

## **Chapter 01**

### **First-Time Experiences in Skeet Shooting**

#### **I've reached a certain level in shooting, but still have...**

Many times, on shooting ranges throughout the world, skeet shooters have joined me and, as easy to imagine, have started to talk about skeet shooting and problems associated with it. Their most frequent problems sound something like the following: "I have reached a certain shooting level but still have two basic problems. On the one hand, my score isn't consistent during the competition. My results go up and down with a few 'ups' and too many 'downs'. On the other hand, I don't know how to improve my upper limits. Regardless of how much practice shooting or physical and psychological training I do, my score doesn't improve. What should I do?"

Keep in mind that these questions are not only of interest to intermediate shooters. Advanced shooters have also asked me the same questions in the past, since all shooters have the same problem of acquiring constant and stable scores and of breaking through the wall of those two or three targets that separate them from a "perfect score".

I realize, of course, that they have confidence in me and I also consider them as friends.

They would all like to have an answer that would allow them to make great strides in their performance...

#### **This is naturally not a suitable time...**

However, a shooting match is not a suitable time to deal with such complex problems. That's why I usually answer: "A very important competition is about to take place, and I know that the secret dream of every shooter here is to perform well. And for that very reason, the best thing to do at the moment is to stop talking about problems until the competition is over." They understand that a hasty change would only be detrimental to their performance from a psychological viewpoint. But for some reason or another, such as the rush to get home after a match, we never got around to examining the real problems facing skeet shooters in a proper, methodical way after the competition.

I would now like to go far back in time and talk about the skeet shooters' first approach to the clay target discipline. A wrong approach when they were just getting started may be the reason why they cannot improve their upper limits. It must be made very clear to them that they are able to correct their wrong approach and will not improve their limits until they do so.

#### **The meaning of "first-time experience"....**

Sigmund Freud, who was a psychologist and the father of modern psychoanalysis, based all of his theories on the importance of "first-time experience", sustaining that the first psychic and physical experiences in a child's life are of fundamental importance. Experiences between the ages of three and six years have a positive or negative impact on the

formation of a child's personality. Freud also added that 80% of the personality and character are formed during these years. I believe that Sigmund Freud's theory of "first-time experience" can also be applied to skeet shooting.

It is incredible! If you analyze all other sports, in which some device is required to practice the sport, you will notice that trainers first teach the basic elements of the respective sport, the so-called "fundamentals", to beginners. We have all certainly had personal experience in other types of sport such as tennis, fencing, baseball, golf, etc. or have been able to observe beginners at least once during their first tries... Just think of the many hours a tennis novice has to hit a ball against a wall with his trainer and how often he is corrected on the way he holds his racket, the use of his wrist, his arm, his shoulder and his body... Or how long it takes a golf novice to more or less master the ground action or properly use the various clubs. The same holds true for fencing, for baseball, etc.

### **Learning the "fundamentals"...**

Everyone knows that this beginning phase is a very important and fundamental phase in shaping the athlete's ability, and no one would even remotely consider sending a beginner to a competition without in-depth, basic training!

This basic training phase is a very important period, in which beginners become acquainted with the tools needed to practice their sport (tennis racket, golf clubs or foil). They develop a feeling for these tools which more or less become an extension of their own body, like arms, hands or fingers and which they must learn to fully control. They can only do what their brain and their autonomic nervous system order them to, if they have full control of these tools!

### **How many shooters started correctly...**

Since a great variety of methodical approaches are used in the beginning phases of a sport, I wonder how many shooters used a correct method when they were beginners? We have no answer to that question and I assume that no research has been done in that field, but my own observations and studies throughout the course of my long career have brought me to the following realizations:

- a. Almost all shooters become acquainted with 'skeet shooting' through the world of hunting. This explains why the fundamental phase of becoming acquainted with the shotgun is omitted in this discipline, since it is falsely assumed that a hunter already knows how to handle a shotgun!
- b. The mounting action (the way shooters bring the stock of the gun up to their shoulder and face) is usually too rough and incorrect.
- c. Shooters are always afraid of the targets.
- d. They always think that they are lagging behind and therefore rush through their actions.

- e. They often perform the entire shooting action under the influence and pressure placed on them by the target and are therefore unable to coordinate their action in such a way that they gain total control over the target.
- f. All shooters, whom I have observed, can improve their performances if they work on perfecting each action down to the last detail.

Points b through e are closely related. The reasons for the incorrect behavior of these shooters can probably be traced back to the first, incorrect learning of the fundamentals of this discipline during their first appearance on a shooting range. Later on, we shall take a closer look at how a beginning skeet shooter should approach his "first-time experience" on the shooting range. At the moment, we are interested in shooters, who are no longer beginners, and want to make several recommendations to help them improve their shooting performance.

### **A methodical approach...**

For the time being, let's take a look at "skeet shooting" from a different point of view. Let's consider it as an Olympic sport discipline, which it is, and not just a derivative of hunting. From this point of view, we can see that this Olympic discipline has become so technical that a special shooting technique has also become required and it has therefore lost all connections with its "classical" origin from the world of hunting. The following check list was compiled for the benefit of those shooters who really want to analyze their technical ability and who prefer a methodical approach to training with the aim of improving their limits and stabilizing their scores.

### **A series of questions...**

Before starting your journey through the fascinating world of skeet, you should first ask yourself the following questions. Keep in mind that this check list is supposed to draw your attention to a topic that will be dealt with in more detail later on, but if one topic or another is of no interest or practical use to you, simply ignore it.

1. Do I have a clear idea of how much lead I should give the targets during each phase?
2. Am I able to select the correct lead without feeling insecure or anxious on each station?
3. Do I believe that my way of hitting the target is the easiest way or do I think this way can be improved?
4. Do I consider my actions well coordinated when shooting? In other words, are the various actions of my overall shooting performance performed in sequence, one after the other, or do I try to perform many actions at the same time?
5. Am I in a position, during the shooting action, to properly use both arms and hands? Do I feel confident when checking the accuracy and diligence of my left hand as it guides the barrel in front of the target?

6. Do I think something happened in the past twenty years that made skeet more complicated? Is it possible to shoot skeet today with the same technique used twenty years ago when everything was much easier?
7. Do I find it convenient to individualize the "control zone" in order to gain better and easier control of the target?
8. Do I find that there are similarities between a skeet shooter and a piano player?
9. I think that there are similarities between shooting and steering a car? Concretely, I think that both activities largely consist of automatic processes that have to be trained individually and very consciously. The logical part of the brain is restricted here to the basic control of the processes on a higher level.
10. Does it seem to me, when in action, that the time I need to fire at a clay target - about 0.650 sec. - is more like 10 seconds?
11. Do I feel, when observing other high-level sporting events, that great athletes give great performances in a very simple way?

We will deal with these questions and other topics in the near future.

### **A Zen story**

The following text is not a part of the check list but rather a Zen story which every athlete, wishing to analyze his own performances in order to improve himself, should consider before he decides to continue "this trip into the skeet shooting world..."

### **"A cup of tea"**

Nan-in, a Japanese master of the Meiji era (1808-1912), was visited by a university professor who had come to question him on Zen. Nan-in served tea. He filled his guest's cup to the brim and kept on pouring. The professor saw the tea spilling over and couldn't contain himself any longer. "It's full! You can't pour in any more!"

"Like this cup", said Nan-in, "you are also full of your opinions and suppositions. How can I explain Zen to you, if you don't first empty your cup?"