. The trial runs through 2026-2027 while the CPSA monitors performance data to assess whether the technology gives users of the aid any unfair advantage.

CPSA chief executive Iain Parker said: "Our goal is to help members affected by eye dominance conditions continue to enjoy and progress in the sport. This collaboration allows us to explore new solutions responsibly, ensuring fairness while offering genuine support."

GUNTRADER USERS WARNED OVER PHISHING EMAILS

Mark Ripley of Vulpine Firearms Training has warned users of the Guntrader website to be vigilant after receiving a convincing phishing email purporting to be from the company. The email, which Mr Ripley says mimicked Guntrader's layout and included his name and a link to his advert, claimed there was a message about the listing but requested account information be updated. Guntrader confirmed the email was fraudulent. Users are advised not to follow links in unsolicited emails and instead access the Guntrader site directly through their browser, or contact customer services if in any doubt.

GUEST EDITOR INTERVIEW



GEORGE DIGWEED MBE

The multiple World and European title-winning shooter, countryman and guest editor for this issue, **George Digweed MBE**, shares his life story, greatest achievements and top shooting tips

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GEORGE DIGWEED MBE



If there is any sportsperson deserving of the 'GOAT' accolade (Greatest Of All Time) it is George Digweed MBE, a 28-time Overall World Champion and 19-time European Champion, and the only shooter to have won world title across five different decades. His record also includes multiple British and English Open titles, countless major international victories and over four decades at the very top of the sport. Awarded an MBE for services to shooting, Digweed has travelled the world representing the sport while also running shoots and remaining deeply rooted in the countryside.

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOU AND HOW YOU GOT INTO SHOOTING.

I was born in Hastings in 1964. My family was in the butchery business – which my ancestors established way back in 1860. Growing up, I naturally assumed I would follow suit and end up working as a full-time butcher. I suppose it was that way for 30 years until my career in shooting took over.

I started shooting when I was 12; and, like many people of my age, was involved in the sport way before that, regularly featuring in the beating line with my grandfather. It was a natural progression from that to shoot, especially as any pigeons, rabbits and pheasants we shot would be sold in the shop. I can't say I have a particularly vivid memory of my first day in the field, but I look back on lots of fond memories out and about – it was a great upbringing.

WHO TAUGHT YOU TO SHOOT?

I am self-taught. I used to go shooting with my grandfather and my cousin Bill Moseley and the biggest shoot we went to was the East Sussex Gun Club and Wildfowlers Association annual clay shoot. One year I finished Top Young Gun and won a tiny trophy that turned out to say 'Best Budgerigar in Show 1938' on the back. Despite that I was absolutely delighted to win it.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR MOST MEMORABLE WIN, AND WHY?

Probably the 1992 win at Okemo in Vermont. My father was very ill with pancreatic cancer, so I wasn't going to go. However, he persuaded me to go so I did, and I won the Championships. Later that year we sadly lost him, so it was very emotional, but it carries good memories because he told me to go and do it. I went on to win it consecutively in 1993 and 1994, which has yet to be matched today.

WHAT DO YOU REGARD AS YOUR GREATEST SHOOTING ACHIEVEMENT?

There have been a few, but there are a couple that really stand out. The first would be in 1993 at Monfortinho in Portugal, where I shot 15 out of 25 on one layout and brought it all back together and still won the World Championship. And

GUEST EDITOR INTERVIEW



then in Arezzo, Italy, in 2010 where in over 40-degree heat I shot 174 of the first 175 targets and went on to win the championship.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE DISCIPLINE?

I wouldn't say I have a favourite now. I've done so much of it over the years that the discipline is irrelevant – I have seen every target gong – so as long as the company is good I'm happy.

WHAT KEEPS YOU SHOOTING?

I've had a great career and shooting changed my life. I grew up thinking I was going to be a butcher, but now I've travelled the world and met incredible people. I believe I am in the giving-back stage, supporting sponsors who supported me with promoting products I believe in, while still seeing friends all over the world through shooting keeps it very much enjoyable.

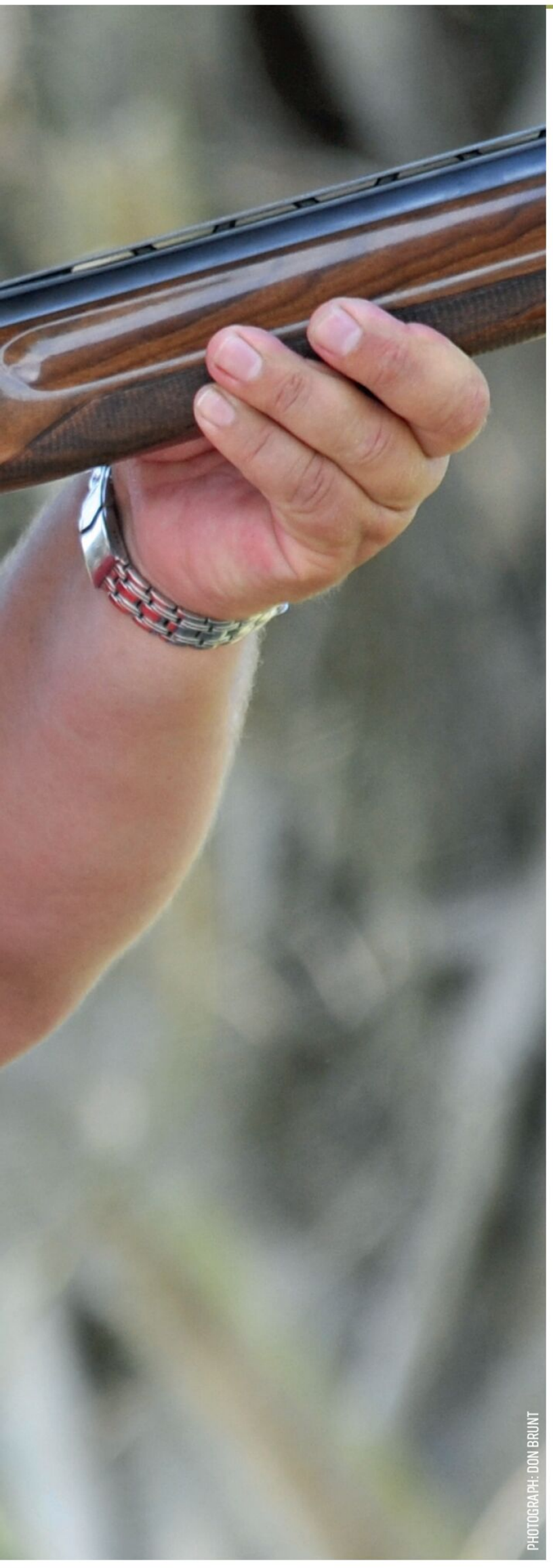
YOU HAVE NOW WON A WORLD TITLE IN FIVE DECADES. WHAT IS THE NEXT GOAL?

It would be remiss not to have a small thought about six decades, but it's a long way off. Standards keep moving forward and you have to keep up; there's aging and health to consider, but who knows – you only need to be on song for a few days.

CLAYS OR GAME?

Game. I'm a countryman at heart. I love the countryside and watching it unfold. It's not all about pulling the trigger – which I realise more and more as I get older. It's about the people you're with, the surrounding nature, and matching your wits against wild quarry.

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PHOTOGRAPH: DON BRUNT



George raising the 2022 World English Sporting Championship Trophy

PHOTOGRAPH: LETTY RAY CHAPA

WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER THE ULTIMATE SPORTING QUARRY?

It depends on the day – grouse, high pheasants, duck flighting, roosting pigeons – all forms of game shooting can be exhilarating in the right conditions.

DO YOU SHOOT RIFLES?

Yes, mainly for vermin control. I'm old-school with a lamp though. My keepers now use thermal and night vision and do most of the work and love it. I still enjoy controlling rabbits and vermin, just not as much as I used to.

WHO ARE YOUR SPONSORS?

Perazzi, Gamebore, Cens, Swatcom, Pilla, Promatic, Pro Ferrum and Sportarm, Beals Scaffolding, ClayClo and MC Truck & Rental.

WHAT IS IN YOUR KITBAG?

Cartridges, cans and glasses. I'm not obsessive – I put my glasses on, put the cartridges in and pull the trigger.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR TOP TIP TO ANY NOVICE?

Start with a couple of sound lessons to get the basics right. If you start correctly, you don't normally make many mistakes. I have seen people on corporate days who have never shot before, quickly overtake the standard of those who have shot for years after a couple of good lessons.

WHAT ABOUT AN ADVANCED SHOOTER?

Be confident in your equipment, gun, cartridges, eyewear and hearing protection – then go out and let it happen. If you have doubts on any of it, or something doesn't feel right, you will never perform at your best.

Also, shoot enough to maintain





your standard and sharpness, whether that is in competitions or purposeful practice. It is important to understand where to spend your time, money and effort to maintain performance at the top.

WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR IN A SHOTGUN?

Reliability, balance and something that moves well. Confidence in a gun is everything. It must go off every time, be balanced slightly forward – on the hinge pin, in my opinion, as this will hold its line better than a gun that feels whippy – and it must not kick excessively. A handmade gun will move better than one made in a machine, but you do not need something extravagant to shoot well. Choose what is most reliable and cost-efficient for you.

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Signing autographs in the USA in 2024

HOW OFTEN ARE YOU PIGEON SHOOTING?

Not as much as I'd like. It's been a mast year so pigeons have stayed in the woods on acorns. I hope to shoot more this year and even have a trip in South Africa coming up.

BEST ADVICE FOR SHOOTING PIGEONS?

Keep still – wild birds look for movement. If you stand up while they are still 50 yards or so away, they will flare up and be out of range before you get a good shot at them. But if you wait to let them get to within 20 yards or so, you can stand up and still be in control – even do a dance or a jig before shooting if you want to – and have far more success.

DESCRIBE YOUR LIFE OUTSIDE OF SHOOTING?

There isn't one.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO RECEIVE AN MBE?

It was the most amazing experience and a very special day. But, I never really felt like it was awarded to me personally, rather that it was awarded for shooting as a sport in general and what had been achieved within it.

I was very lucky in 2019 to be invited to Buckingham Palace for lunch with the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh, which was an incredibly personal and memorable occasion. There were only 10 people there, one from each different walk of life – say farming, military, whatever. It was the second to last lunch they ever did together, and to sit and talk with them, particularly about the countryside and conservation at Sandringham, was extremely special and something I will never forget.

YOUR DOG OF A LIFETIME?

I had a line of black labradors that were all named after West Indian cricketers, and the last one was called Sobers. She was without question a proper gundog, I could send her five or six hundred yards and she would not come back until she had what I sent her for. Unfortunately, we lost her last year after returning from a competition in America, at only eight years old. She suddenly became ill

GUEST EDITOR INTERVIEW

PHOTOGRAPH: ROBERT WARREN

Above: George shoots at the World FITASC Sporting Championships in Hungary 2023



and it turned out she had a very aggressive form of cancer in her lungs. Dogs like that tend only to come once in a lifetime.

YOUR FAVOURITE CIGAR?

Partagas Serie D No.4, Cohiba Siglo II and Hoyo de Monterrey Epicure No.2.

TELL US SOMETHING READERS WOULD BE SURPRISED TO KNOW ABOUT YOU?

That I am training to run in the 100m Olympics? No, seriously, what I would consider one of my very best sporting performances wasn't in shooting, but in cricket! In a Sussex T20 cup match, I opened the bowling and finished with figures of five overs, five maidens, eight wickets for no runs. What made it even better was the opposition captain came out determined to score off me, and hit the ball straight to extra cover where our slowest fielder was positioned and ran. Somehow the fielder picked up the ball, threw the stumps down and ran the captain out – saving my figures! ■

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GUEST EDITOR'S GUNS

George Digweed MBE talks us through his gun history, and the very model and cartridges which he returns to for competition time and again

George's earliest experiences with guns were simple and functional. Indeed, his very first gun was an old .410, although it came with strict conditions. "I actually carried this gun with me along hedgerows and on shoot days for a year or more, learning about safety. However, I don't class it as the gun I started shooting with, as I was never given any cartridges!" From there, he moved on to an old Winchester pump gun fitted with a Cutts compensator. "The Winchester was a gun originally used by my mother for 'shooting the branchers', when people would shoot young rooks annually on the 14th of May," George explained. He progressed onto a Miroku MS150 which he used for a long period in the field, and at the very early beginning of his career in clays.



George's first & multiple World title-winning Perazzi

As his volume of shooting increased, George moved into more performance-focused guns of that time: first a Remington 1100 before fully entering the world of competition shooting. Amazingly, his first World Championship victory in 1988 at West Midlands was achieved using two guns, a Parker Hale 803 trap gun paired with a Browning A1 Sporter. "I'd switch between the two throughout the layouts, shooting one for lower targets and the other for higher targets."

At the end of that year, he signed a deal with Beretta, moving to a pair of 682s. With these guns he won a number of titles, including his consecutive World FITASC Titles in 1992, '93, and '94.

Come the close of his contract with Beretta in 1995, it was a switch to premium Spanish brand Kemen, from which he claimed another bag of world titles over a 5-year period. After this, it was back to Italian makers, but this time to Perazzi, for which his performance has been formiddable, most notably with his MX2000S (photographed).

Today, the heart of his clay shooting revolves around said Perazzi MX2000S – which, despite other models being used from time to time, it is a gun he keeps returning to and winning with over 20 years later. It is a gun built around consistency rather than complication, and there's nothing bespoke about it. "I have always said to any of my sponsors, I want exactly the same product as anybody can buy. I do not want anything special, whether it is wood or barrels or cartridges, because people will say any performance is down to that. I want to be able to promote a product that anyone can walk into a gun shop and buy."

"My gun is choked full and full, it has a parallel comb and 32-inch barrels," he says, explaining that his go-to cartridges for competitions are Gamebore White Gold 28g 7½, stepping up to Black Gold Dark Storm 28g 6½ for longer targets. It is a setup he knows intimately and one he has trusted through years of competition at the highest level.

On the game side of things, George uses a pair of Perazzi High Tech 20-bores with 34-inch barrels, also choked full and full. "When you're shooting live quarry you should do the best job you possibly can, and I know exactly where these guns shoot." His standard game load is Gamebore Black Gold 30g No.5, a cartridge he uses for pheasants, pigeons and crows alike, stepping up when required for higher or more testing birds. "If I can't kill it with that set up, it can't be killed."

George has used a lot of steel too, on lead-free estates like Warter Priory and on ducks and geese. He predominantly opts for Dark Storm high-performance steel loads, typically 32g No.3, adapting his approach to ensure clean and effective shooting with non-lead ammunition. "I feel that when shooting driven birds with steel, you have to take them more positively than you would do with lead. What I mean by that is shoot them earlier, as once they go past the horizontal – by even five or 10 degrees – you start shooting a bird from behind and the energy does not transfer into the bird enough to hit the vitals and ensure consistently clean kills."

Throughout his career, George has always prioritised reliability and feel over aesthetics or novelty. Whether shooting clays at the highest level or live quarry in the field, his approach remains unchanged – simple, proven equipment, total familiarity with his tools and complete confidence in the gun and cartridge combination. It is a philosophy that has underpinned the most successful shooting career in history and continues to define the contents of his gun cabinet today. ■

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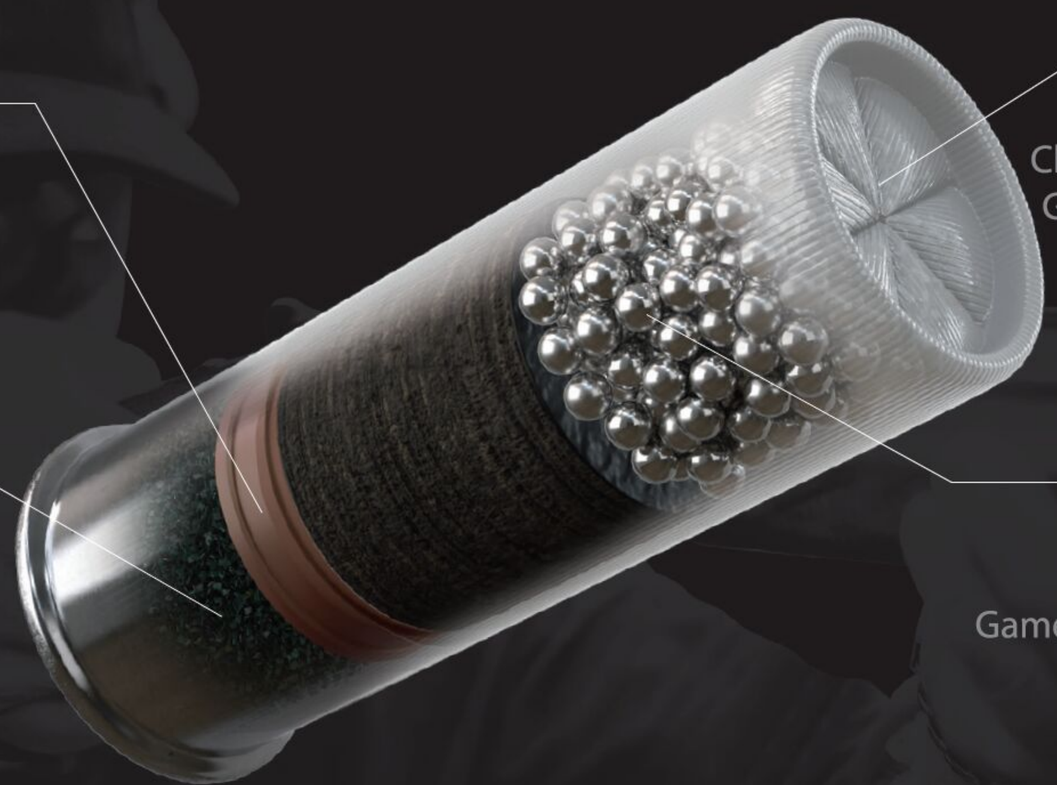
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PIGEON RECAP

During what seems to be a quiet period across the country, **Geoff Garrod** reflects on some memorable outings on pigeons over the past 12 months and prepares for the coming spring

PHOTOGRAPHY: **RICHARD FAULKS**

It's a sign of the times around here that my last two articles have been about decoying crows and enjoying a farm shoot, instead of my usual focus on the pigeons. The reason is that I haven't had any real opportunities to shoot any pigeons. As we all know, winter pigeon shooting can be a famine-or-feast affair, but pigeon numbers are really low around the farm at the moment. This is something that has been noted by many decoyers on pigeon forums on social media, so it appears to be a national issue rather than a local one.

Pigeons certainly seem to be more nomadic in their behaviour right now, arriving in massive numbers before quickly moving on to another area. My guess is that many will have headed back over to the continent, while others

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will be filling their crops with the abundance of acorns and beech masts that are around this year.

We have 1,200 acres of rape on the estate and, so far, there is nothing to report on crop damage at the moment, which is no bad thing. Indeed, we have 20 gas guns that are still sitting in the sheds at the time of writing, which is unheard of. Hopefully, from a shooting point of view, they will start to come back. My theory is that the acorns wont have much of a shelf life left as they tend to rot on the ground after a while – so the pigeons will have to come back to their usual areas ready for the spring drilling. But that is only one theory. My fear is that any that have crossed the channel to the continent decide to stay put for the spring. Only time will tell!

This lull in crop protection duties has given me time to sort out all of my kit and get it in good working order for when the pigeons do return. It has also allowed a moment to recap on the highs and lows in the hide last year – and remind myself of any days where I had made mistakes.

ROOSTING

An obvious place to start would be on an evening's roost shooting in late January. It was my first trip out in the woods, and I decided to visit a large block of woodland that is usually a safe bet for getting a few shots. I'd noticed a good flock of pigeons had been roosting there in the game season, which was just about to close at the time; but, we had already finished flushing any pheasants from the wood so I couldn't wait to have a go. Being such a large area, I should have waited to be joined by someone as it would be hard to choose a single spot to stand where I could bag some birds. Excitement got the better of me and I headed out anyway. Despite eight pigeons for my efforts, going it alone didn't achieve what could have been a very fruitful evening, but it felt so good to start the year and it is always nice to have some solo time.

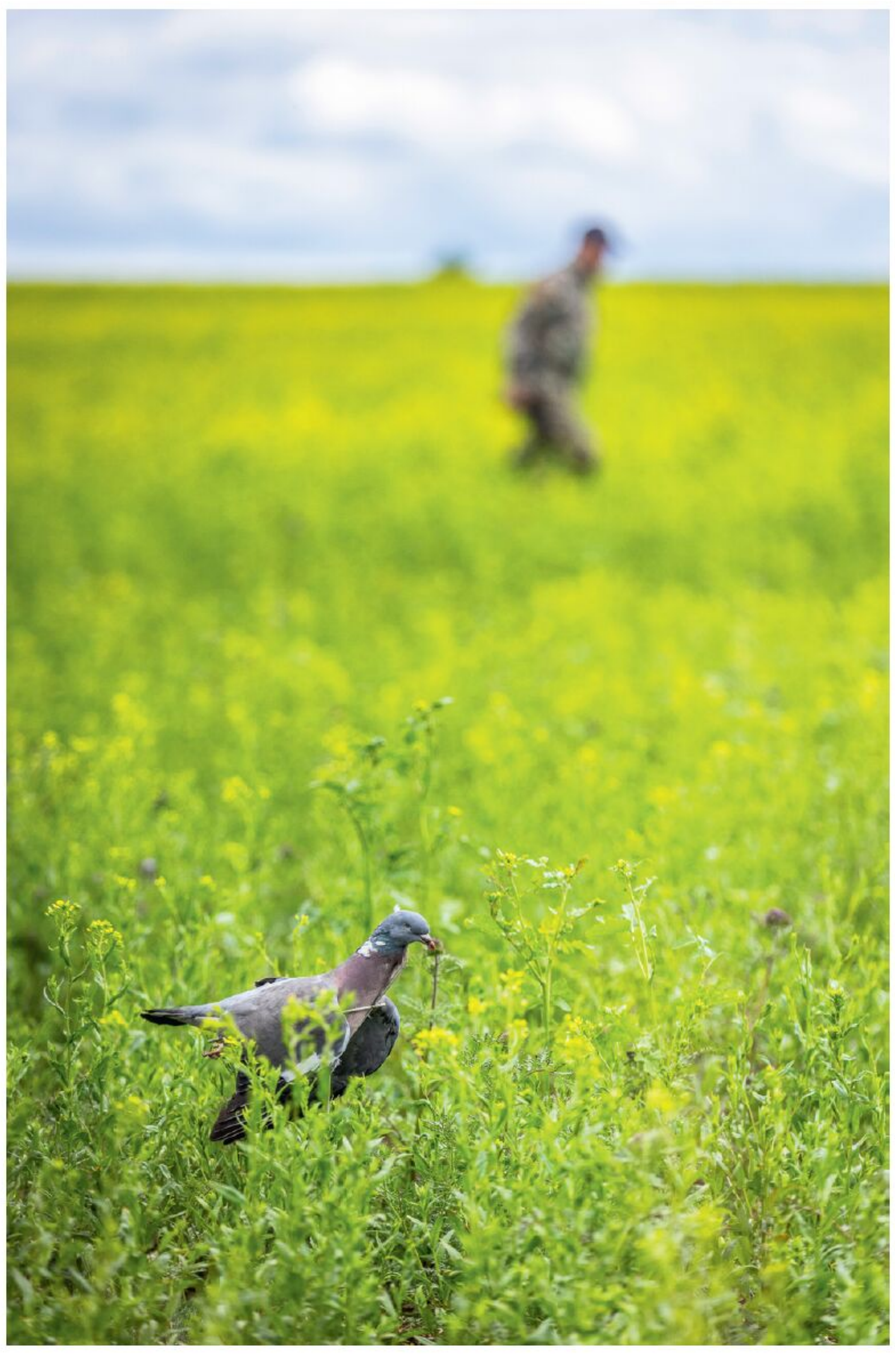
WINTER RAPE

Next up was winter rape, which also proved to be a bit tricky. The farm had about 1,000 acres of rape, but mostly in one block of adjoining fields. There were pigeons around in massive flocks, which is common for February, and gas guns weren't helping (particularly due to the fact the gas bottles had been stolen!). One field stood out which was a little smaller and set apart from the others. With 500 pigeons feeding on it, it looked hopeful, so that is where I decided to focus my efforts. As is typical with winter pigeons, the day I set out my hide and decoys was the day the flock decided to move onto another field. I ended up watching a flock of 1,000 pigeons feed over the other side of the valley on another farm's land. I had a few more outings and finished with a few bags in the 30s and 40s, but it was a struggle.

SPRING DRILLING

Winter was frustrating, so I was looking forward to the spring drilling from March, which is my





favourite time of year to decoy. I had a holiday booked in so I was desperate to at least have one outing before going away. It played out that some freshly drilled wheat made for only a single day before then, on which I had moderate success. It had been an exceptionally wet March and I knew the farm was chomping at the bit to get the fields drilled, but I hoped the wet weather would keep the drills in the sheds until I returned.

Of course, the opposite happened, and a spell of continued dry weather allowed the farm to work day and night to get the corn sown while I was away. The only glimmer of hope I had for a good outing was one small field that had been left until last. The pigeons had scratched around on the other drilled fields, clearing the exposed corn, so I knew it was only a matter of time before they would find their way onto the small field.

It was an odd but successful day in the hide when I finally got the right conditions. The pigeons I had kept in the chiller and planned to use as decoys had all been ruined, as the chiller had been switched off by accident when I was away, so I had to start with the plastic decoys and build the pattern up as I went – which didn't take long at all! I was plagued by feral pigeons throughout and it was a challenging day in general, but that makes it even more rewarding, memorable and enjoyable when you get it right.

GREEN FERTILISER

After the spring drilling, there's usually a slight lull in the pigeon activity, and last year was no exception. There was one unexpected June day, though, when I was shooting over a green fertiliser crop, which turned out to be the highlight of my year on the pigeons. The field is roughly 60 acres and is made up of a mix of mustard, phacelia, lucerne and other plants, which is ploughed back into the ground to add nutrients back into the

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soil. While the crop is not harvested, it is still very important and needs protecting equally.

Thousands of pigeons had found the field and were enjoying feeding on one of the plant species as it flowered. The crop was fairly sparse which meant the pigeons could land anywhere they wanted. I needed help to keep them on the move, so I had a friend set up at the other end of the field. The weather was warm and windy and the pigeons decoyed perfectly non-stop, crossing the motorway to feed. It was one of those days you dream about as a decoyer. It more than made up for my patchy start to the year.

BEAN STUBBLE

The next memorable day was in August when I shot over a field of bean stubble. I was protecting the standing wheat that was in the field behind me, but pigeons were dropping onto the bean field to sit and digest the wheat in their crops and scratch around a little. I'd played around with different ideas of where would be best to position the hide, and eventually decided to place myself under the main flight line to the wheat field with the decoys easy to spot on the bare ground.

It turned out to be a great day and, apart from a few minor changes to my decoy pattern that were needed to keep the line on track, I had steady and enjoyable shooting from 11am till 4pm. I picked well over 100 pigeons and, evidently, did a good job of protecting the standing wheat





as it was safely harvested a day or two later.

LATE RAPE DRILLING

Early September was another surprising day when I shot over a field of late-drilled rape. Most of the rape had been drilled a month or so earlier and was now out of the ground and large enough to be reasonably safe from pigeon damage.

One field had been direct drilled into wheat stubble because the rain had prevented it from being drilled along with the rest of the fields. The young plants had just broken the surface of the ground, and there was a great deal of damage being done by the pigeons, pecking out the plants along with the kernel.

I'd set up and started shooting in reasonable weather. I had consistent traffic and was adding plenty to the bag. Then, the first of many heavy rain showers arrived. At the time, I thought that might be it for the day, but the pigeons just kept on coming. It was extraordinary that they could even fly in the torrential rain, but they did. I only had three hours of free time before I had to feed my gamebirds, but I managed to shoot over 70 birds in that time, making it an intense, soggy – but very enjoyable – outing.

As I conclude this article, I'm looking forward to things picking up again. Some roost shooting is looking likely in the coming weeks, with the woods seeming to be filling up with pigeons in the evening now. I really hope they stick around long enough to have some good outings in the spring – I'll keep you posted as the year progresses. ■

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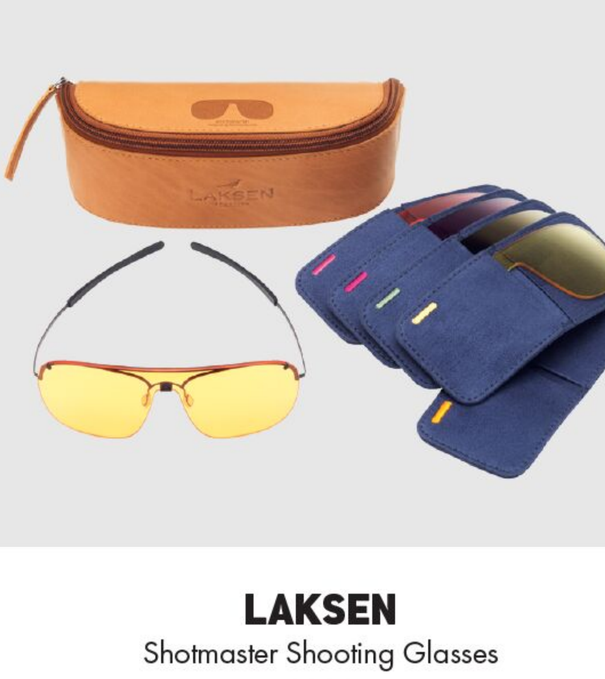
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Guest Editor George Digweed MBE trusts the Gamebore White Gold



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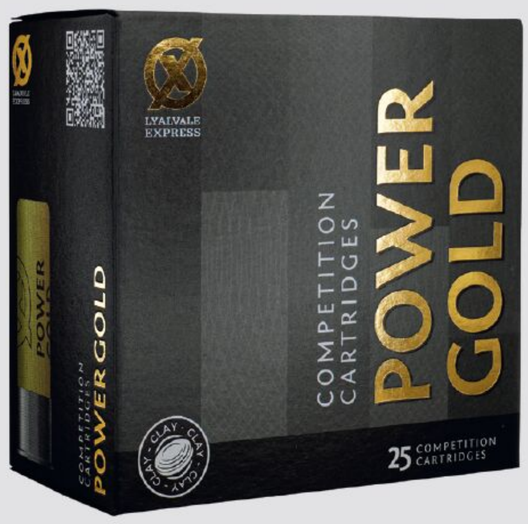
White Gold

The choice cartridge of multiple World Champion and guest editor for this issue, George Digweed MBE, Gamebore's White Gold is widely regarded as the benchmark for competition loads. Featuring the company's British-made Diamond Shot, it delivers exceptional pattern uniformity and striking power on target.

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Power Gold

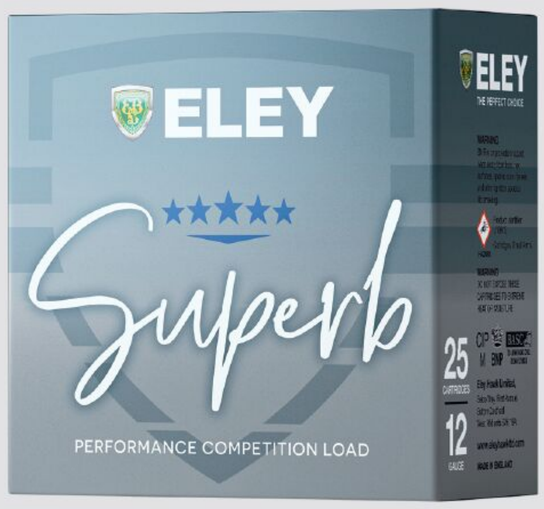
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SHOOT PROFILE

OWLEY & PARK GATE

Matt Kidd joins the **Digweeds** on their two shoots in Kent at the end of the season

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Towards the end of the season, I found myself making the long journey south to Kent for the third time in only a few weeks. It's a pig of a journey, particularly getting past the Dartford crossing, but all the shoots I have visited in the 'Garden of England' have been well worth it. This time was no exception, for it was to join the great George Digweed MBE – and guest editor for this issue – at his two shoots, Owley and Park Gate.

It was not my first visit to Owley either, a shoot which George has run since 1992. Some years ago now, I stood in this rolling patch of the Romney Marsh much earlier in the season, when leaves still clung to their branches and the birds had only been flushed through maybe half a dozen times. That particular year we had enjoyed a good spring and summer, with autumn fairing well with all of the cover crops in good nick and the soil dry underfoot. On this trip, in the final days of January, the landscape felt altogether different – and no doubt testing for George and his team, with sticky mud throughout and lots of flooding, with wily birds that know exactly what is happening – though the latter is exactly how late-season shooting should be.

The other of George's shoots, Park Gate, which he has run for eight seasons, is located in the higher Weald of Kent, a 15-20 minute drive away. This area is known for ancient landscapes of wooded hills and small, irregular-shaped fields. I was looking forward to seeing the contrast and if and how the team run things differently.

Unlike my first visit where we met in a traditional local pub – and there is certainly nothing wrong with that – guns now meet at the Digweed's recently completed shoot lodge. Fitted with a near-commercial kitchen, huge table to sit16 guests comfortably, new toilets and more, it is a fantastic space.

From the outset, one thing is immediately clear: while George is the figurehead, the shoot is very much a family operation. George himself operates in a quieter, more observational role, drawing upon

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Nick Hendrick brings down two mallard



decades of experience running shoots, while his wife Kate hosts the Guns, manages the day and ensures everything runs with calm efficiency – and she is very good at it. Front of house is George's charming sister, Sally, who ensures that everyone is well fed and watered as soon as they enter the main doors.

The atmosphere was totally relaxed and welcoming, and there was enough time to study the fascinating memorabilia that charts George's life as you enjoy a freshly brewed coffee – from the Hickman's family butchers' signs to photos of countless clay shooting triumphs and days pegged on fabled shoots with Kate, and an ornament crafted from spent shells – Gamebore Black Golds, of course.



Jamie Brightman waits for the first birds of the day

You will not meet George here in the morning, though, only hear him over the radio in communication with Kate. He is already up and out with his keepers and beating team, preparing for the Guns to arrive at the first drive.

Making up the team were some formidable shots – many familiar names from George's clay shooting world. England shooter Jamie Brightman was among them, alongside Kelly Childs, Nick Hendrick and several other top competitors who travel globally to compete at the highest level.

Soon, the call came in to Kate to load us up and get moving. As you can imagine, with friends who have shot with each other for years, plus a few new faces, the gun bus was a rather rowdy affair – the way it should be.

The big man was waiting for us on arrival, tendrils of rich cigar smoke surrounding him. After he had greeted everyone, hugged long-term friends, he called everyone to attention and quickly started the briefing, eager to get going. "We won't be drawing pegs nor numbering today," George explained. "I will be watching the drive and, if somebody is out of it, I will address that on the following drive, making sure that you all get plenty of shooting throughout. We will be shooting four or five drives, with a long break for refreshments after the third or fourth."

This style of peg management and order of the day becomes commonplace as the season progresses, as I found out spending a little time with George by the ATV after he had placed the Guns. "You've got eight to 10 people in a line and they're all part of the day," he said. "You've got to try and include those people equally – peg 5 might be great one drive, but out of it the next, so it really is luck of the draw late on in the season. We don't have drives in the traditional sense, either. Instead we have multiple locations where we can flush birds to or from in order to put on a really good day, whatever the wind or weather. That's what I think makes our days particulary special."

Visually, Owley and Park Gate are very different shoots, though only a few miles apart. Owley is the larger of the two – expansive topography, established and varied, with significant acreage, larger cover crops, woods and a greater volume of game. Park Gate, by contrast, feels more intimate, more atmospheric. Its steeper ground, with well-managed woodland belts and a striking pond overlooked by the lakehouse give it a distinct character. Choosing a favourite would be entirely subjective, but personally I would like to see more of Park Gate.

On the first drive, I stood beside Jamie as he accounted for some extraordinary duck. Afterwards it was a pleasure to watch the many dogs work – a flurry of spaniels and labradors sweeping the ground, including Kate's own duo of spaniels.

George now employs two full-time keepers, Ben and Bradley, who manage the ground year-round, he told me as we returned to Owley and made our way to the second

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Owley during mid autumn

drive. "They're both doing a very efficient job," George said. "Fox control, general keepering duties, running the beating line – they're doing very well."

His keepers are relatively young but already demonstrate strong understanding of the ground and the rhythm of the shoots. From early-season bird management through to late-season presentation, they work closely with George to ensure birds are shown with a focus on quality rather than simply numbers. Their role extends to conservation and habitat management, with ongoing work on cover crops, feeding and maintaining the environment that allows game and wildlife to thrive – something George believes is a fundamental part of running any shoot.

"To show good quality, sporting birds they have to be in their own environment," George explained. "By putting cover in and managing it properly, they become wilder. We predominantly put in maize which is mowed regularly to provide extra food in addition to that we put down. And this year I put in five blocks of chicory for the first time, and on each we had over 200 goldfinches, which was a



Kate's dogs pick multiple birds as she talks with one of the keepers



wonderful sight and something we wouldn't normally expect. I have a couple of ponds that I feed and leave as a reserve for wild teal and other ducks. Doing my part for conservation is really rewarding," George admitted.

At Owley, the persistent rain of late was evident, with large areas of flood water staying put over the clay soil. In contrast to that seen at Park Gate, the ground feels broader and more open, the drives expansive while carefully positioned. Late season always carries unpredictability, and I recalled an earlier visit when a nearby belt of maize flushed a strong head of partridge before towering pheasants followed over the line.

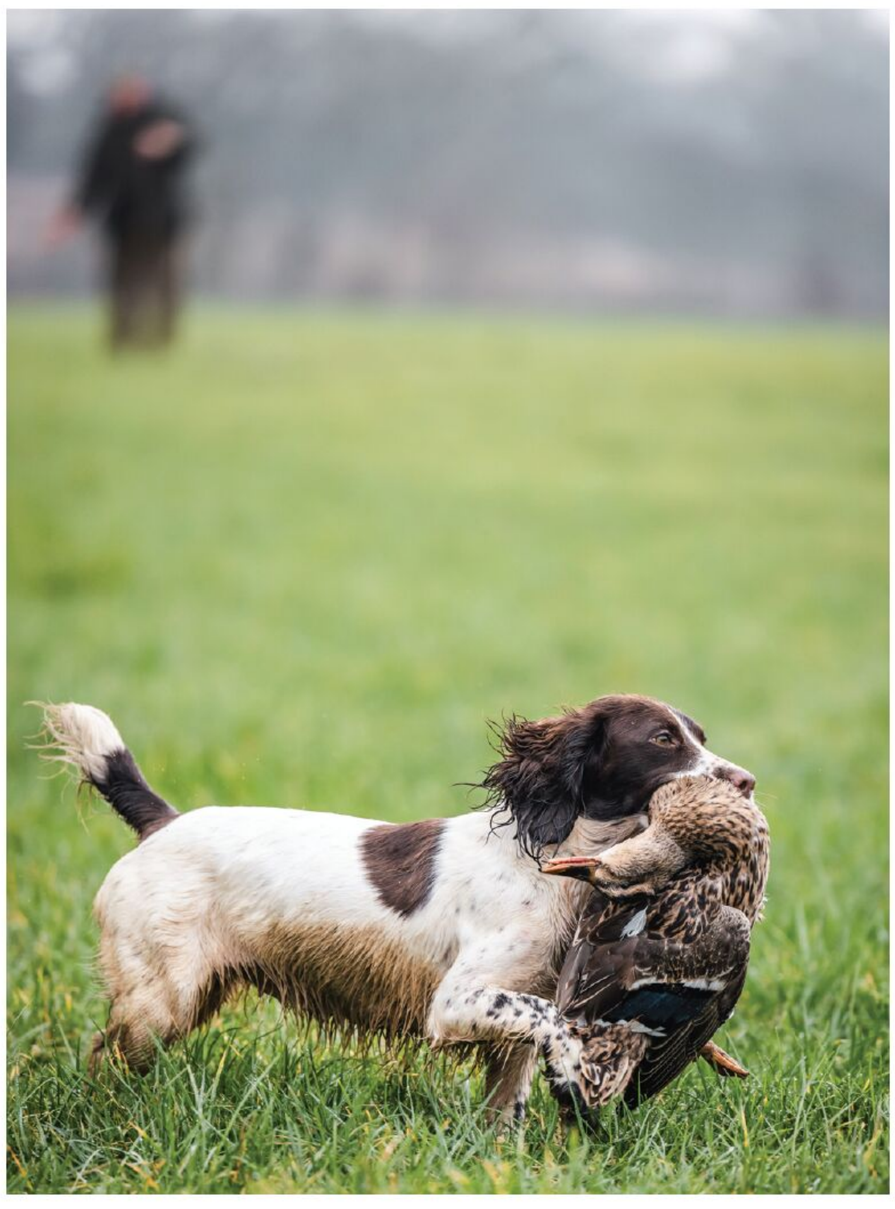
A short walk brought us to the next drive, where – true to his word – George had centrally placed those who had been on quieter pegs earlier in the day. They duly saw the volume of birds George had predicted. It is this balance – ensuring fairness while maintaining quality – that is synonymous with George's approach.

Late elevenses followed – a highlight in itself. The shoot's new chef from South Africa produced pheasant goujons, succulent medium-rare mallard breast on toast and an array of other homemade game dishes, alongside excellent cakes and a selection of soft drinks and alcoholic beverages for those that wanted them. Hospitality here is genuine rather than elaborate, built on quality and warmth. "The game we serve has been shot on the estate," Kate began. "We process a little bit ourselves so that everybody that comes shooting leaves with a brace of pheasants, and they can take as many birds – including duck – as they want in the feather. The rest of the game is all collected by a local game dealer and goes into the food chain."

With boards cleared, it was time for the final drive and Kate also revealed the reason for one of the shoots more unusual quirks: the use of golf umbrellas instead of flags. "Waving a flag all season is a stress on the shoulder joints," she laughed. "With an umbrella, you simply have to lift it up and down to help move the birds, which is so much more enjoyable."

As the afternoon progressed, Kate spoke further about the philosophy behind the shoot – not simply producing birds, but producing the right experience. "George is here to host 99% of the days," she said. "You get his knowledge of the countryside – I'm pretty sure he thinks like a pheasant – and desire for Guns to have as good a day as they possibly can. Our intention is to give a family feel and make sure that every day is special."

And that, ultimately, is what defines both Owley and Park Gate. Not just strong birds, varied drives or excellent hospitality, but the careful orchestration of a day where every Gun feels important – guided by one of the greatest shooting minds the sport has known. It is a simple philosophy – but in practice, one that few execute better. For proof, the Digweed's 2026/27 shoot days are already fully booked. One can ask to be put on a reserve list, of course, and pray for a drop out, which is unlikely. ■



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BIRD CONTROL LAW

Conor O'Gorman reviews the latest general licences for the control of pest bird species

BASC receives many queries from members on the general licences which is no surprise given how complicated they have become.

General licences are issued by government agencies to provide a legal basis for people to carry out a range of activities relating to wildlife. By definition, you do not need to apply for general licences, but you are required by law to abide by their terms and conditions.

Control methods allowed under general licence may include shooting, the destruction of eggs and nests, and the use of cage traps such as Larsen traps, Larsen mates and multi-catch traps.

There are different general licences in place in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and BASC has created colour-coded tables for each country, as each has various terms and conditions that you need to familiarise yourself with, and they differ from year to year. The table for each country is downloadable, so you can have access on your mobile or print them off, and are a good starting point to identify which species can be controlled and why. I stress the importance of downloading the relevant general licences.

Where there is a need to manage a species and such activity is not covered by a relevant general licence then an individual or specific licence can be applied for. For example, control within or near various protected sites may not be covered by general licences.

Let's have a look at some of the information for 2026, again with the caveat that you must look at the specific details online to be sure you are acting lawfully.

ENGLAND

There are three main general licences in England covering conservation, public health/safety and preventing serious damage. The species included on one or more of these are carrion crow, magpie, jay, jackdaw, rook, feral pigeon, woodpigeon, Canada goose, Egyptian goose, Indian house crow, monk parakeet, ring-necked parakeet and sacred ibis.

It is critical you look at the details and not assume a one-size fits all approach. For example, you can only control various species on the conservation general licence to protect certain wild birds of conservation concern. And you can only control jays to conserve a specific list of endangered woodland birds.

WALES

As in England there are three main Welsh general licences, but with a much shorter list of species covered on one or more of these: carrion crow, jackdaw, feral pigeon, woodpigeon and Canada goose. There is also a separate ruddy duck general licence.

If you intend on controlling carrion crow under the conservation general licence this is only allowed from 1 February to 31 August to protect the chicks and eggs of certain bird species.

Note that rook, jay and magpie are not covered by general licences in Wales and individual licences must be applied for. BASC can assist you with this.

SCOTLAND

There are three main Scottish general licences, and one or more of these cover carrion crow, hooded crow, jackdaw, jay, magpie, rook, feral pigeon, woodpigeon, Canada goose, greylag goose and ruddy duck. If you are using traps they must also be registered with NatureScot.

NORTHERN IRELAND

The three main Northern Irish general licences cover one or more of hooded crow, jackdaw, magpie, rook, feral pigeon, and woodpigeon. As for the other countries do check the specific permitted reasons. For example, the conservation of wild birds general licence covers only hooded crow and magpie and is restricted to use from 1 March to 31 August.

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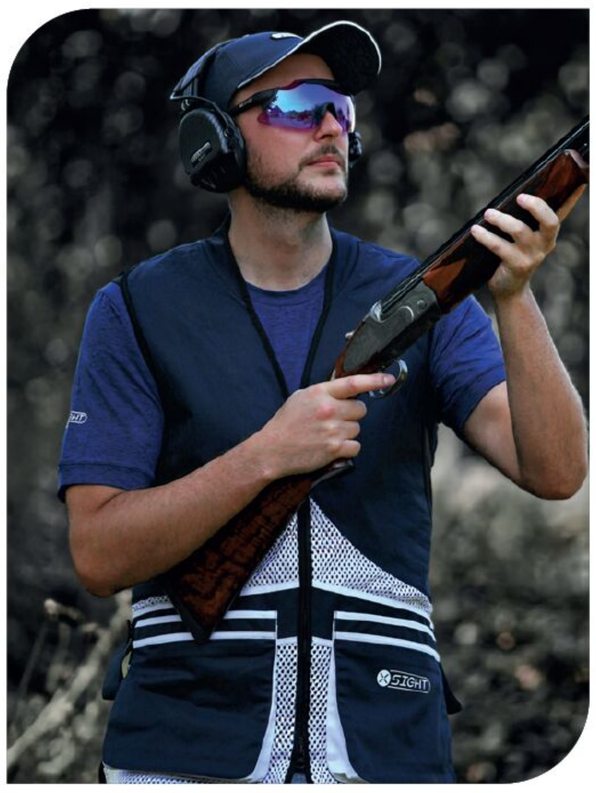
Having reviewed the BASC information online, if you still have a query, feel free to get in touch with us via your country or regional BASC team; or email me with your membership number at *conor.ogorman@basc.org.uk* and I will pass it on.
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FITASC

From gun-down technique to reading targets and maintaining focus, **Becky McKenzie** breaks down the FITASC discipline

FITASC stands for Fédération Internationale de Tir aux Armes Sportives de Chasse. It involves strategically placed clay target traps labelled A, B, C, D, etc from left to right, usually hidden from the eye. They are set to simulate live game shooting, such as rabbits, teal and other birds. There are normally anywhere from 100 targets to 120, 150 or 200 targets.

Each 'parcour', or layout, comprises 25 targets. Each station, where you stand in a hoop not a cage, has a menu indicating a target type and order (for example, C single, A/B simultaneous, A/D on report). The shooter is presented with the 'single targets' first, for which they have full use of the gun (two shots if needed). Once all shooters in the squad have shot the singles at the first station, the doubles will be presented and shot by each shooter. Once all targets are completed by all shooters they can move on to the next station and repeat the process, until the parcour is completed. FITASC must be shot 'gun down'.

All targets are used in FITASC: standard size 110mm; rabbits; midi 90mm; super mini 60mm; battue; flash clay; and ZZ targets. They can all be different colours, and range can vary from very close targets just a few feet away to longer distances.

The time taken to complete a round can vary depending on whether the new or old system is used (the new system accommodates more shooters but requires considerably more traps, while the old system is favoured but means only one squad can be in action at a particular parcour at any one time). You can shoot 100 targets a day; a European or World Championship is held over four days. Shooting 100 targets certainly takes all day. You shoot the first 25-bird parcour, then go in for a rest and some breakfast. After that you go out again, shoot the next 25 birds and then go back in and have a cuppa; you might have anywhere from half an hour up to an hour-and-a-half's break between each 25-bird parcour.

At the big events abroad you shoot 200 targets over four days, which works out at 50 birds a day broken down into two parcours, which can still take half a day to shoot. It is great fun, very interesting and really exciting.

HOW FITASC DIFFERS FROM SPORTING

FITASC differs quite a bit from Sporting. Firstly, it must be shot gun down. The Skeet vest, or shooting vest, will have a line drawn 25cm down from the top of the shoulder and the stock must be held below this line. The gun cannot be mounted until you can physically see the clay. You can, however, advise the referee that you can see the target, say, behind the bush. As long as he/she can see this too, you can mount the gun.

In FITASC, you stand in a hoop, not a cage as in Sporting. This means that, when allowed, you can physically turn around to take on the target in the best possible way. For example, a driven target, shot one, can be taken driven. If missed, you can safely turn around (after advising your fellow shooters which way you are turning) and shoot it as a going-away target.

The format also differs greatly between FITASC and Sporting. In Sporting, you stand in a cage and have the same two targets repeated three, four or five times. In FITASC, you have a menu which will include four singles, and maybe two pairs on report, or a sim pair. Once completed, you move to the next hoop for a set of completely new targets (new system). The targets are

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not labelled; you are not told, "It's a battue," which makes it rather tough. You'll never get bored.

Everyone is different and has different skills, but concentration, ability, stamina, and being able to read the targets well are all traits that make for a good FITASC shooter.

HOW TO SHOOT IT

Firstly, it is very important that you have a gun and stock that fit you. You are not allowed to pre-mount your gun, and a badly fitting gun will not mount in your shoulder perfectly every time, causing you to miss targets. Any gun can be used, but a 12-bore is recommended. Barrel length is to suit each shooter's preference.

Running before you can walk is the most common pitfall with FITASC shooting. Learn to shoot Sporting first. Learn different target presentations, and learn about leads, hold points, and kill zones before you even consider FITASC, because when you shoot gun down, everything changes. FITASC is the Grand Prix of Sporting shooting. Practise your gun mount and practise FITASC before you enter an event – it can be quite daunting if you are not prepared.

WHERE TO SHOOT IT

Many clubs run FITASC competitions and practice layouts. Checking the CPSA fixtures will list shooting grounds that hold them. Many grounds also offer FITASC practice, and coaching is available.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Maintaining concentration is a main challenge when shooting FITASC. Consistency is always tough as different grounds set different targets, so it is hard to be at the top all of the time. Training, fitness, and practising gun mount help both physically and mentally. Practising FITASC regularly helps keep skills sharp. Preparation for competition may include rest, adjusting fitness routines, and arriving early to acclimatise and assess the ground and terrain.

TOP 5 TIPS FOR FITASC

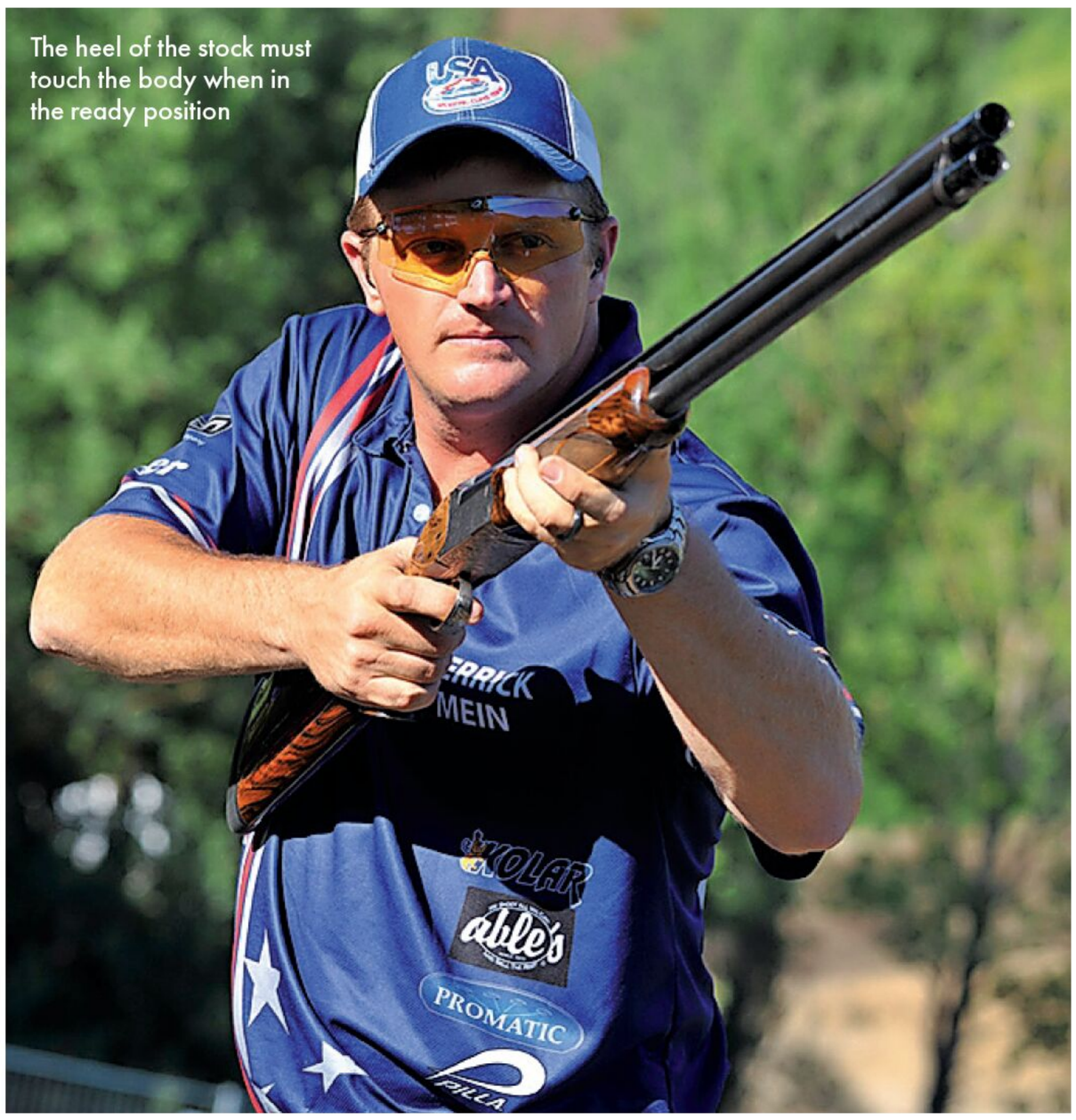
1. Make sure your stock fits you perfectly
2. Get a well-balanced gun
3. Practise a lot
4. Seek out a good coach to help you
5. Shoot plenty of different grounds to learn different target presentations

SPECIAL RULES

- Gun down — all types of stocks must be below the FITASC line on your vest while waiting in the ready position for the target.
- Don't mount the gun until you can physically see the target.
- Warning cards are issued for breaches of rules.
- No coaching is allowed on any of the parcours.
- The heel of the gun stock must touch the body when waiting for the target in the ready position. ■

BECKY'S CREDENTIALS

Becky is one of Britain's leading FITASC competitors. She has been crowned British FITASC Grand Prix Ladies Champion, UK FITASC Ladies Champion, English Open FITASC Ladies Champion and more. On the international stage, she has earned both World and European Ladies Team Gold medals, establishing herself as a consistent and accomplished performer in the discipline.



The heel of the stock must touch the body when in the ready position



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National Championship
National Shooting Complex, USA
2 200 shooter, 2 technicians

Olympic Games - OT & Skeet
National Shooting Center, France
2 technicians

European Championship - CS
Porto Hunter's Club, Portugal
+450 shooters, 2 technicians

World Championship - UT
Federal Stand Ychoux, France
600 shooters, 1 technician

2025

Euro Shooting Cash - Sporting
Sologne Shooting Club, France
700 shooters, 1 technician

World Championship - CS
Signes Shooting Club, France
800 shooters, 1 technician

World English Sporting Championship
E.J. Churchill, UK
2 000 shooters, 5 technicians

British Open English Sporting
Eaton Hall Shooting Ground, UK
1 800 shooters, 2 technicians

European Championship - OT & Skeet
National Shooting Center, France
1 technician

National Sporting Clays Championship
National Shooting Complex, USA
+2 500Shooters, 3 technicians

Grand Prix of Abu Dhabi - CS
Al Ain Shooting Club, UAE
300 shooters 2 technicians

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Eaton Hall Shooting Ground, UK

Euro Shooting Cash - Sporting
Sologne Shooting Club, France

World English Sporting Championship
National Shooting Complex, USA

World Championship - UT
Melbourne Gun Club, Australia

European Championship - CS
Sologne Shooting Club, France

World Sporting Championship
Vale das Pedras Shooting Club, Portugal

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COMPAK SPORTING

Top international shot Jamie Brightman explains the fundamentals of Compak Sporting, from rules and technique to competition mindset

PHOTOGRAPHY **DON BRUNT**



WHAT FORMAT DOES COMPAK SPORTING (CS) USE?

The discipline is overseen and owned by FITASC, whose representative in the UK is BICTSF (British International Clay Target Federation). Compak is shot in rounds of 25, in six-person squads. There are five firing points in a line, in cages measuring one metre by one metre, spaced between three and five metres apart. The sixth shooter waits behind peg 1 until the line rotates, after all five targets have been shot by each shooter. At that point the shooter who walks off peg 5 then goes to the waiting point behind peg 1.

All targets must pass through a box, measuring 25m deep and 40m wide, in front of the shooting line. Layouts may consist of all singles, three singles and one double (either on report or sim) or one single and two doubles (one on-report pair and one sim pair.) Each event usually has a mix of those formats. Each layout must utilise a minimum of six traps and may on occasion use eight or nine.

HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM ENGLISH SPORTING?

Although many of the targets seen will be similar to those encountered in English Sporting, it is quite different in the way that the birds are sequenced with the mixture of singles, on-report doubles and sim pairs. You only shoot a bird once from each peg so there's no repetition as there is in Sporting.

ARE THERE ANY SPECIAL RULES?

Cartridge loads must not exceed a maximum of 28g, as in Sporting and FITASC, though lighter loads are permitted. Unlike in English Sporting, where you might decide to shoot both barrels at one of the birds in a pair, in Compak you must fire one barrel at each of the two birds; if you do not then the second barrel is automatically a loss.

WHAT TYPES OF TARGETS CAN YOU EXPECT?

Any style and size of target, black or coloured, and all types of clay are used (mini, midi, standard, 70mm, battue and rabbit). In international events, usually 100% of the targets are orange/coloured. Black clays are a rarity when shooting Compak overseas.

Compak targets can be more 'technical' than many English Sporting targets, i.e. they are often doing more than just one thing, such as crossing plus curling away plus dropping.

HOW LONG DOES A ROUND OF CS TYPICALLY TAKE?

A layout of 25 targets usually takes 15 to 20 minutes. In the UK you usually go from one layout to the next and shoot straight through, so with waiting times at the next layout 100 targets can be shot in around one and a half hours. In international events you usually shoot 50 targets a day over four days with a break between each of the 25-target layouts.

WOULD YOU RECOMMEND A CERTAIN TYPE OF GUN AND/OR CARTRIDGE?

Any normal Sporting shotgun would suffice; ¼ and ½ choke would be more than adequate. I typically use a 32" Perazzi gun choked ½ and ½ with Gamebore cartridges with shot sizes of 7.5s and 8s.





WHAT SHOULD YOU BE SHOOTING TO IMPROVE YOUR CS TECHNIQUE?

Skeet is the best practice for Compak, and in fact for any of the Sporting disciplines as it helps you work on concentration. You also need the mental toughness to be able to put in a big score because in Compak it's usually won in the top 90%. Internationals are often won between 190 and 199 and have been won on 200 straight, though that's only ever been done a few times, twice by George Digweed. Sportrap is very similar and it can be a good way of training yourself to work out which way round to shoot the sim pairs.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR ADVICE TO SOMEONE WHO WANTS TO START COMPETITIVE CS SHOOTING?

Most local gun clubs have a Sportrap layout and this is a good way to start. Sadly, Compak isn't seen as often here as it is on the Continent, where it's hugely popular. The targets are fairly friendly and consequently most people who can shoot to a reasonable standard can put in a good score and go home happy that they broke plenty of clays, which is part of the reason it's so popular.

Don't be scared to try the GB selection shoots – everyone is very friendly and the events are well attended by a wide range of people and abilities. Also, don't pass up the chance to shoot Compak abroad if you are able to. The events on the Continent are fantastic – well organised, well run with a great atmosphere – and it makes for a fantastic weekend away.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES WHEN SHOOTING CS?

Concentration is key; you also need the ability to shoot high scores when under pressure. Also, learning to shoot the targets one by one, stand by stand, and to understand the sequences. For example, if I am on peg 2 and someone else is on peg 1 then the second bird of their on-report pair will be the first bird of my double. You need to read the targets and make the right decision as to which target to shoot first in the sim pairs.

IN THE LEAD-UP TO A COMPETITION, WHAT IS YOUR ROUTINE?

I try to work on my timing, usually by shooting a fair amount of Skeet. If we are going to a ground I have been to before then I visualise where it is, what time I am shooting, etc. It's important to get all the details in my head so nothing is a surprise and I don't feel rushed.

WHERE DO PEOPLE NORMALLY GO WRONG WITH CS? WHAT ARE THE COMMON PITFALLS AND HOW CAN THEY BE AVOIDED?

They think it's too easy. Because they see the big scores that are shot in the discipline, they fall into the trap of thinking, this must be easy. Consequently, they tend to take things for granted and not put the effort into concentrating fully on every target.

YOUR TOP CS TIPS?

- Concentrate... concentrate... concentrate... concentrate... concentrate!!
- Have a pre-shot routine, stick to it and use it on every bird.
- Shoot one target at a time: think of the target you are shooting, not the one you are going to shoot after it.
- Don't rush the sim pairs.
- Arrive in plenty of time to view the targets while the previous squad is still shooting.
- Watch the top shots if you get the chance and learn from what they do.
- Most importantly... enjoy!

I would like to see more Compak Sporting in the UK – it's a great discipline, a lot of fun and very enjoyable. Internationally, it's one of the most popular disciplines with huge entries at the major championships and, in my opinion, it will only continue to grow further. ■

JAMIE'S CREDENTIALS

Jamie Brightman is an experienced international Compak Sporting shooter and long-standing GB team member with over 20 years in the discipline. His achievements include a World Championship silver medal, European Cup victory, Belgian Compak Championship title, Pan African Championship win and a British Grand Prix silver. He was also part of the Great Britain team, alongside Cheryl Hall and George Digweed, to win a Team Gold medal in Compak in 2012.

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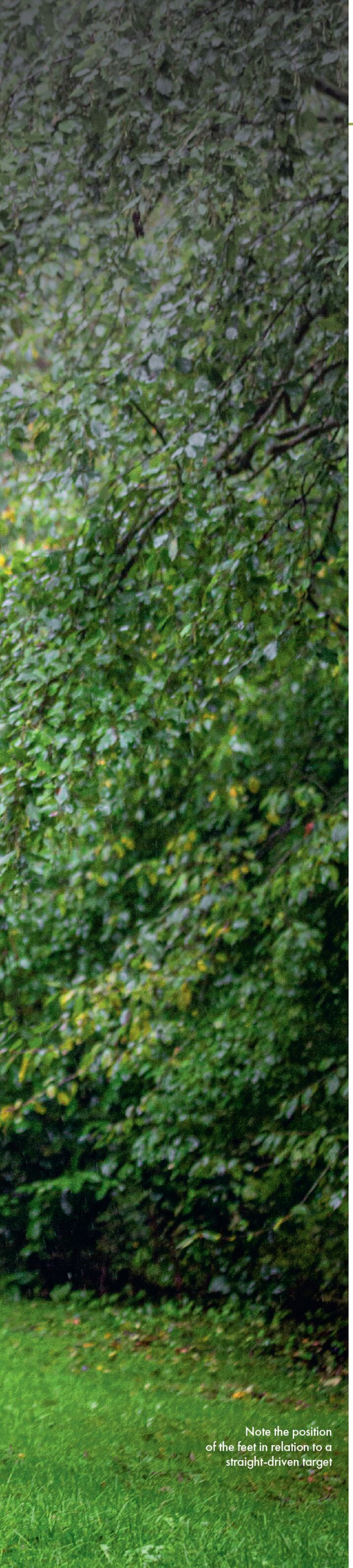


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SHOOTING INSTRUCTION

THE METHOD

Gary Turner reports on a high bird shooting lesson with **George Digweed MBE**



Note the position of the feet in relation to a straight-driven target

We were sat in the lodge at E. J. Churchill on a dreich Thursday afternoon, waiting with anticipation to meet George Digweed MBE, unquestionably one of the greatest Shots that has ever lived. A 28-time World Champion, 19-time European Champion, and winner of countless other global clay shooting competitions.

George is also regarded as one of the country's finest and most clinical game Shots, and a countryman first and foremost. His success in competition and in the field is solely attributable to his own, self-taught 'Method' – not forgetting a huge amount of practice and a large slice of commitment.

We made our way through the torrential rain down to the high tower to shoot some driven game targets, where I was in the enviable, and perhaps slightly nerve-wracking, position of learning from the man himself. However, if there is one chap I'd like on my shoulder telling me what I've done wrong, it would be George Digweed.

It's a fallacy to think that in order to shoot driven birds, one needs to do it off the front foot. Quite the contrary according to George, who firmly believes that the weight distribution should be 75 per cent in favour of the back foot. This allows the swing to stay on-line for a longer period, where with the weight on the front foot, one's back would stop the swing continuing and cause the shooter to roll off the line. In the majority of cases, missing is most likely caused by being offline, rather than ahead or behind the target.

With this in mind, George positions me completely side on to the driven target, with both feet pointing 90°, perpendicular to the target, shoulder-width apart, with balance loaded onto the back foot.

I'll admit it felt very alien to me having shot with a slightly open stance and off the front foot for some 35 years, and right on cue as I call for the bird, my hips push towards the target in anticipation.

"Where are you going?" asks George, without sending the bird.

We re-address the starting position, straighten up and call for the bird again. As the clay flies towards me the gun easily stays on the line of the bird; my hips at this point (not before I know the line) can push towards the target; and starting from behind the bird – one thing George and I do have in common – I come onto the front edge, squeeze the trigger and consistently record a kill.

It makes perfect sense despite making me feel like an absolute beginner and fighting years of muscle memory telling me to revert.

"The only time this method doesn't work, and when you should shoot off of the front foot, is shooting driven grouse or shooting down onto a target," says George. "As in this situation this is the answer to keep the shoulders square through the shot."

Another key point George talks about is what part of the bird to look at. "We all want to execute a clean, instant kill on a gamebird, which means the more head shots we can record the better. With that in mind, let's not look at the target as a whole, instead focus on the front of the clay, or when on the peg, the head of the bird."

It sounds simple, but quite a skill to master in the heat of the moment.

As we know, gamebirds are often curling, yawing like a passenger jet and very rarely, in fact almost never, in a dead straight line. If the bird is curling off to the left (for a right-handed Shot) and one keeps the square stance, the shooter will pull left and nearly fall over. If it curls to the right, the shooter's shoulders will roll off-line and pull the shot underneath the bird.

"When you get to your peg, think about where the birds will most often come from. Yes, we all know each bird is different but think on a little more. Is there a cross wind? Is there a tree they will avoid? Where are they flying to? What is the bird likely to be doing?" he explains.

"Arm yourself with all the information available to you and all these little learnings will help give you a better chance of reading the bird correctly. Initially, set up sideways to shoot the straight driven bird and if the bird does drift or curl to the left, the front foot opens slightly to keep the shoulders in



line with the bird. If it curls or drifts to the right, the back foot moves backwards to keep the shoulders square through the shot."

To employ George's method, the shooter must come through the bird from behind. Every bird or target that George shoots is addressed in this way. Pick up the line of the bird (feet and shoulders square on), come through from behind and as you pass the head (not the body) squeeze the trigger. Continue the swing and keep the gun speed going to build in any perceived lead.

I ask George about building in lead for longer birds.

"Why would you?" he replies. "If we are going to be consistent, a shooter must not build in lead for a target, but employ the key elements of the 'Method' and trust the hand-eye coordination that we have. A very small perceived lead at the muzzle makes a big difference at impact and is controlled by gun speed and swing."

All shots must be taken with both eyes open as this helps depth perception – something that's impossible to read with a non-master eye closed. George does acknowledge and understand the eye dominance issue faced by some, and in this case says it's paramount to cover only the pupil of the offending eye, rather than shutting it completely or covering with a blacked-out pair of glasses.

It's important that the dot to cover the pupil does just that, and is precisely positioned on the glasses to block the view past the bead when the gun is mounted and no more. This allows the peripheral vision to continue to have an effect on the overall picture and aid the hundreds of calculations you are quickly making.

I got the chance to put George's Method to the test on my next game day. With George's instruction fresh in my mind, back gunning, I assess all the likely situations as we wait on our peg.

Stood behind the left-hand end of the line it felt like I was in a hotspot, with a cover strip on top of a hill in front of me and a tall hedge running down to my right, within shot. Sure enough, redlegs started coming, drifting on a slight wind.

I kept my feet square to the birds, which I hope kept my shoulders the same, and took on some excellent partridge. Most birds curled or drifted slightly from left to right and I was able to employ George's Method with very pleasing results.

I'm sure lots of elements went out of the window as coveys of Frenchmen poured over me, and blind panic and muscle memory took over, and it's going to take a while for it to become natural or automatic.

But try it – you might be pleasantly surprised. ■

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SHOTGUN REVIEW

HYPERGUN

Ed Jackson explores the Beretta SL2, a technical tour de force that merges competition pedigree with the high-end craftsmanship of the Pietro Beretta Custom Shop

Spotted in the field: The Beretta SL2's distinctive aesthetics don't look out of place on game days

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In the competitive world of high-end clay shooting, Beretta has long been a dominant force, with the DT11 serving as the benchmark for shooters seeking silverware. However, with the release of the SL2, the Italian manufacturer has coined an entirely new category: the "Hypergun". The idea is to merge the competition pedigree of the DT11 and the high-end craftsmanship you usually only see in their Custom Shop. The result is "a machine designed to win", offering a bridge between Beretta's competition line and the exquisite hand-finishing of their "Pietro Beretta Selection" grade.

A FUTURISTIC SILHOUETTE

The first thing that strikes you about the SL2 is that it defies traditional shotgun aesthetics. It doesn't look like a standard walnut-and-steel over-and-under; instead, it possesses a modern, almost futuristic appearance. This is largely due to the Diamond-Like Carbon (DLC) coating. This industrial treatment, more commonly found in the high-performance automotive and racing sectors for its extreme resistance to chemicals and scratches, allows for a striking visual contrast on the receiver.

The finish provides a beautiful interplay between matte, anti-glare surfaces and mirror-polished accents. This is most evident on the hinge pins, which feature a high-polish finish that provides a striking contrast against the dark DLC receiver. Inverting the gun reveals further mirror-polished accents flanking a matte central section, which is neatly engraved with the Beretta logo, the 'SL2' designation, and a discreet 'Made in Italy' stamp. It is an exceptionally handsome arrangement. Ultimately, this is a functional choice as much as an aesthetic one, intended to withstand the rigours of a busy competition season while maintaining the appearance of a piece of art.

The receiver itself has undergone significant architectural changes. Beretta has slimmed down the top profile specifically to widen the shooter's peripheral view of the target. To ensure a clear sight picture regardless of the sun's position, the top surface features a laser-etched texture of tiny pyramids. This design choice is specifically engineered to scatter

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

NAME: Beretta SL2 Sport Adjustable

CALIBRE: 12-bore

BARREL LENGTH: 32" on test, 30" and 31" also available

WEIGHT: 8.5 lbs

LENGTH OF PULL: 14.5"

PRICE: From £18,900

CONTACT: GMK – www.gmk.co.uk





The trigger unit can be removed for safety or maintenance

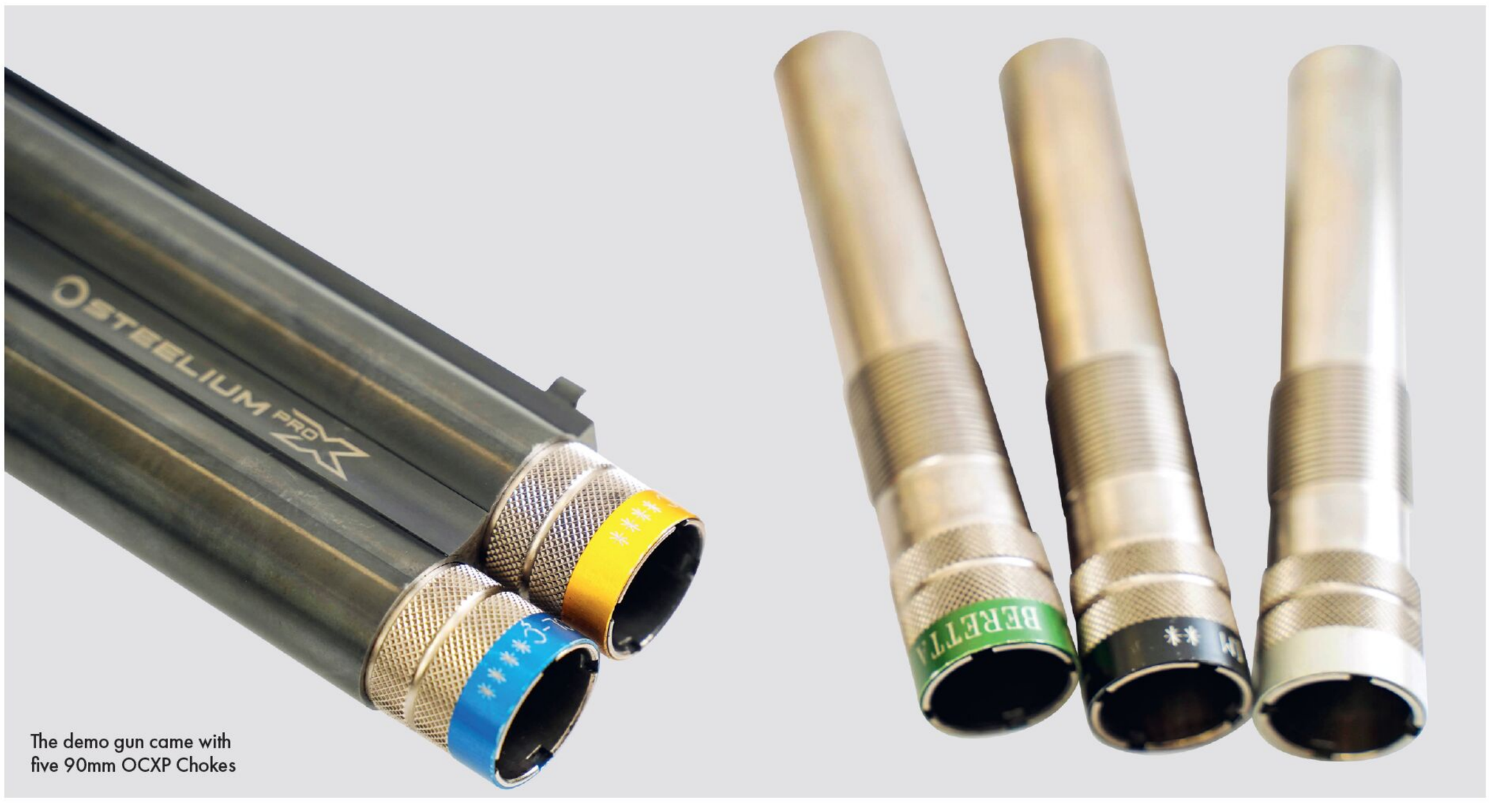
light and eliminate glare entirely, ensuring nothing distracts the eye from the clay.

In a high-end competition gun, ergonomics are as important as aesthetics. The safety catch incorporates an integral barrel selector; moving the slider forward reveals an 'F' to indicate the 'fire' position, while sliding it rearward engages the 'safe' mode. By shifting the selector to the right, two dots are exposed, allowing you to quickly verify and adjust the firing order.

INTERNAL ENGINEERING

The mechanical soul of the SL2 is a Boss-type locking system derived from the SO10 game gun. By positioning the locking lugs at the same height as the hinge pins, Beretta has successfully lowered the gun's centre of gravity. This translates to a remarkably neutral balance, with any perceived weight sitting perfectly between the firing and support hands. If you put two fingers under the hinge pin, the gun balances perfectly. In theory, and in practice, this results in a smoother swing and significantly reduced muzzle flip.

The SL2 features a detachable trigger unit, allowing for quick maintenance or enhanced security



The demo gun came with five 90mm OCXP Chokes

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during travel. The removal process is simple: with the gun closed, you push the safety forward beyond its normal 'fire' position until it clicks, then move the top lever across to break the gun. Another click signals that the unit is ready to be pulled free.

The trigger blade itself flares out like the tip of an oar and is notably wide in the centre. It features a smooth, polished finish and offers fore-and-aft adjustability to suit the shooter's reach. This sits within a stylish, bright-finished trigger guard that complements the gun's modern looks.

Crucially, the unit utilises leaf springs rather than coil springs. This is a hallmark of high-end triggers, preferred by competitive shooters for the consistent, crisp, and instantaneous break they provide. To complete the top-side aesthetics, Beretta offers a choice of top levers: solid, hollow, or a version featuring the iconic three-arrows logo.

BARREL REVOLUTION

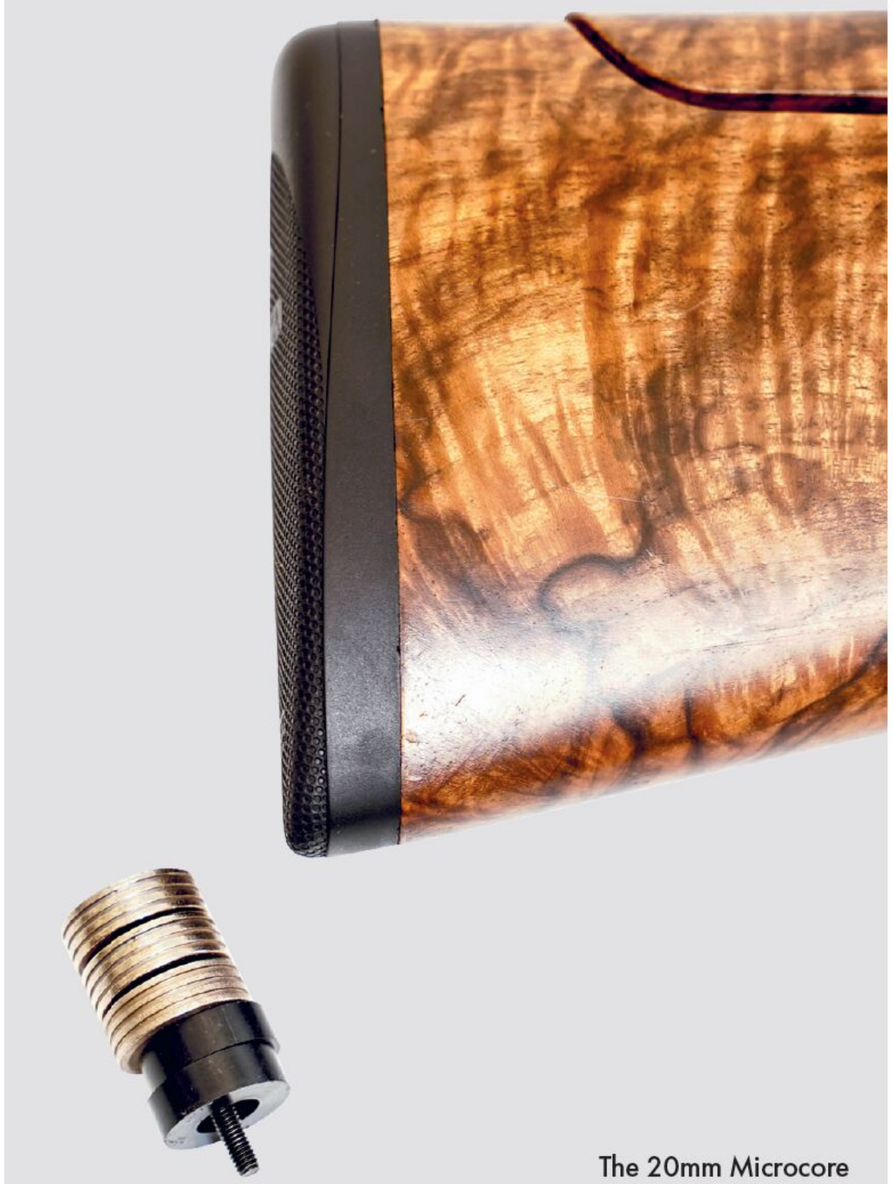
The sporting configuration on test is fitted with 12-bore, 32" barrels, though 30" and 31" options are available for those who prefer a shorter gun. The top rib is ventilated and features a progressive taper, starting at a broad 11mm at the receiver end and narrowing to 8mm at the muzzle to draw the eye naturally toward the target. Sight alignment is handled by a silver mid-bead and a white bead at the muzzle, while the mid-rib is also ventilated to aid cooling. While the barrels are crafted from Beretta's signature Steelium tri-alloy steel, the real breakthrough lies in the 'Pro X' internal geometry.

This isn't just marketing spiel, as Beretta has fundamentally redesigned the forcing cones with a smaller diameter compared to previous generations. According to Beretta's data, this profile improves terminal energy and manages recoil more effectively than even the Steelium Pro barrels found on the DT11. Furthermore, the 3" chambers provide essential future-proofing for high-performance steel loads, a vital consideration these days if you want to use the shotgun for a variety of tasks.

To complement this new profile, the SL2 introduces OCXP chokes. These are significantly longer than standard offerings, measuring 90mm, a 20mm increase over the standard DT11 chokes. This extra length allows for a more gradual constriction of the shot column, reducing pellet deformation and improving pattern density for both lead and steel shot. The demo gun arrived with five chokes, ranging from Cylinder to Full, with ¼ and ½ providing the ideal performance compromise for the targets I was shooting.

FURNITURE AND CUSTOMISATION

The SL2 comes dressed in Grade 4 walnut with hand-cut chequering, and the wood-to-metal fit is obviously incredibly good



The 20mm Microcore recoil pad and B-FAST System weights

The adjustable comb ensures you can achieve the desired eye-rib alignment





A lower centre of gravity improves handing and reduces felt recoil

throughout, as one would expect from a shotgun of this stature. The ergonomics are particularly well-considered; the rounded fore-end measures approximately 28 centimetres in length and is secured via a beautifully inset Anson-type latch, which proved precise and tight during operation. This fore-end features a specific finger groove sculpted into the wood, mirroring the flowing lines where the grip meets the receiver. It's a subtle touch that guides the leading hand into a consistent position, and I found the angled tip of the fore-end particularly comfortable in use. Moving back to the grip, there is a very slight palm swell on the right side which, along with the left, features high-quality diamond chequering to ensure a secure, repeatable hold.

At the rear, a 20mm Microcore recoil pad handles the recoil, while the B-Fast adjustable comb features two Allen keyholes on the right-hand side. You can adjust it laterally and you can adjust the height to achieve perfect eye-rib alignment. The system also allows for the addition of weights to alter the overall balance of the gun.

As a 'Pietro Beretta Selection' grade shotgun, the customisation options are extensive. Owners can commission a made-to-measure stock, upgrade to Grade 5 walnut, and select from various oil finishes, including natural, glossy, or Tru-Oil. The barrel surfaces and some components are hand-polished by gunsmiths rather than just machine-finished, ensuring the fit and finish are beyond reproach.

PERFORMANCE

Now, performance on clays is, of course, ultimately down to the shooter, but I was pleased to find that I tuned in to the SL2 remarkably quickly, which is always a promising sign when using a new shotgun.

While it can often be difficult to quantify the specific benefits of a new design during a short-term test, the SL2's revised action genuinely makes a difference. Because the centre of gravity has been kept so low, muzzle flip is virtually non-existent, and I never felt as though I was fighting the gun's 8.5lb mass; instead, it felt incredibly planted, effortlessly gliding from target to target with a neutral, obedient swing.

Beretta claims the Pro X barrel geometry manages energy more efficiently, and I am certainly inclined to believe them. When using 27g, No.7.5 cartridges, the recoil impulse was exceptionally mild and, crucially, entirely free of any residual vibration. It translates to a very clean, premium shooting experience. As a result, I would be happy to use 28g cartridges on a high-volume, simulated day, for example.

I did note that the action was quite stiff to open and close, but I won't be losing any sleep over that. Given that this is a demo gun that has likely seen a lot of cartridges, I consider this a reassuring sign of the action's inherent durability and tight tolerances.

VERDICT

The Beretta SL2 is a substantial shotgun in every sense. With a price tag sitting north of £18,000, it enters a rarefied atmosphere, going toe-to-toe with heavy hitters like the Krieghoff K-80 Parcour or a well-specced Perazzi High Tech. However, for that investment, you are receiving the absolute pinnacle of Beretta's current technology.

The gun arrives in a dedicated SL2 hard case with internal stitching that wouldn't look out of place in a Bentley, reinforcing the 'Selection' grade prestige. It is a rare blend of 'Custom Shop' hand-polished refinement and cutting-edge ballistic engineering.

If your budget allows for the best of both worlds, the SL2 is an absolutely lovely tool for the serious competitor. ■

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GAME'S OVER, BACK TO SCHOOL

Jasper Fellows explores all that is on offer at Mickley Hall Shooting School in Cheshire

The darkness of winter is fading and spring is almost here. It is time to prepare for brighter skies, warmer weather and the chance to spend more time outdoors doing the things we love, mostly shooting.

The game seasons may have closed, but a bright summer of clay competitions lies ahead. Now is the time to get your clay eye in with a trip back to school.

Thankfully, Mickley Hall is not the kind of school that leaves lingering nightmares of algebra and missed deadlines. It is one where world-beating top Shots teach clay smashing mastery and help shooters of all stripes as they aim to better themselves on the stands.

In fact, over the past 12 months or so, the estate has been on

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The shop is a great place to stock up on cartridges and accessories

its own journey of self-improvement. "2025 was a landmark year for Mickley Hall," says Ashleigh Tyson, who welcomes me to the school. "Our gunroom doubled in size, our clay and cartridge store opened its doors, we expanded our café and introduced a brand-new field target course and long-range plinking area for our visiting airgun fans.

"The improvements are continuing this year too, with construction almost complete on our new corporate layouts, which will allow us to host bigger and better events than ever." Once fully constructed, these new layouts will sit alongside Mickley Hall's Sporting course, where practising shooters are welcome to take in the targets at their own pace.

"Our Plug & Play course features 11 stands, with four different targets on each," explains Ashleigh. "Brody Woollard has been setting the traps for two years at Mickley hall, has been competing for more than 10, and was British Open Sporting Champion in 2021.

"He preps the course to a world-class level, while still ensuring there are plenty of accessible targets for newer shooters. To keep things fresh, he re-sets everything at least once a month, so there is always something new to tackle."



Airgun ranges for all ages and abilities

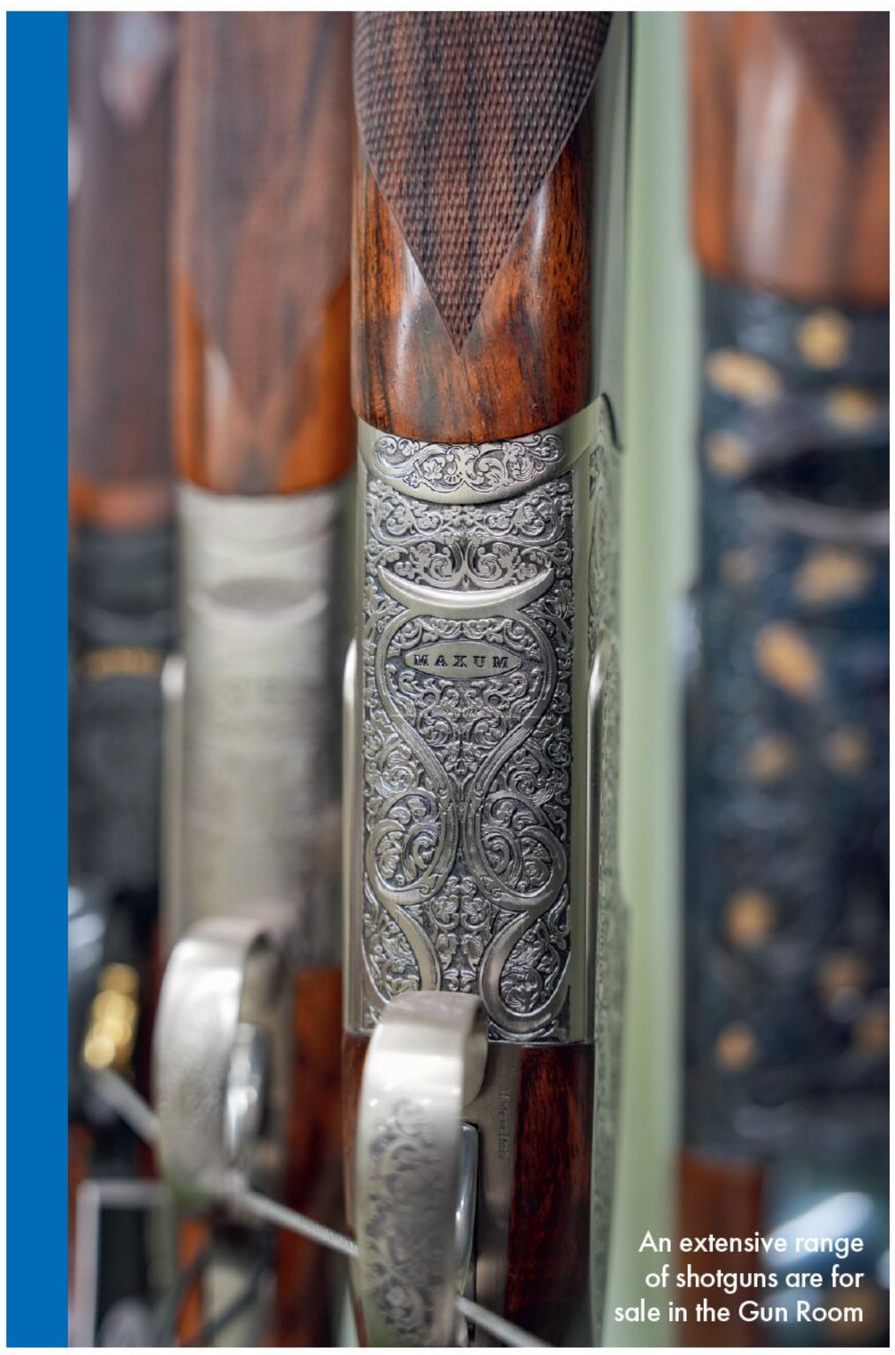
Brody pulls double duty as one of the school's chief instructors, alongside fellow England-capped coaches, father-son duo John and Scott Barnett.

"It's important for us to have instructors who are not just teachers, but accomplished competitive shooters in their own right," explains Ashleigh. "Alongside his BO Sporting Championship win, Brody also won British and English Open Junior and Colt Championship titles and Junior World Cup titles, so is very experienced with both senior and youth shooting.

"John, meanwhile, has represented England across multiple disciplines, including Double Trap, DTL and Sporting. He has a real wealth of knowledge of the national and international circuits. Similarly, Scott has represented the nation in DTL, Double Trap, UT and Sporting, and has claimed titles across the Benelli Open, White Gold and Perazzi Master Championships."

While facing this power trio during a competition would be intimidating, Mickley Hall's uniquely structured lesson packages help ensure students progress at a level that is





An extensive range of shotguns are for sale in the Gun Room

comfortable for them. “We offer three levels of lessons, Standard, Senior Instructor and Head Instructor,” continues Ashleigh. “All of our instructors are fully qualified, and a standard lesson would be suitable for anyone wanting to learn. But for those hoping to really excel, our Senior and Head Instructors can draw on their own experiences as podium-topping competitive shooters and target setters to plan sessions that work effectively towards a student’s goals.”

If you are really looking to boost your clay-breaking potential, and fast, there is one additional pathway open to the rising shooting star, Brody’s Mini Masterclasses. “Each Mini Masterclass is limited to four participants and runs for two hours, with unlimited clays included,” Ashleigh explains. “The small-group format allows participants to learn from one another and share insights, all while receiving tailored tuition from Brody. These sessions are ideal for those looking to refine technique and take their shooting to the next level.”

Mastery may seem a rather lofty goal for many, especially for newer shooters simply looking to crack a few clays but bewildered by the joys of shotgun certificate applications. For those starting their journey, Mickley Hall has designed a course to set participants on the pathway to shooting and application success.

“Our Licence Application Course includes five lessons, each with 50 clays included, and is designed to introduce shooters to clay shooting, gun safety and the law. Throughout the course, participants will learn how to hit simple targets while mastering the essential safety principles of owning a shotgun.

“At the end of the course, if participants are assessed as competent, they will receive a certificate of completion. This certificate can then be submitted with a shotgun certificate

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Rows of clothes for clay and game shooters

application as proof of training and ability."

When your certificate is finally approved, Mickley Hall is right there to help with the next, more exciting step of your clay shooting journey. "The Mickley Hall Gun Room stocks an extensive range of new and second-hand shotguns, rifles and airguns from brands including Beretta, Caesar Guerini, Krieghoff, Zoli and more," says Ashleigh.

"Our senior and Head Instructors have extensive experience in assessing gun fit and are always happy to help guide customers through the process of fine-tuning fit. Their expertise can help ensure that a client's new shotgun will complement their shooting style."



WHO'S WHO?

Father-and-son duo John and Scott Barnett are the founders and head instructors. They are assisted in their teaching duties by multi-championship title-holder Brody Woollard. Brody also sets the targets alongside Shaun and Phil. In the clubhouse, Ashleigh and Nicky welcome visitors at the front desk, while Alex offers expert advice in the gun room.

WHAT'S ON OFFER

English Sporting, Compak, Sportrap, Super Sporting and Make a Break. Plus, two plinking ranges, a field target range and 35 HFT stands.

WHEN IS IT OPEN?

Tuesday-Saturday, 10am-5pm
April-Sep: Wednesday-Thursday, 10am-7pm

WHERE IS IT?

Mickley Hall Shooting School, Broomhall, Nantwich, Cheshire, CW5 8AJ

CONTACT

Tel: 0800 772 0058
Web: mickleyhall.co.uk
Email: admin@mickleyhall.com

TUITION

Certificate holders can enjoy lessons with one of Mickley Hall's Senior Instructors from £55, with premium Head Instructor lessons starting from £65. Beginners can get started with an all-inclusive experience from £55, with Juniors benefiting from discounted rates.

MEMBERSHIP

Standard membership costs £40 with benefits including preferential rates on clays and invitations to exclusive members' events. Premium membership costs £80 and offers additional benefits, including reduced entrance fees for Mickley Hall's Summer and Winter Series, discounted entry to weekday registered shoots, an annual half-price gun-fit session, a Mickley Hall cap and a gun slip.

Mickley Hall's instructors can guide a new shooter from first clay, through to shotgun ownership, then out onto the stands to master the art before diving into the competitive scene.

"We pride ourselves on offering an exceptional shooting experience to shooters at all levels of ability," ends Ashleigh, "and all for the best value for money possible." ■

THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING AWARDS 26

THE RESULTS

The definitive list of this year's awards victors – the brands and personalities chosen by readers and members of the shooting public, as the very best in the business

The Great British Shooting Awards returned this year to honour the very best in the industry, from pioneering manufacturers to the dedicated individuals who form the backbone of our rural heritage. Eschewing a formal sit-down ceremony, the 2026 awards took on a more dynamic format, with winners being presented with their accolades directly on their stands on Friday 13 February during the British Shooting Show at the NEC in Birmingham. This personal approach allowed the winners to celebrate their success in the heart of the action, surrounded by the very products and people that earned them the titles.

This year's event, which was originally launched in 2018, was particularly historic, attracting more public votes than ever before. The sheer volume of participation serves as a powerful testament to the vitality of our sport and the high esteem in which these nominees are held. In an era where the shooting industry faces constant scrutiny, these awards provide a vital platform to showcase the gold standard of craftsmanship and conservation. From the latest advancements in lead-free ammunition to the tireless work of gamekeepers and gundog trainers, the winners represent the pinnacle of excellence. The definitive list of this year's victors – the brands and personalities chosen as the very best in the business.



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1



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10



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1. RANGEFINDER OF THE YEAR: ELEMENT OPTICS TITAN 3K

The Element Optics Titan 3K has set a new benchmark for precision. Lauded for its rapid target acquisition and crystal-clear optics, this high-performance rangefinder has become an indispensable tool for long-range marksmen and deerstalkers who demand absolute accuracy and reliability in the varied and often challenging British weather conditions.

"We are delighted to have won Rangefinder of the Year. We're extremely pleased with the Titan 3K that we've developed for the long-range shooting community. It reliably measures distances out to 3,000m and features an integrated ballistic chip with Bluetooth connectivity, so you can upload your ballistic profiles beforehand and use it in the field without needing your phone."

2. RETAILER OF THE YEAR: SPORTSMAN GUN CENTRE

A titan of the UK trade, the Sportsman Gun Centre continues to lead the way with its unparalleled selection and expertise. Their commitment to customer service and their ability to provide a comprehensive range of equipment across multiple branches has cemented their reputation as the nation's premier destination.

"It's a fantastic honour to win Retailer of the Year again this year. We'd like to sincerely thank everyone who voted for us and continues to support what we do. We also couldn't achieve this without the incredible brands we're proud to work with – Benelli, ATA, Kofs, Perazzi, FX, CZ, and many more. We're grateful to represent such outstanding products, and thank you again for your support."

3. AIRGUN OF THE YEAR: FX DRS CLASSIC

The FX DRS Classic masterfully combines traditional aesthetics with cutting-edge PCP technology. Its streamlined, wrap-around air cylinder design gives it the silhouette of a classic sporting rifle, a feature that has clearly resonated with shooters who appreciate heritage styling paired with world-class Swedish precision and adjustability.

"We're incredibly grateful to have won this year's award with the FX DRS Classic. The DRS is a really exciting rifle for the UK market and has been exceptionally well received. It offers an accessible, tactical look and feel while remaining a robust and dependable platform. We're absolutely delighted to see it recognised as Airgun of the Year."

4. CLAY SHOTGUN OF THE YEAR: PERAZZI HIGH TECH SPORTER

Perazzi's High Tech Sporter remains the choice of champions on the competitive circuit. Engineered for perfect balance and exceptional durability, this shotgun offers the reliability and finesse required to compete at the highest levels, proving once again why the Perazzi name is synonymous with victory on the world stage.

"We are extremely happy to have won this award. The Perazzi Hi-Tech is an outstanding gun, and like all Perazzi models, it represents the very highest standards of craftsmanship and performance. We are incredibly proud of it. Thank you very much."

5. GAME SHOTGUN OF THE YEAR: BROWNING 825 GAME PRESTIGE

The Browning 825 Game Prestige is a masterclass in both elegance and mechanical functionality. Designed specifically for the discerning game shot, it offers superb handling and exquisite finishing, ensuring it performs as beautifully as it looks when tackling high birds or walking-up over dogs on a crisp winter morning.

"Thank you very much for this award – we are extremely proud to receive it and truly appreciate the support. We launched the Browning 825 Game Prestige last year, and it has been a tremendous success in the UK market. We're delighted to see it recognised in this way."

6. CLAY CARTRIDGE OF THE YEAR: ELEY HAWK SUPERB

Eley Hawk Superb cartridges have lived up to their name by delivering incredibly consistent patterns and manageable recoil. Trusted by clay shooters across the country, these cartridges are engineered to provide the confidence needed to break targets reliably, whether shooting at a local club or a national championship.

"Thank you so much for this award – we're absolutely delighted. The Eley Superb is a fantastic cartridge, perfectly suited to all clay disciplines and equally impressive in the field."

7. GAME CARTRIDGE OF THE YEAR: FIOCCHI PIGEON BIO

Fiocchi's Pigeon BIO reflects the industry's proactive shift toward sustainable performance. By combining effective knockdown power with environmentally conscious, biodegradable components, Fiocchi has provided game shooters with a reliable, high-performance alternative that respects the environment without compromising on the traditional standards expected in the field.

"We truly appreciate all the loyal Fiocchi shooters who voted for us as Game Cartridge of the Year. We'd also like to thank our UK production and sales team for the hard work and dedication that have made this product what it is today. We're especially excited about the cartridge's biodegradable wad, which delivers the same performance and consistency as a traditional plastic wad, while offering the added benefit of being environmentally responsible."

8. RIFLE OF THE YEAR: TIKKA T3X ACE TARGET

The Tikka T3X Ace Target continues the brand's legacy of exceptional out-of-the-box accuracy. Specifically tailored for the growing number of precision target shooters, its ergonomic design, modularity, and famously smooth action make it one of the most versatile and dependable rifles currently available on the UK market.

"We'd like to sincerely thank everyone who voted and support us. The Tikka T3 Ace Target has firmly established Tikka in the target shooting arena, and we look forward to continuing to grow and innovate in this market."

9. RIFLE AMMUNITION OF THE YEAR: HORNADY INTERNATIONAL ECX

Hornady's International ECX line has redefined expectations for non-lead rifle ammunition. Designed for deep penetration and high weight retention on European game, it offers stalkers a reliable and ethical choice. It ensures that Hornady remains at the forefront of the global transition toward sustainable ammunition innovation.

"We're absolutely delighted to have won Rifle Ammunition of the Year again. The Hornady International ECX is an outstanding product, and the continued expansion of Hornady's industry-leading non-toxic ammunition range is truly setting the standard. This award is a real testament to that innovation and performance."

10. INNOVATIVE PRODUCT OF THE YEAR: BERETTA

Beretta's latest advancements have earned them the title of most innovative. By consistently pushing the boundaries of firearm technology – integrating modern materials with centuries of gunmaking wisdom – they continue to introduce features that enhance the shooting experience, ensuring their place as a perennial leader in the global sporting arms industry.

"We're incredibly honoured to have received this award. Winning the Innovative Product Award is especially meaningful, because that is exactly what we set out to achieve with the Beretta SL2 Stellium Pro X. Improving on a platform as respected as the DT11 was no easy task, but we're proud to have created something that delivers exceptional performance as well as outstanding beauty."

11. BINOCULAR OF THE YEAR: SWAROVSKI NL PURE

The Swarovski NL Pure binoculars offer an immersive viewing experience that is simply unparalleled. With an incredibly wide field of view and revolutionary ergonomic design, they allow observers to spot movement with ease, making them the gold standard for UK deerstalkers and professional wildlife enthusiasts alike.

"Thank you very much for presenting us with the Binocular of the Year award. The Swarovski NL Pure has been an extremely popular model with our customers, thanks to its exceptionally wide field of view and outstanding optical quality, enhanced by our Swarovision technology. It's a real pleasure to see this product recognised as Binocular of the Year for 2026."

12. RIFLESCOPE OF THE YEAR: SWAROVSKI Z8I+

The Swarovski Z8i+ sets a new benchmark for optical clarity. Its expansive field of view and intuitive illuminated reticle make it a premier choice for various hunting scenarios, from tight woodland stalking to open hill shooting, providing the ultimate confidence when every second and every shot counts.

"We're absolutely delighted to receive the award for Riflescope of the Year 2026. The Z8i+, and the Z8i family as a whole, has long been the benchmark for premium optical performance. With the Z8i+, the 5mm larger ocular lens has made a significant difference and truly feels like a game changer. Combined with the updated zoom ring and throw lever, it enhances what was already an outstanding model even further. We're really pleased to receive this recognition."

13. THERMAL SCOPE OF THE YEAR: HIKMICRO STELLAR SQ50L

The Hikmicro Stellar SQ50L has revolutionised night shooting by housing advanced thermal capabilities within a traditional 30mm scope tube. It provides incredibly detailed heat signatures, allowing for precise identification in complete darkness while maintaining the familiar mounting height and feel of a standard daylight optic.

14. THERMAL HANDHELD OF THE YEAR: HIKMICRO LYNX LH25

The Hikmicro Lynx LH25 is a compact powerhouse for spotting and surveillance. Its portability and high-resolution thermal imaging make it an essential tool for gamekeepers and stalkers who need to scan large areas quickly and efficiently without the burden of carrying heavy or cumbersome equipment.

15. NIGHT VISION OPTIC OF THE YEAR: HIKMICRO ALPEX 4K

The Hikmicro Alpex 4K delivers stunning clarity in low-light conditions. By bridging the gap between day and night optics with its ultra-high-definition 4K resolution, it offers shooters a seamless transition and a vivid digital image that significantly enhances both accuracy and safety after the sun goes down.

"As the official sponsor of the GBSS Awards, HIKMICRO is truly honoured to have supported an event that celebrates innovation, craftsmanship and excellence within the UK shooting industry.

"To be recognised as the winner of three awards this year is a moment of great pride for our entire team. It affirms the strength of our technology, the trust placed in our brand by professionals and enthusiasts alike, and our long-term commitment to advancing thermal and digital optics for hunters across the UK and Europe.

"We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the organisers for delivering such a professional and influential platform, and also to express our heartfelt thanks to our users and partners for their continued support. Your trust, feedback and real-world experience are what inspire us to innovate and improve every year. We remain committed to standing alongside the shooting community and empowering every hunter to move forward with confidence – because at HIKMICRO, we truly believe: Trust Your Journey."

16. THERMAL ATTACHMENT OF THE YEAR: NOCPIX MATE ULTRA S60R

Nocpix's MATE Ultra S60R offers incredible versatility for shooters looking to convert their existing day optics into thermal systems. Its high-resolution sensor and easy integration make it a top choice for those who demand high-end thermal performance without the need to dedicate a specific rifle to night work.

"We are incredibly proud to have received the award for Best Thermal Add-On Unit for the Mate S60R. We're absolutely delighted to achieve this recognition, and it's a real testament to the product and the team behind it."

17. FOOTWEAR AND APPAREL OF THE YEAR: HÄRKILA

In a rare double victory, Härkila has swept both the Footwear and Apparel categories. Renowned for their rugged durability and advanced weather-resistant technology, Härkila products remain the definitive choice for professionals and enthusiasts who require gear that can withstand the most punishing conditions the British Isles can offer.

"We're delighted to take home two awards at the British Shooting Show – Best Footwear and Best Shooting Apparel. It's a real testament to Härkila's commitment to quality gear for hunters. Thank you very much."

18. GUNDOG TRAINER OF THE YEAR: BEN RANDALL

Ben Randall's dedication to gundog excellence is legendary within the field. His refined training methods have helped countless handlers develop highly skilled and disciplined companions. He is a truly deserving winner, recognised for his outstanding contribution to the standard of working dogs across the country.

"Feeling incredibly grateful and humbled to be voted Gundog Trainer of the Year once again. This award means so much because it was supported organically by clients, the BG Community, friends, and people worldwide. The long days, late nights, phone calls, messages, and time spent helping people train their dogs, whether in person or online, can be exhausting at times, but moments like this remind me why I do it. Thank you to my family and everyone who voted and continues to support us – it genuinely means a great deal."

19. GAMEKEEPER OF THE YEAR: SCOTT MCKENZIE

Scott McKenzie has been recognised for his tireless work and stewardship. His commitment to habitat management and the welfare of his quarry exemplifies the vital role that keepers play in the conservation and health of the British countryside, ensuring our landscapes remain rich in biodiversity.

"To be announced Gamekeeper of the Year for the fourth time was fantastic. A huge thank you to all that took the time to vote for me and a big shout out to the guys behind the British Shooting Show, it's a great event that is a huge support to the industry."

20. MEDIA CONTRIBUTOR OF THE YEAR: CONOR O'GORMAN

Conor O'Gorman has been awarded for his exceptional work in communicating the values and challenges of the shooting community, particularly as a columnist in *Sporting Gun*. Through his insightful contributions, he has helped represent the

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11
THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING AWARDS 26
HIKMICRO
Binocular of the Year
Swarovski NL Pure 10×52
Presented by
time well spent


12
SWAROVSKI OPTIK


13, 14 & 15
HIKMICRO
ELITE
ROLLINGER


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THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING AWARDS 26
HIKMICRO
Thermal Attachment of the Year
Nocpix MATE Ultra S60R Front-Mounted Thermal
Nocpix


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Harkila
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THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING AWARDS 26
HIKMICRO
Harkila
Pro Hunter GTX
Legacy Jacket


18
THE GREAT BRITISH SHOOTING SHOW
BOLLINGER


19
Scott McKenzie
BOLLINGER


20
BASC









interests of shooters and conservationists to a wider audience with remarkable clarity, balance, and passion.

"The sporting press is inspiring a united fight for the future of shooting, and I am proud to be able to play a part in that movement. Thank you to everyone who voted for me."

21. PROFESSIONAL DEERSTALKER OF THE YEAR: PAUL CHILDERLEY

Paul Childerley is a pre-eminent figure in the stalking world, respected for his immense expertise and commitment to deer management. His professional approach and educational efforts via various media platforms have made a significant impact on the community, earning him this year's well-deserved top honours.

22. OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO CONSERVATION: NIALL ROWANTREE

Niall Rowantree's lifelong dedication to conservation has left an indelible legacy. His work in managing complex landscapes highlights the positive environmental impact of well-managed shooting estates, making him a true champion for the natural world and a guardian of our wild spaces.

"I would like to say that I'm humbled and delighted to receive the award for an outstanding contribution to conservation. I've been fortunate to be surrounded by wildlife from childhood and firmly believe that country people and the shooting community in particular have a huge role to play in reconnecting our nation with its countryside and demonstrating sustainable living through the wise use of natural resources."

23. CLAY GROUND OF THE YEAR: EATON HALL

Eaton Hall has been recognised as the UK's premier clay shooting venue. With its diverse range of targets and world-class facilities, it offers an exceptional experience for both novice and experienced shots, setting a high standard for hospitality and target presentation nationwide.

"This recognition is a testament to the dedication and hard work of our entire team at Eaton Hall. We strive to offer an exceptional experience for every guest, and this award inspires us to continue raising the bar. Thank you to everyone who voted for us – it means the world."

24. LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT: JOHN AND ANNIE ALLISON

The Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to John and Annie Allison in recognition of their remarkable leadership and enduring contribution as owners of the British Shooting Show, whose passion and commitment have left a lasting legacy in the shooting community.

"We're truly honoured to receive this award. The British Shooting Show has been our passion, and seeing the shooting community thrive has been incredibly rewarding. As we step back this year, we're grateful for the support and memories created together." ■

"In an era where the shooting industry faces constant scrutiny, these awards provide a vital platform to showcase the gold standard of craftsmanship and conservation."

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*Terms apply

FEBRUARY COMPETITION PRIZE WINNER: Crossword: Derek Booth from Hucknall

GUNDOG FIRST AID IN THE FIELD



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WHY EVERY SPORTING GUN SHOULD CARRY A GUNDOG FIRST AID KIT

Whether you are training young dogs in early season cover, picking-up on a driven day or roost shooting pigeons, gundogs work in environments that are unpredictable, physical and often unforgiving. Cuts, punctures and minor trauma are not a question of if, but when. While most injuries are not life-threatening, the actions taken in the first few minutes can make a decisive difference to outcome, recovery time and long-term soundness.

Carrying a canine first aid kit is no longer seen as optional but essential for any gundog owner. It allows you to stabilise an injury, reduce infection risk and prevent a minor issue becoming a costly veterinary problem, or worse. More importantly, it gives you the confidence to act calmly and effectively when something does go wrong.

COMMON INJURIES IN WORKING GUNDOGS

The majority of field injuries occur when dogs are doing exactly what they are bred to do. Pushing hard through bramble and hedgerows, negotiating wire fences, working around fallen timber or powering into cover crops at speed. Thorns embedded in skin, puncture wounds from sticks, pad lacerations and barbed wire tears are all regularly seen during the season.

A dog hunting through thick hedgerow may emerge with a small puncture wound that looks insignificant at first glance. Left untreated, that wound can seal over, trapping contamination inside and leading to abscess formation days later. Similarly, a dog jumping a fence may clip old wire, resulting in a tear that is not immediately obvious under a wet or muddy coat.

Eye injuries are another frequent concern, particularly when dogs are hunting in woodland or rough cover. A scratched cornea from a thorn or stick may present as excessive blinking, watering or sensitivity to light. Immediate flushing can reduce further damage while you seek veterinary care.

Water-related incidents also feature heavily during the season. Dogs retrieving from cold water may inhale water or become rapidly chilled. Hypothermia and shock are genuine risks, even on days that feel relatively mild to the Gun.



Eye injuries are a year-round concern

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMMEDIATE FIRST AID

First aid does not replace veterinary treatment. Its purpose is to stabilise, protect and prevent deterioration until professional care is available. In certain minor cases, correct early management means a dog could continue working safely once treated and recovered, rather than being withdrawn for the rest of the day.

Bleeding wounds should be managed with direct pressure using clean dressings or bandages. If blood soaks through, further layers should be added without removing the original dressing, maintaining pressure throughout. Once bleeding is controlled, wounds should be gently cleaned to remove dirt and debris. Infection is the greatest enemy of field wounds, particularly in warm, wet conditions.

Shock is an often-overlooked risk following trauma, dog fights or road incidents. Dogs may appear quiet, cold or unresponsive. Keeping the dog warm with towels or a foil blanket while minimising movement can be critical while travelling to a vet.

Picture a young dog hunting through bramble on a training walk. It returns blinking repeatedly, clearly uncomfortable. Immediate eye irrigation with sterile solution, followed by protection and prompt veterinary attention, may prevent long-term damage.

These are not dramatic emergencies, but they are situations where preparation matters. Without first aid equipment, handlers are often forced to improvise, increasing stress for both dog and owner.

WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE GUNDOG FIRST AID KIT?

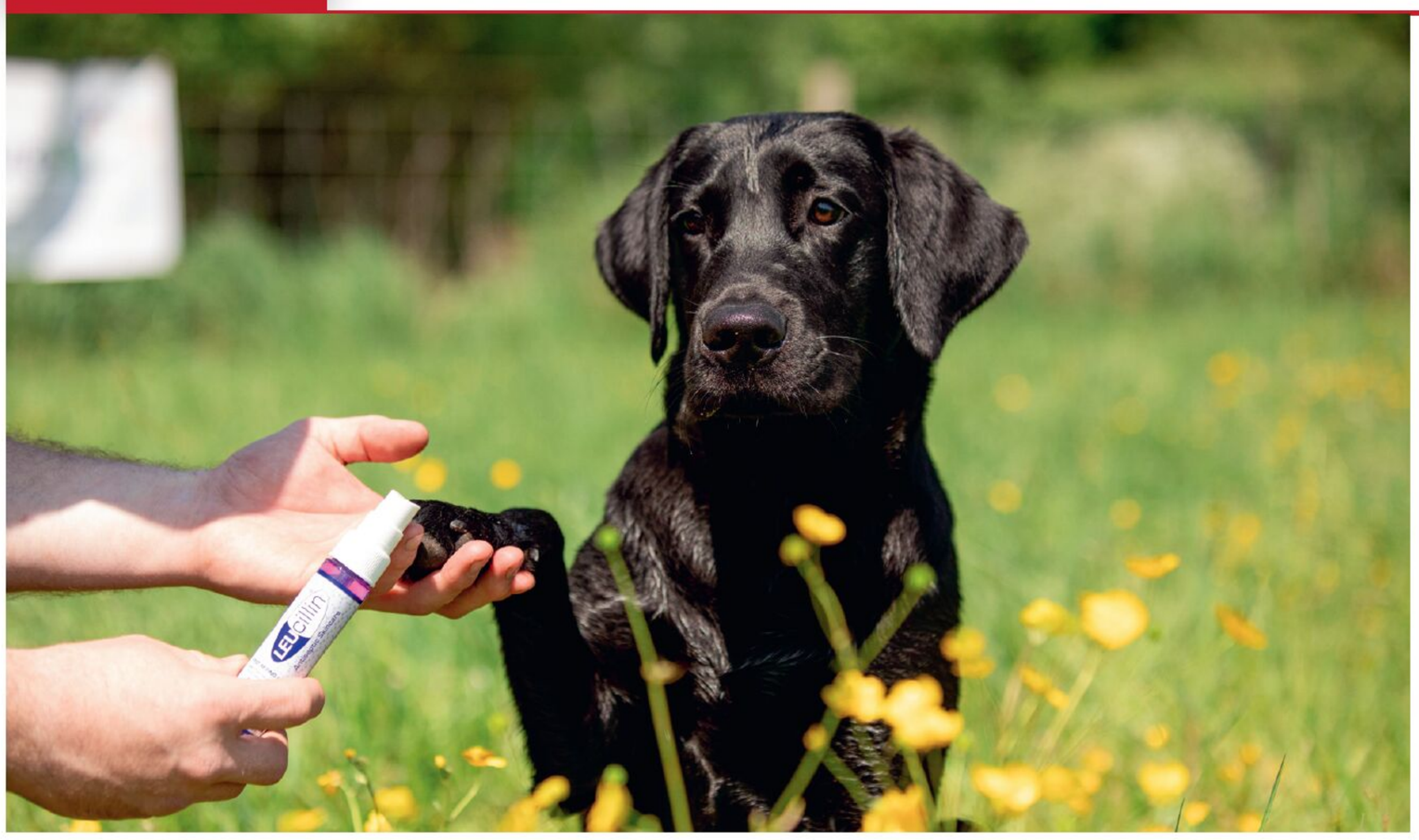
A good kit focuses on versatility, safety and ease of use. It should allow you to clean wounds, manage bleeding, protect injuries and maintain body temperature. It should also be compact enough to live permanently in the car or game bag, so it is always available.

Key components include sterile dressings, bandages, saline solution, gloves, scissors, tweezers, tick removers and thermal protection such as foil blankets. Eye care supplies are particularly valuable for dogs working in cover. Clear instructions are equally important, ensuring items are used correctly under pressure.

Veterinary guidance stresses that certain products should be avoided if not used properly. Over-tight bandaging or inappropriate splinting can do more harm than good. First aid is about doing the right amount, not doing everything.

INFECTION CONTROL AND WOUND CARE IN THE FIELD

Field wounds are rarely clean. Mud, plant material and bacteria are easily introduced, particularly in wet conditions. Effective cleansing



Leucillin provide multiple solutions to carry in your dog's first aid kit

is the cornerstone of good first aid. Flushing wounds thoroughly helps remove contamination before it becomes embedded.

Modern wound care focuses on creating an environment that supports healing rather than simply drying the area out. Gentle cleansing and protection are preferable to harsh chemicals that may delay tissue repair. Consistency matters too. A wound cleaned promptly in the field and monitored over the following days is far less likely to develop complications.

TRAINING DAYS MATTER TOO

It is easy to associate first aid with shoot days, but many injuries occur during informal training sessions. Young dogs learning to hunt often move awkwardly, misjudge obstacles or push too hard. Because training days are more relaxed, first aid kits are often left behind. That is a mistake.

Training injuries can be just as significant, and early intervention may prevent bad experiences that knock a young dog's confidence. A calm response from the handler, supported by practical first aid, reinforces trust and keeps training positive.

RESPONSIBILITY BEYOND THE PEG

Carrying a first aid kit is not only about protecting your own dog. On any shoot day, there are multiple dogs working. If an incident occurs, the nearest handler with the right equipment may make the difference. Prepared Guns are an asset to the whole team.

As expectations around animal welfare continue to rise, demonstrating preparedness and competence is increasingly important for the future of shooting. Good first aid practice reflects well on the sport as a whole.

KEY FIRST AID PRODUCTS FOR THE SHOOTING FIELD

- **Wound cleansing solution**
  Used to flush cuts, punctures and grazes caused by thorns, sticks or wire before dressing.
- **Sterile dressings and bandages**
  Essential for controlling bleeding, protecting wounds and preventing contamination.
- **Eye irrigation solution**
  Vital for flushing eyes following contact with thorns, dust or plant material.
- **Tick removers and tweezers**
  Allow safe removal of ticks and embedded debris before infection develops.
- **Foil blanket and towels**
  Used to manage shock, hypothermia or post-water retrieval incidents.
- **Protective gloves and blunt-ended scissors**
  Improve hygiene and safety when administering first aid in the field.
- **Antimicrobial wound care products**
  Designed to reduce bacterial load while supporting natural healing.

A well-stocked first aid kit should live permanently in your vehicle or kit bag and be checked regularly throughout the season. ■

LEUCILLIN – FIRST AID ESSENTIALS FOR WORKING GUNDOGS - SPONSORED

When injuries happen in the field, fast, effective infection control is critical. Leucillin has become a trusted part of many gundog handlers' first aid kits because it is tough on bacteria, yet safe to use on sensitive areas.

Leucillin Antiseptic Skin Care Solution
Ideal for flushing and cleaning cuts, puncture wounds and grazes caused by thorns, sticks or barbed wire. It can be applied directly into open wounds to reduce bacterial contamination without stinging or damaging healthy tissue, making it suitable for immediate field use.

Leucillin Antiseptic Eye Care
Designed specifically for eye use, this is invaluable when dogs emerge from cover blinking or watering after contact with bramble, dust or seed heads. Rapid flushing can help prevent infection and reduce irritation before veterinary assessment if required.

Leucillin Antiseptic Ear Care
Working dogs are prone to ear issues after wet retrieves, heavy cover or repeated water work. Regular cleansing helps reduce the risk of infection, particularly during warm or damp conditions.

Why Leucillin works in the field

- Non-toxic and non-irritant
- Safe to use on skin, eyes and ears
- Kills bacteria on contact
- Does not damage healthy tissue
- No antibiotics or steroids

Compact, versatile and easy to use, Leucillin products are well suited to the unpredictable nature of shooting days and training sessions alike, providing reliable infection control when veterinary treatment is not immediately available.

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FIVE MINUTES WITH

AUBREY LADYMAN OF ROSEBAY GUNDOGS

Aubrey Ladyman has made up over 20 Field Trial Champions and won the Kennel Club AV Spaniel Championships in 2009 and 2024. Here, Aubrey talks to us about his love of springers, how he founded his winning line and what makes him tick

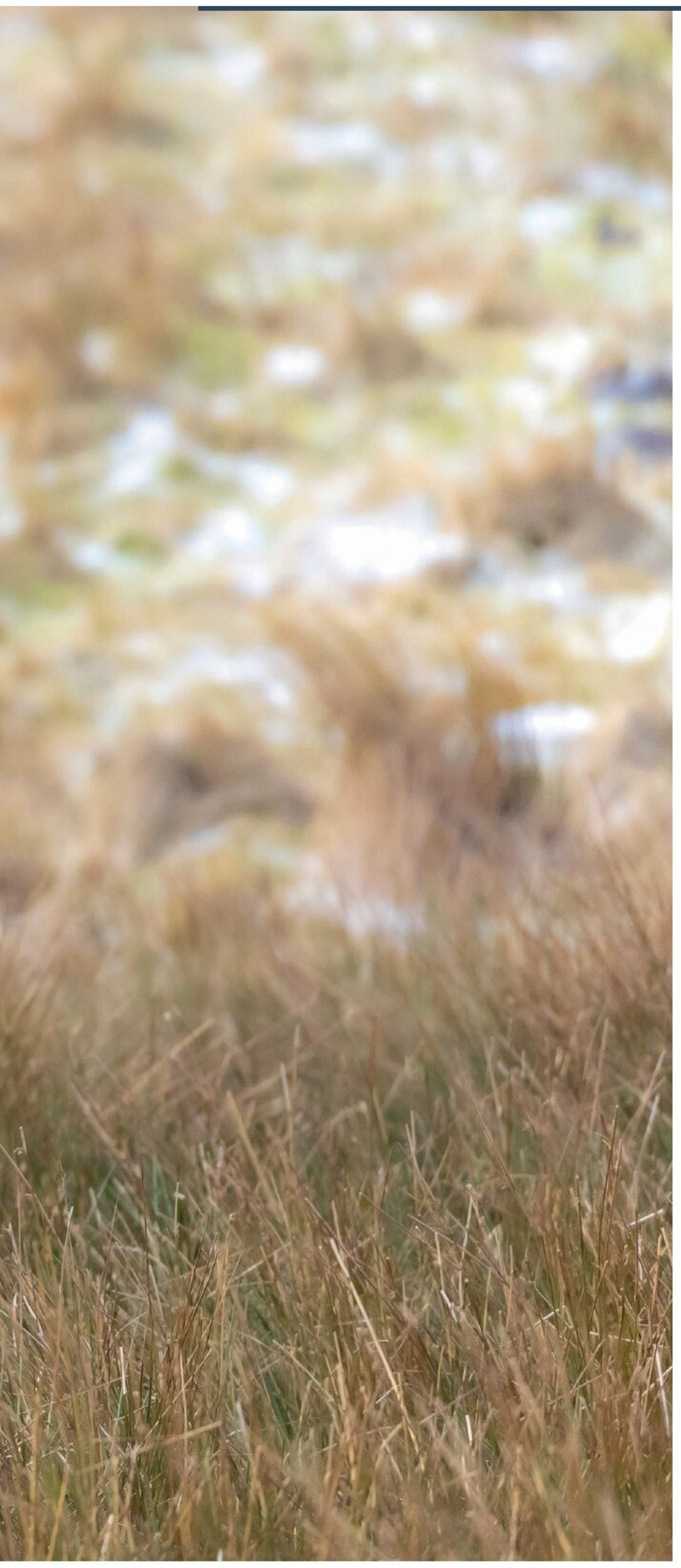
PHOTOGRAPHY **ARC PHOTOGRAPHY**

WHERE DID YOUR LOVE OF GUNDOGS BEGIN?

After leaving school, I enrolled on a gamekeeper's course which led to a gamekeeper's job at Thame Park in Oxfordshire. While working at Thame Park, I brought my first spaniel and spent every spare minute training him, eventually taking him beating and then picking-up. He was a fantastic all-round dog and it was because of him that I got the bug for dog training and realised that I had a great passion for English springer spaniels, loving their intelligence, enthusiasm and loyalty.

After a family move to Woburn, I also ran my own shoot for a couple of seasons before the land was taken back by Woburn Estates and a golf course was built there.

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HOW DID YOU GET INTO FIELD TRIALS?

After an unsuccessful interview for a grouse keeper role in Yorkshire (later finding out that the keeper's son got the role) I decided not to pursue a gamekeeping career and instead took a job with East Midland Electricity as an overhead linesman. Thirty-nine years later and I'm still working there, albeit for National Grid now. I didn't lose my love of the sport though and alongside my day job ran a small pheasant shoot in Buckinghamshire where I met a great mentor and friend, Freddie Smith. Freddie introduced me to field trials, explaining and showing me what was required to compete. The first step was to buy a well-bred pup and Freddie introduced me to Ian Openshaw, who found me two female puppies: Rytex Riffs and Craigharr Holly. I spent hours with those dogs and I entered my first trials with them. I had great success, making them both Field Trial Champions. Craigharr Holly was an exceptional bitch and won seven Open Stakes first time out every year and ran off at her first Championship. At nine years of age she ran off again at the Championship and came fourth.

TELL US ABOUT THE ROSEBAY LINE.

Breeding was something else I was keen to try and after setting up the Rosebay Affix, Craigharr Holly and Rytex Riffs produced some fantastic offspring, resulting in many Rosebay FTChs and I was delighted that some of the great trainers such as Freddie Smith, Ian Openshaw and Simon Dixon were interested in them.

YOUR PROUDEST MOMENTS?

I have represented England at the CLA Game Fair on a number of occasions, which I thoroughly enjoyed. My dream, though, was to win the KC Spaniel Championship and in 2009 that dream came true. Pat Downes had bought a lovely pup from me, Rosebay Bella and I had the great pleasure of spending many hours with Pat and Bella. Bella and her sister Rosebay Blossom both qualified that year for the Championship and both got called into the run-off. Rosebay Bella took first place with her sister in second. That was one of my proudest days and it was so special to share the stage with Pat, with my family watching on. Pat has sadly passed now and I miss him very much.





TELL US ABOUT YOUR 2024 WIN?

Working full time and training dogs was quite time consuming and with a young family I decided to take a break after winning the 2009 Championship. Both my children, Thomas and Eva are very sporty and I loved watching them from the sidelines as they grew up.

After several years of not competing, I decided to give it another go and was very fortune that a good mate of mine, Lee Walker, headkeeper at Blenheim Palace, had been given a dog which he said I needed to see. As soon as he let Olive out I could see she was something very special.

Lee gave her to me as a gift so I was determined to try and do well with her for him. FTCh Walkers Winkle (Olive) was made up to a FTCh in three trials and is one of my favourite dogs. She also went on to produce some very talented offspring and produced my 2024 second Championship winner FTCh Rosebay Meadow (Bella).

The 2024 Championship was different to 2009; the terrain was open moorland whereas in 2009 it was brambles. I was extremely nervous as I felt I had never prepared so well, so the pressure was on.

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It was bitterly cold with a sprinkling of snow, which made scenting conditions very poor. I cast Bella off and she got straight into her pattern so I put my trust in her and let her go. She found a pheasant almost immediately which she flushed and retrieved cleanly, so we were off to a good start. She hunted really well down the rushes where she indicated a cock pheasant, drove in and flushed it. It was shot on the third attempt, which resulted in a long retrieve. She marked it perfectly and after telling her to 'fetch' she went straight to it and made an excellent retrieve. As I came out of my run I thought we had done a good job.

On the third day, Bella had her second run. The conditions were now freezing and the rushes we were hunting in were frozen. Again, Bella got straight into her pattern and hunted really well to find a hen pheasant tucked up tightly, which she flushed and retrieved cleanly without the need to handle her. After a good display of hunting, we finished our run and waited for the results. After consultation, the judges called a run-off which ended with myself and Simon Dixon battling it out for first place. Bella continued her good work and was declared the overall winner.

Bella is a very fast and stylish bitch who is a dream to train – she stands out on the moorland and is also good in brambles.

WHERE IS YOUR HAPPY PLACE?

My favourite times are when I'm out rabbiting with the dogs on the Yorkshire moors. I love taking the young dogs, starting around 12 months, and slowly watching them learn their trade and getting better and better. I love to find their weak points and then work and work on those points until they end up being their strongest.

YOUR BEST ADVICE TO NOVICE HANDLERS?

If I could give any advice to anyone coming into the sport,







it would be to listen to the experienced trainers, set your standards and perfect it to your way. Be patient, be prepared to take two steps forwards and one back at times, keep your feet on the floor and be honest with yourself. Watching a dog develop from a Novice, to an Open winner, to a Field Trial Champion and finally win the Championship is the best feeling in the world.

HAVE YOU HAD SUPPORT FROM MANY PEOPLE?

I would like to thank a number of people for their support and help over the years, particularly my family for putting up with all the hours I spend with my dogs. Also to all the great friends I have made along the way who come training with me, give me advice or provide amazing facilities for me to get the very best out of these wonderful dogs. And of course, Lee and Jamie for all the support and help they give me. ■

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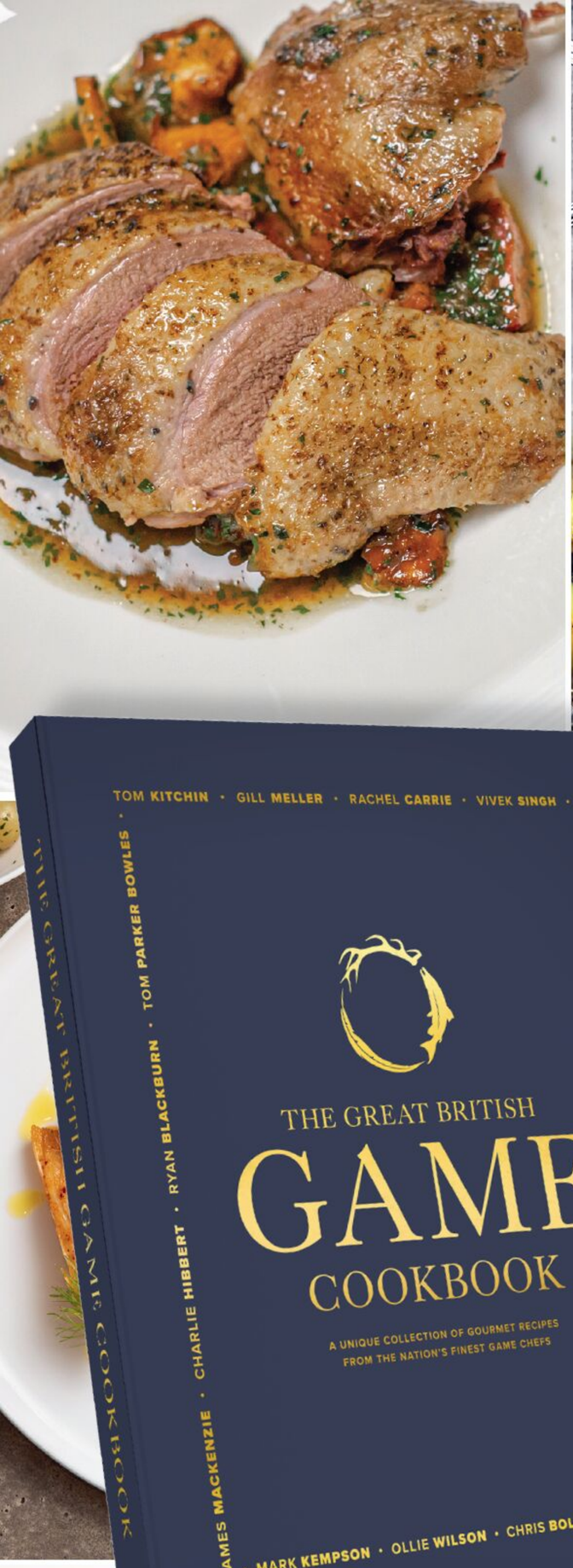
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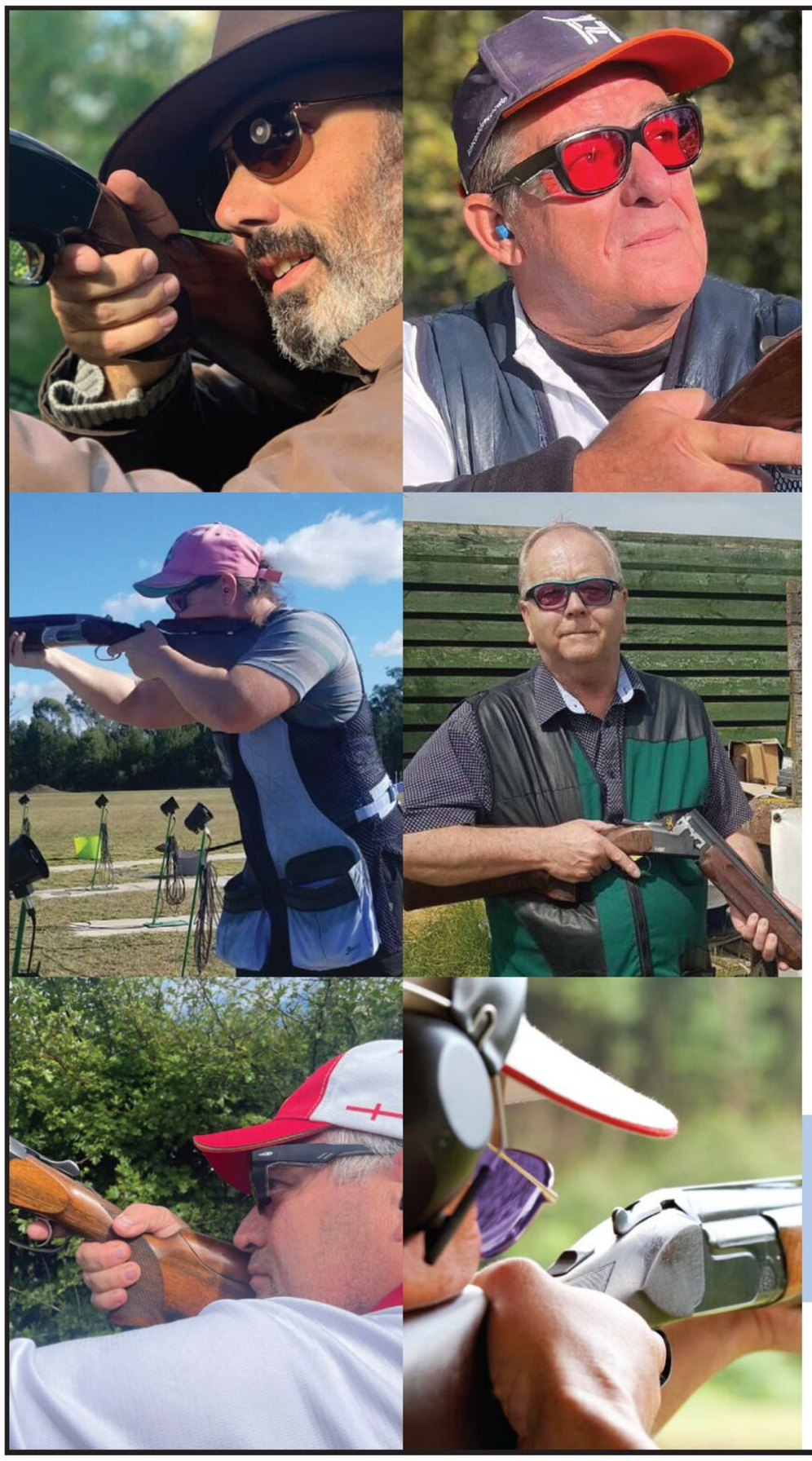
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ANSCHÜTZ 1761 CLASSIC

The Anschütz 1761 Classic provides **Bruce Potts** with unmatched reliability and accuracy for some serious vermin control

This new 1761 version of the Anschütz rimfire sporter represents the pinnacle of rimfire design and accuracy in a compact hunting format. It is offered in .22 LR, .22 WMR or .17 HMR (on test). The rifle is configurable in various formats and styles to complement the shooter's end use and satisfaction. Anschütz is known for supplying rifles in both right- and left-handed options, and the 1761 is also offered in a variety of stock designs. I had the traditional-looking and handling Classic walnut stock variant on test.

There is also a choice of single- or two-stage triggers to further customise the Classic to your own preferences. You can also choose bolt knobs, muzzle thread pitches, scope mounting options and even polymer or aluminium trigger guards. This 1761 is unashamedly aimed at the real hunter who appreciates the match-winning qualities for which Anschütz is renowned, condensed into a no-nonsense compact hunting rifle.

As such, the sleek lines of the older rounded-profile 54 and 64 rimfire actions have gone, replaced by the newer, squarer-looking and compact 1761 design. With the option of four barrel lengths, you can fit a sound moderator without affecting balance.

The whole Classic ethos of 'just get the job done' resounds

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MANUFACTURER: Anschütz

MODEL: 1761 D HB

TYPE: Bolt Action

OVERALL LENGTH: 36.0in

B**ARREL LENGTH**: 18in, ½in UNF muzzle thread

L**ENGTH OF PULL:** 14.0in

WEIGHT: 2.8kg

FINISH: Blued steel

CALIBRE: .17 HMR (also in .22 LR and .22 WMR)

STOCK: Classic walnut

MAGAZINE: 5-shot detachable

SCOPE MOUNTS: Dovetail or Picatinny rail option

T**RIGGER:** 5061D, single-stage, adjustable

PRICE: £1,545

IMPORTER: Viking Arms

in this format. The ambidextrous ergonomics of the stock, at 36in with the 18in .17 HMR barrel option on test, fully exploits the fine handling qualities of this trim, little sporting rifle. It is ideal for carrying all day, shooting from a concealed vantage point or while lamping.

IN DEPTH

I always think the stock is the pivotal part that either makes or breaks a rifle design. It is the first thing that catches your eye and then you are drawn in to handle the rifle. If everything feels perfect, you are halfway there. At first glance, the Classic stock is just that: a classic-profiled, straight-combed, non-adorned, lightweight sporter. Anschütz has also used walnut for more visual appeal, but this particular example had strength through tight grain rather than fancy figuring and colour.





The straight comb on the Classic's walnut stock is plain but highly practical

Anschütz tends to stain its stocks, giving them a characteristic dark hue that is visually balanced with laser-cut chequering on the forend and pistol grip. The chequering was a bit fussy on older models, but here it is clean and tactile.

The ambidextrous nature of the stock lends itself to being shot from either shoulder in the field when you sometimes need to swap orientation, regardless of preference, just to get a shot at a rabbit. Its short 14in length of pull allows easy manipulation from any shooting angle, which is perfect for the job.

The solid black rubber recoil pad is very tactile and maintains a grip in the shoulder, which is handy when shooting off sticks and when you need to free your hands to reload a magazine. The two QD swivel studs finish off the stock and accept a sling or bipod fitment. All in all, this is not a winner in the beauty stakes, but it is all you need for hunting. It is incredibly tactile and offers really solid and lightweight handling characteristics in the field.

If you look into the stock when the barrelled action is removed, you can see some very good and precisely cut bedding areas. The stock screws penetrate here and the action sits in the walnut. A perfect union between metal and wood will always ensure consistent accuracy as there is a solid, flat bedding of the action into the stock, guaranteeing the highest precision. An additional integrated abutment in the flat contact surface ensures a rock-solid union. And just to make extra sure, the forend channel is cut to allow the barrel to free-float without touching the stock along its length.



A large polymer bolt knob eases manipulation

ACTION

The action is where the biggest changes have occurred with the introduction of the 1761 series. It has a newer styling, blending modern angular lines into an easy-to-manufacture and compact overall design. Anschütz's top-notch quality control remains, with the whole action being precisely machined from steel. There is a matt blued finish, which is practical for hunting and decent at resisting scratches and corrosion when wiped over. On top of the action are 11mm dovetails, with a rear recoil lug cut out. There is also the option to fit a one-piece Picatinny rail, which will please N/V, thermal and multispectral scope users.

A generous ejection port cut into the right side of the 6in receiver facilitates the removal of a stuck cartridge or manipulation in the event of a jam. At the rear on the left side of the action is the bolt release lever. Depress it at the front and the bolt can be removed to clean it and the bore. A closer look at the bolt reveals where Anschütz has made quite a few changes. There is now a newer, more compact bolt throw, in part due to the repositioning of the handle to the mid-section of the 4.75in bolt itself.

Common to rimfire rifles, it is still a rear-locking lug arrangement, with the large lugs joined to the straight bolt handle positioned 120° apart. This rotates to lock the action, while the front portion stays parallel and slides within the raceways. This makes for a very fast and short bolt

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throw, with the 1.5in long straight bolt handle and its tactile plastic ball knob really helping. You can choose from a variety of bolt knobs, including walnut, at extra cost.

The forward section of the bolt sports twin extractor claws at 3 and 9 o'clock, with a 12 o'clock firing pin aperture. This really makes sure that spent cases are extracted from the chamber with confidence, and the firing pin left a good solid indentation on all tested case rims.

At the rear of the bolt handle is an elongated bolt shroud that houses the cocking piece. When cocked, a small, red cocking indicator appears at the rear. Due to the orientation of the three locking lugs, bolt lift, as expected, is very low at about 50°. Thus the whole cycling of the action is smooth and effortless, which is another Anschütz trait.

With the bolt handle now at the mid-point of the bolt, the whole bolt handle and knob stay within the action itself. Only the rear shroud protrudes, so a fast second shot with your head still in position on the stock is not a problem as the bolt will not hit your face.

Just behind the bolt slot in the action is the safety mechanism. This uses a rounded toggle lever that in the forward position is 'fire', and rearward locks the trigger mechanism but still allows the bolt to operate. Importantly, it is silent, which hunters will certainly appreciate.

BARREL

There are options for 14, 18, 20 or 24in (.22 LR only) lengths, all with a medium barrel profile of 19mm. You can also choose a ½ UNF or UNEF muzzle thread, along with a recessed muzzle crown, like Anschütz's target rifles, to protect the rifling. I had the hunter-friendly 18in model with a UNF thread. Being chambered in .17 HMR, it has the industry-standard 1 in 16in rifling twist rate. Made from match-grade chrome-moly with honed button rifling, the interior is precise with crisp lands. The barrel is fully free-floated and wears the same matt bluing as the action areas.

Loading and feeding the Classic is a breeze with the newer configuration of the 5- or 10-shot magazines. The magazine is housed within a larger polymer trigger guard (aluminium is an option), and the magazine housing release catch is easily accessible. The five-shot magazine supplied has a steel upper body and a polymer lower that sticks out of the stock and is easily grasped for a magazine change even in the dark.

TRIGGER AND SAFETY

Now we come to the star of the show, which has always been one of Anschütz's strong points. Anschütz has a number of triggers to choose from, but this model has the two-stage 5061 D unit. It has an adjustable blade that moves fore and aft, as well as side to side, from its cylindrical hanger. A single grub screw tightens or loosens for adjustment. On my Lyman Trigger gauge it gave a very consistent pull weight of 2lb 8.5oz, which no doubt contributes to the Anschütz's great accuracy.

FIELD TEST

I fitted the very capable and excellent-value Zeiss V4 4-16 x 44mm scope, which not only achieves good light-transmission but also offers edge-to-edge clarity, as expected from a Zeiss scope. Up front and snugly fitted to the muzzle thread was the super-efficient A-Tec Wave sound





The twin extractor claws are efficient, as are the mid-mounted bolt handle and slick QPQ finish



A far easier and quicker magazine release than in the older design

moderator, which successfully calmed the supersonic crack of the HMR rounds.

I chose four typical HMR rounds, with bullet weights ranging from 15.5-20gr. One was a lead-free option. After an initial period of inconsistent availability and case flaws, the .17 HMR cartridge has firmly established itself as a practical and highly accurate vermin cartridge in Britain. It is good to see the calibre being offered in a variety of rifles.

First up was the round that started the HMR craze. The Hornady 17gr V-Max load with its red polymer-tipped projectile was primarily designed to shoot a flat trajectory at 2,550fps and expand rapidly on thin-skinned game. In the Classic's 18in barrel I had a five-shot average velocity of 2,491fps, which equates to 234ft·lb energy. All shots clustered into 0.816in at 50yd. That's a great start and shows why Anschütz is considered a premium rimfire rifle maker.

Next up was another 17gr bullet, the Winchester HV round with its grey-tipped V-Max projectile. These grouped into a scant 0.739in at 50yd at a velocity of 2,497fps and 235ft·lb energy. They were the ones I used later on some rabbits.

If you want to go lighter on the bullet weight and also satisfy the lead-free ethos, there is the Hornady NTX (Non-Toxic) round. This shot slightly higher velocities, as expected due to its lighter 15.5gr bullet, with a velocity of 2,522fps and 219ft·lb energy. Again, accuracy was incredibly consistent, with five shots going into 0.785in. These also expand exceedingly well and are great for all types of small game such as squirrels, crows and rabbits.

Finally, and one of my favourite .17 HMR rounds, was the CCI GamePoint. It is so called because it is a departure from the V-Max frangible format of bullet construction and offers a more controlled expanding projectile with a copper-jacketed bullet, a lead core and a hollow point. These are superb for slightly larger game such as foxes as they penetrate and then expand, delivering their payload of kinetic energy into the vitals. I had a velocity of 2,402fps/256ft·lb and five shots into 0.6790in. Over all the ammunition, the average group size for the Classic was an impressive 0.755in.

TRAJECTORY

I always shoot the chosen ammunition in the test rifle not only at the original zero range but also at closer and longer ranges as rabbits can pop out anywhere. I used the Winchester 17gr HV ammo as I had a good quantity of it and it has always worked for me. With an average velocity of 2497fps, when zeroed at 50yd it was -0.67in at 25yd, +0.21 at 75yd and -0.12in at 100yd and -2.78in at 150yd if you want to stretch it a little. At 50yd the velocity dropped to 2,164fps/177ft·lb energy and at 100yd it is down to 1,857fps/130ft·lb, but that is still more than a .22 LR at the muzzle.

I test all my hunting rounds in ballistic wax to ascertain the true terminal performance. The Winchester HV is a consistent round that looks similar to the other 17gr V-Max bullets. It had deep start penetration of 1in and then expanded to produce a wound channel of 47ml with a total penetration of 4.8in. In comparison the standard 17gr Hornady V-Max started out at a healthy 2,517fps for 239ft·lb and then expanded at 0.45in as it entered the medium. It then penetrated a total of 5.25in and dumped its tip within 2in, with the jacket evenly spread around the wound channel, which had a volume of 51.2ml. So the Winchesters I used are a good alternative.

The real test, as always, is in the field after game. I was after rabbits ranging from 10-85yd in and around a dumping ground at the edge of a farmyard. I positioned myself downwind against a tree with the rifle rested on my sticks and waited patiently. Soon the first small rabbits appeared and then the 'eaters'. I loved how nimble and agile the Classic was, short and very light, enabling me to track and precisely hold the reticle on target with minimal fuss.

I accounted for 13 rabbits in total, all headshots. The Classic is accurate enough to take headshots out to 100yd. The lock time (the time from trigger pull to the firing pin striking the rim of the cartridge) on the 1761 action is very fast and really helps with accuracy.

CONCLUSIONS

The looks of this 1761 model are deceptive, as it has no real bells and whistles. However, for real shooters who actually use their rifles in the field and need an accurate and reliable rimfire, this Classic model is one of the best. Accuracy was not in question and the trigger was sublime. Although the looks are a bit angular I did appreciate the easier magazine release when I needed to make a quick change. Viking Arms is the new importer, so give them a call to see the latest models. ■

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NEW BALANCE

Ed Jackson provides an in-depth field test of the Swarovski AT and ST Balance, using groundbreaking stabilisation technology to offer the observer total freedom in the field

I genuinely look forward to reviewing new Swarovski products, as when it comes to hunting, their gear consistently represents the pinnacle of what is available on the market. For me, the premium optics deliver a view where colours are brilliantly vivid and shades are rendered with such clarity and detail that nature truly comes alive.

Consequently, the launch of the AT and ST Balance marks a pioneering milestone for the Austrian company. While integrated image stabilisation has typically been reserved for cameras or binoculars, these spotting scopes are the first to bring such high-level technology to a premium spotting scope. I was sent both versions to test: the AT Balance 18-45x65 and the ST Balance 14-35x50.

Swarovski's new Swarobalance technology aims to eliminate the need for a tripod by providing a stabilised image even at maximum zoom. It's a potential game-changer, but does it work?

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TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

AT BALANCE 65
MAGNIFICATION: 18-45
FIELD OF VIEW: 55-30m / 1,000m
WEIGHT: 1,470g (51.9 oz)
LENGTH: 268mm (10.6″)
WIDTH: 83 mm (3.3″)
PRICE: £2,980

ST BALANCE 50
MAGNIFICATION: 14-35
FIELD OF VIEW: 70-39m / 1,000m
WEIGHT: 1,300g (45.9 oz)
LENGTH: 268mm (10.6″)
WIDTH: 91mm (3.6″)
PRICE: £2,810



UNBOXING AND ERGONOMICS

You get instructions, a lens cloth, a carrying strap, an ARCA tripod adapter, a USB-C-compatible charger with a cable, and a 1,860mAh rechargeable battery. Each spotter is fitted with a black captive rubber lens cap for the eyepiece and a solid 'pinch-to-remove' cap for the objective lens.

The bodies are wrapped in a robust, green rubberised material for a secure grip, while the twist-to-adjust eyepiece, strap attachment point, tripod adapter plate and battery housing are all in black. Both AT and ST units share the same intuitive power button positioned at the front of the battery housing, which you press and hold to activate/deactivate the Swarobalance system.

The AT (angled) model is the larger and heavier of the two, weighing in at 1,470g, and it features an eyepiece set at a 45-degree angle to the body for comfortable viewing over extended periods. In contrast, the ST (straight) model has the eyepiece in line with the lens to allow for faster, more intuitive target acquisition. It is lighter at 1,300g, and the different shape offers alternative ergonomics depending on your preferences.

On both models, the large magnification collar is ridged for grip and rotates approximately 120 degrees across the full range, with the figures cleanly debossed into the rubber outer. An even larger collar surrounds the main body for fine focus adjustment.

THE SWAROBALANCE REVOLUTION

Everybody knows that the limiting factor of high-magnification spotting scopes has been the necessity of a tripod or support system. Even the best glass in the world cannot compensate for the human body's movement when viewing at powers like 35x or 45x. This is where the Swarobalance technology marks a fundamental change in the capabilities of high-end spotting scopes.

Swarovski's optical stabilisation uses sensitive sensors to detect minute movements. This data triggers an electric motor to adjust the lens position, with the system processing over a staggering 1,000 measurements per second to compensate.

Out in the field, the experience is surreal, as there is a genuine sense of wonder and excitement as your brain registers a level of handheld stability that it is not used to. It triggers a relentless desire to revisit every familiar landscape or animal you've ever seen, just to experience them again through these superior optics, at a much higher magnification. It's genuinely very exciting.

Given that the technology needs to detect your hand movement and then compensate for it, there is very little, if any, perceivable lag, which is also pretty astonishing given the task at hand.

OPTICAL PERFORMANCE AND CLARITY

Known for unparalleled glass, Swarovski delivers brilliant colours and edge-to-edge sharpness in both the AT and ST models. This optical quality allows you to see 'into' the landscape rather than just scanning the surface, a feat mid-tier optics simply cannot match. While thermal is superior for pure detection, these scopes master light for those who want to truly observe and appreciate nature.

This glass maintains exceptional edge-to-edge clarity and brightness throughout its zoom range. However, at 45x, the eyebox tightens significantly, requiring precise head alignment that can lead to quicker fatigue. It serves as a reminder that, even with stabilisation, high-power observation remains a demanding task over long periods.

Fields of view are class-leading, ranging from 55–30m on the AT to a wider 70–39m on the lower-magnification ST. This breadth is designed to capitalise on the units' stabilised handheld capability, transforming the often-restrictive spotting scope experience into a more binocular-like one.

FIELD TEST

The week the scopes arrived, I was booked to shoot steels out to 1,132m at Bisley, providing the perfect environment to truly test the limits of the AT Balance, which is the one I took with me. The conditions were tricky, with the sun directly in our eyes, but it was here that the premium Swarovski glass really stamped its authority over the spotting scopes provided at the range.

Handing the AT around, the stabilisation proved an instant hit and drew immediate praise as we spotted impacts freehand at various magnifications. The compactness of the unit was brought up in conversation as well, as the resulting agility allows for swift, intuitive movement when switching between targets at different ranges.

The controls are largely excellent, particularly the perfectly weighted magnification collar. The focus ring, however, feels a bit light. While it functions perfectly once you are on target, offering easy, precise adjustment, it is perhaps too eager to move when the optic is being



Putting the AT Scope through its paces at Bisley

handled or shared, leading to accidental adjustments. This is a minor gripe, but worth mentioning nonetheless.

I spent most of my time using the 18-27x magnification range. I found this to be the most relaxing 'sweet spot' for my eyes, as it provided a generous field of view, a relaxed eyebox, and excellent clarity. While the technology is groundbreaking, it is important to remember that environmental and human limitations still apply at 45x magnification.

After spotting from a standing position for several hours, my limit for precise freehand impact-spotting was 663m. Beyond this, a rest helps maintain clarity and combat fatigue. The battery lasted a freezing morning of constant use, though the unit remains a world-class passive optic even without power.

VERDICT

Choosing between the AT (£2,980) and ST (£2,810) depends on personal preference. While representing a significant investment, you are not just buying world-class glass but a two-in-one tool that bridges the gap between high-power binoculars and a traditional spotting scope, potentially eliminating the need to carry both a heavy tripod and a separate spotting scope. With a 12-hour battery rating, it easily outlasts a demanding day in the field, ensuring you're never caught short. Anyway, by the end of my day at the range, one shooter declared he was going to buy one!

When picking one, the AT model is best for extended glassing. The angled eyepiece offers a relaxed posture when looking uphill. Alternatively, the straight ST version provides a larger field of view and faster target acquisition. It is also more comfortable for looking at anything downhill.

Ultimately, these scopes represent a genuine paradigm shift. Given that I was able to use the AT Balance unsupported to spot strikes at long range, it should give you total confidence that the stabilisation will be even more effective at closer ranges, right down to the minimum focus distance of 3.4m. Swarovski has not just added a new feature; they have fundamentally changed the rules of the game. For the hunter or observer who demands the freedom of handheld movement without sacrificing the power of a spotting scope, the Balance series is, quite simply, in a league of its own. ■

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WHATSAPP

THE OETTINGEN DRIVEN HUNT

For the first time in its centuries of history, **Simon K. Barr** and other guests are welcomed into one of Europe's most respected hunting estates for its annual driven boar hunt

There are few invitations in European hunting that carry the heritage and significance of joining Prince Franz-Albrecht Oettingen-Spielberg for his family's annual driven wild boar hunt. This is not just a recreational hunt or simply a social fixture. It's a once yearly carefully orchestrated management day on one of the continent's finest non fenced, free range estates, a landscape shaped and protected by the House of Oettingen Spielberg for centuries.

The setting is Schloss Oettingen, a Baroque palace built between 1679 and 1687. The Oettingen lineage stretches back more than 1,000 years, with connections to the Imperial Hohenstaufens. At its height the family ruled one of the largest secular domains in East Swabia. Despite the upheavals of the 19th century the family remained deeply rooted in the region and today they continue to manage their land with a sense of continuity that few estates in Europe can match.

This year marked an historic first. The family opened their famous driven boar hunt to a group of international journalists to witness and participate. To stand on ground traditionally reserved exclusively for the Princely family and their closest companions was an immense privilege.

The weekend, co-hosted by Hornady, Savage, Leupold and A-Tec, began at the MSZU shooting cinema in Ulm, a state-of-the-art training facility that reveals a shooter's strengths and weaknesses with total honesty. Full size moving boar footage is projected onto a cinema screen and shot with any rifle. This demanded instant judgement, correct lead and repeatable technique. This is as close to the real thing as you can simulate and I can confirm, it includes adrenaline. It exposes hesitation and flaws much more

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Entering Schloss Oettingen for dinner felt like stepping across a threshold into a living history. The trophies, vaulted ceilings, heavy beams, carved crests and oil portraits all spoke of a lineage that has shaped the region for centuries. The atmosphere was not theatrical but authentic. The castle is used by the family regularly as an extension of their own home, not a museum and the welcome we received reflected that.

Sharing a five-course, silver-served meal in such a setting on the eve of the estates most important hunt of the year was a rare privilege. The international group added its own richness, many of whom I knew from a couple of decades on the media circuit in Europe. It is always nice to reconnect with some old faces. Guests from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Poland, Hungary, Finland, Norway, Serbia, Bulgaria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United States and the United Kingdom all brought their own perspectives and stories. Yet everyone understood that the next day would be something entirely unique.

Despite the hospitality there was no late night atmosphere. The significance of the coming day was clear to everyone. We left the castle early, stepping out into the cold Bavarian night with a quiet anticipation.

The next morning began with a full briefing in the courtyard of the castle from Franz-Albrecht himself. The Oettingen Forest rules are among the most refined and ecologically grounded I have seen, yet practical and far removed from the anxiety-inducing trophy hunting rules that often exclude larger females and males above 50kg I have witnessed elsewhere in Germany. This reflects a deep understanding of wildlife biology, long-term sustainability, but also getting the job done in a way that is enjoyable for all participating, so hunters relax and in my opinion, shoot more accurately.

This is a once-a-year activity for the forest. One day of extreme disturbance in return for every other day being quiet and peaceful. Management is key to the forest and this is a way of conducting the entire year's cull with minimal disturbance for its inhabitants.

Wild boar were the primary focus. All age classes and sexes could be taken but younger animals were prioritised. Leading females were protected unless alone or all followers had also been taken, to maintain sounder structure. Roe deer were restricted to fawns and females, fallow deer to calves and does. Foxes were actively targeted for predator control. Mouflon were not to be shot.

The safety rules reflected the ethical discipline expected. Naturally no dangerous shots, correct identification of targets, particular caution of the dog teams that run free in the drives

effectively than any paper range could. The screen freezes after the shot to show where your hits are.

We were using Savage Impulse rifles in .308. Hornady's .308 ECX 125gr ammunition and Leupold Gen 2, 1-5x24 VX 5HD scopes. I particularly liked the throw lever on the magnification that offered fast changes for closer and further targets. It was the ideal warm up before stepping into the forest, and by the end of the session the entire group, regardless of their varied international backgrounds, had found their rhythm.

From Ulm we travelled to the beautifully preserved Bavarian town of Oettingen and checked into the hotel. That evening we prepared for one of the most memorable parts of the weekend.





The MSZU shooting cinema in Ulm

and mandatory marking of every single shot for the blood tracking teams following each drive. This was not a standard shoot. It was a carefully coordinated management operation where meat would be optimised yet rooted in tradition and ecological responsibility.

Prince Franz-Albrecht Oettingen-Spielberg hosts the briefing

For the first drive I shared the stand with an old friend Neil Davies of Hornady. We had decided to switch shooter after each shot. In true Brit fashion, I let the American shoot first. Neil was up. Sharing a peg with someone you trust brings focus, rhythm and humour. The forest rewarded us quickly.

A young frischling broke cover at speed into a ride and Neil took the opportunity cleanly, with minimal wiggle room between trees. Moments later a medium sized keiler crossed the same ride and I hit him in the lungs on the first shot but he ran on, I anchored him with the second closer to the head and it flipped in true Franz-Albrecht *Wild Boar Fever* style. A satisfying spectacle whenever it happens. The drive was rich with movement. Neil added a mature Uberlaufer and I took a young sow towards the end of the drive cleanly with one shot. A huge herd of 20 mouflon passed silently through the trees in between the action, including some incredible rams, pity they were not on the list for the day we both thought. Roe deer settled into pockets of cover. The dog teams worked tirelessly, always present in the background. This was about as good as it gets with action every few minutes on this two and a half hour drive.



At the end of the drive, we had all been given an exact time to get down from the stands, we gathered up the boar we had taken for the ground crew and headed for a hearty Bavarian lunch, deep in

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the forest in a true Hansel & Gretel cabin. Sausage from a grill, red hind stew, hearty bread and some quality company.

The second drive placed Neil and I near one of the estate's most storied stands, a location where Franz had once experienced such an extraordinary drive he then shot exactly there for the five years that followed.

Before the drive began, reports came as we were being dropped off, that a sounder of 50 boar had slipped into the block ahead. The forest began to move almost immediately. Groups of frischlinge flowed through the undergrowth. Sows guided their young steadily. Lone boar probed the edges of the wind. The dog teams entered in coordinated waves, their voices rising and falling across the landscape.

Shooting was evenly distributed around the enormous forest, a sign of broad and consistent game movement. More than 200 shots would ultimately be counted during the drive. Neil took the only clear opportunity presented to us, accounting for another male Uberlaufer with two controlled shots. We saw a lot near us, but not close enough for sensible shots. Not that this mattered given we were in such a beautiful place and had experienced a stand of a lifetime, on the drive before.

The behaviour of the game demonstrated the depth of the estate's management. Roe deer lay low rather than running. Boar hesitated at scent pools. Foxes slipped back to their earths. The forest felt like a living system responding to a single day of carefully applied pressure.

At dusk the provisional bag was recorded as 57 wild boar, 12 roe deer, three hares and three foxes. But the process did not end there. The following morning blood tracking teams revisited every marked shot location. Four additional boar





were recovered and added to the total. Their recovery confirmed the effectiveness of the estate's ethical framework.

The tableau to celebrate the day's hunting was spectacular yet understated. An animal of each class was laid out, together with all big males, under flaming torchlight, next to the castle. The horns played, the speeches were made and we all reflected on a special day we were all privileged to be part of.

The final dinner in the castle's stables hall was another memorable moment, surrounded by trophies and history. Yet what stood out most was the teamwork behind the day. The beaters, dog handlers, bloodhound teams, gamekeepers, foresters, estate staff, sponsors, journalists and the family all contributed to a highly coordinated operation. Hunting is a very universal language and we had all been speaking fluent hunting all day. This for me is such a rewarding part of hunting activities where so many people take part.

To be invited as a guest to be part of the first group of outsiders to take part in this tradition at Oettingen was a genuine honour. It was a driven hunt carried out with precision, respect and a sense of heritage that is unique to this family and demonstrates centuries of passion and commitment to wildlife and conservation. ■

EQUIPMENT THAT EXCELLED ON DRIVEN BOAR

Used by the author during the Oettingen hunt:

SAVAGE IMPULSE DRIVEN HUNTER IN .308 WINCHESTER

The Savage Impulse Driven Hunter delivered exactly what driven boar hunting demands. The straight pull action allowed for rapid follow up shots without losing sight picture. The short, light barrel made the rifle quick to mount and steady from improvised positions. The AccuTrigger and AccuFit systems provided consistency and comfort. Combined with the 20 MOA picatinny rail the rifle offered the perfect balance of speed and precision.

HORNADY ECX 125 GRAIN IN .308 WINCHESTER

Hornady's ECX ammunition was exceptionally well suited to the varied distances and speeds of driven boar hunting. The monolithic construction delivered decisive penetration while its design allowed reliable expansion even at lower velocities common in European calibres. The 125 grain loading offered high velocity and a flatter trajectory which made judging lead easier on fast moving animals.

GEN 2 LEUPOLD VX 5HD 1-5 X 24 WITH FIREDOT

For driven boar the Gen 2 Leupold VX 5HD was ideal. The true 1x setting allowed both eyes to remain open optimising the field of view and offering rapid target transitions. The FireDot illuminated reticle stood out clearly in dark woodland. Low light performance was excellent and the optic remained completely reliable despite cold, moisture and forest debris. Its combination of clarity, robustness and speed made it the perfect optic for a driven hunt of this nature.

A-TEC OPTIMA 45

For driven boar the A-TEC Optima 45 proved to be an excellent sound moderator. Its lightweight modular design kept the Savage rifle fast to mount and did not disrupt the balance needed for moving targets. The reduction in recoil and muzzle blast made shot recovery noticeably quicker, especially when opportunities appeared in rapid succession.



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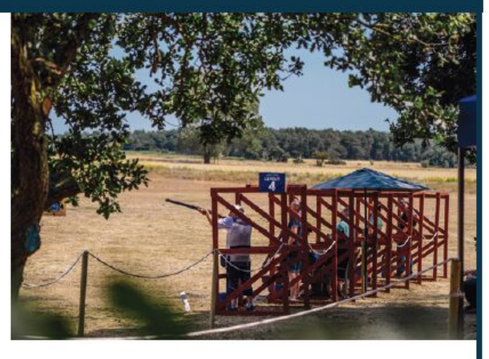
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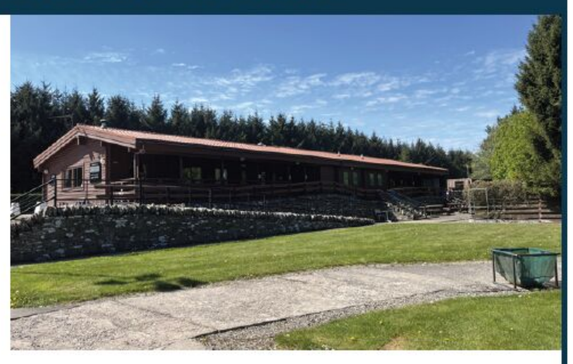
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VENISON PIE, MASH AND LIQUOR

Cai ap Bryn gives a traditional pie and mash recipe a makeover by using minced venison, serving it with buttery mash and a liquor gravy

Living in the south-east of England and being rather close to London, we have an array of different eateries that span a multitude of cultures. A traditional pie and mash shop is among them and, though a dying breed, it provides an excellent meal that warms the soul.

Traditionally, it is a beef or mutton mince pie served with mashed potato and a liquor. A liquor gravy doesn't contain alcohol, but is a fish-based stock with lots of fresh parsley. The stock was often made using the stewed stock from cooked jellied eels. As pie and mash is historic, I have kept to tradition, but swapped the minced beef with venison, which works very well in a delicious suet pastry crust.

Serves 2

INGREDIENTS

For the filling
500g Venison Mince
1 medium white onion, finely diced
1 tsp Worcestershire sauce
500ml rich beef stock
½ tsp salt
½ tsp pepper
1 Tbsp cornflour

For the pie casing
300g self-raising flour
150g suet
Pinch of salt
Water

For the pie top
450g puff or shortcrust pastry

For the mash
3 large white potatoes (maris piper work well)
75g butter
100ml milk
Salt and pepper to taste

For the liquor
50g butter
50g cornflour
400ml fish stock
25g finely chopped parsley
Salt and pepper to taste



PHOTOGRAPH: ANDREW SYDENHAM

METHOD

1. Fry the venison mince and onion in a pan until browned.
2. Add the Worcestershire sauce, beef stock, salt and pepper. Simmer for 15 minutes.
3. Put the cornflour into a cup with a splash of cold water and pour into the mince, slowly stirring at the same time. This will thicken the gravy and should set nicely in the pie. If it's too thick, add a bit more water. Taste the mixture and add more salt if required.
4. To make the suet pastry casing, mix the flour and suet together with the salt. You need to add the water slowly until it comes together in a ball that leaves your hands and bowl clean. Once done, remove and knead on a surface dusted with flour until it becomes stretchy. Roll out into 2mm-thick sheets and line your greased pie dishes. Traditionally, these are single rectangular ones, served to each person individually.
5. Fill the dishes with mince mixture and cover with the shortcrust or puff pastry. Pinch the edges and, using a knife, poke a small hole in the top to vent the steam. Brush all over with beaten egg.
6. Place the pies in a preheated oven at 180°C for 25 minutes. Meanwhile, peel and place potatoes in water with a teaspoon of salt, bring to the boil, then simmer for 15 to 20 minutes. Drain, add butter, milk and season to taste. Mash to a smooth consistency.
7. Prepare your liquor. Heat the butter in a pan, add the cornflour and stir until it thickens. Slowly add the fish stock, stirring well until you get a thick gravy consistency. If it's too watery, cook until the liquor reduces slightly.
8. Add chopped parsley and stir in. Set aside until you are ready to serve. Season with some salt and pepper.
9. Serve the pies with the mash and liquor, plus a nice pint of ale. ■

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I AM A SHOOTER

KATE DIGWEED

Shoot hostess, organiser and the steady hand behind one of the most decorated names in shooting, Kate has spent a lifetime in the countryside balancing family, horses, hospitality and helping to run the Digweed's shoots



TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND.

I'm a Kent girl. My parents are from Sevenoaks and we lived in Wadhurst, where my father had a very small game shoot which my brother and I used to be beaters on. And, alongside that, I always had a great love of horses.

WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY OF SHOOTING?

My earliest memory of being on a shoot was at Wadhurst beating on a pheasant shoot for Mum and Dad when I was about 10 years old. I was a boarder, so when we were home at the weekends we would often help. I never got paid though.

DO YOU SHOOT AND HAVE YOUR OWN GUN?

I shoot a little bit, mainly the odd charity clay shoot. I shot one game day this year which I thoroughly enjoyed; but, generally, I prefer to run the guns and host on a shoot day.

I do have my own gun, which George very kindly gave me after he moved to Perazzi. It's a 32in, 12-bore, world championship-winning Kemen – so it's rather special.

TELL US HOW YOU MET GEORGE?

We met in 1988 when I was working on a farm doing the books and George was running a clay shoot there. We came from very different backgrounds, but we both loved the outdoor life and sport and so it just worked. We've just celebrated our 30th anniversary. I've travelled all over supporting George and have only missed one World Championship through illness. We have a huge network of close friends around the world, which we would have never have made if it wasn't for shooting.

WHICH OF GEORGE'S ACHIEVEMENTS ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

There are so many titles and championships to choose from, but him receiving an MBE from HRH The Queen means the most to me, because it recognised everything he has achieved. There's been so many titles, but it was also in recognition of all the charity work he does quietly behind the scenes, raising huge amounts without ever making a fuss about it. Of course I'm immensely proud of all his World titles and everything he has achieved in the sport; but that honour felt like recognition for George as a person, not just a shooter.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR ROLE ON THE SHOOTS?

On our shoots I host the guns, meet and greet them, place them, and look after everyone and help make the day run smoothly, while George is very much behind the scenes rather than on the frontline. Out of season I run the office, doing the accounts, bookings, contracts and organisation, while George moves into clay shooting and we begin travelling.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS SPECIAL ABOUT YOUR SHOOTS?

Our days are very friendly, with a lovely old-fashioned family feel. We offer great hospitality and fabulous food, and we have a wonderful tight-knit team of keepers, beaters and pickers-up who all want the day to work perfectly.

TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT YOUR RACEHORSES.

I have three lovely racehorses – two flat and one jumper – plus a leg of another horse, which is part of a syndicate. They are what I call entertainment horses, rather than top class, but they've given us some wonderful days and I share them with my parents, which makes it even more special. I used to buy them all the same colour so George didn't quite realise how many I had, although that became harder once a grey arrived and gave the game away. We've had plenty of fun and a few wins along the way.

SOBERS WAS GEORGE'S DOG OF A LIFETIME – WHO WAS YOURS?

I think it would have to be Defa, a black and white springer who lived to 16 and was incredibly loyal and full of character. She was from a litter of 14. She had the funniest habit of sitting behind guns who weren't shooting very well, and would make strange little noises at them, so we would always know when someone had a particularly bad drive; it was very funny. She was a wonderful dog, great company and like all truly special dogs, she left a very big hole when she left us. ■

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