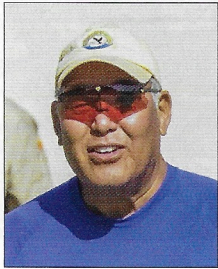




BY JOHN D. SHIMA

The Target Is Your Friend

The target isn't your enemy. It isn't trying to 'beat you' because it doesn't care. In fact, it gives you all the information you need to break it.



▲ John D. Shima

My college girlfriend was a horse trainer. I learned that young horses are innately afraid of humans and naturally resist pressure. When a trainer attempts to pull an untrained horse forward with a lead rope, the horse will likely step backwards. A human can never win the game of tug-of-war with a 1,000-plus-pound horse.

Good horse trainers do not attempt to "break" a young horse with force. They usually start working with a young horse in a large, round pen so the horse can move freely in circles around the trainer. While the horse is moving around the pen, the trainer can introduce commands to walk, trot, canter, stop, back up, and change direction. The movement and commands of the trainer are intended to alter the young horse's direction of travel. Since the horse is never trapped in the round pen, it pays attention to the trainer. Hence, the horse whisperer's maxim is "Movement is your friend."

THE TARGET IS YOUR FRIEND

I believe too many shooters approach skeet from the viewpoint that the clay target is either trying to get away from them like a flushed gamebird or beat them by streaking past their hold point. Believe me when I tell you it's just a clay target, and it doesn't care. However, if you want to break clay targets consistently, I recommend shooters try to believe the target is your friend. Only the clay target can tell you when it emerges, its distance, its speed and its direction. Nothing else matters!

When shooters detect the movement of an emerging clay target with their eyes in expanded soft focus, the visual data is transmitted to the visual cortex to instantaneously determine the target's distance, speed and direction of travel. While the shooter's conscious mind (watching reflex) watches the target continuously, the adaptive unconscious (shooting reflex) automatically determines where to point the muzzle at the correct lead in the break zone.

Simply stated, the clay target is your friend because it actually tells the shotgun where to point. All that is required of the shooter is to patiently watch the target emerge into expanded soft focus, and then watch it continuously until the shotgun fires in the break zone.

PATIENCE IS THE KEY

When shooters approach each station with a "me against the target" mindset, it heightens the tension of execution, which often precipitates impatience, creating visual and mechanical faults. Impatience will cause shooters to leave on their call or cause their eyes to slide on their call in a misguided attempt to stay ahead of outgoing targets. Impatience also causes shooters to focus too hard too soon, which causes premature engagement of incoming targets. These and other faults interfere with optimal visual acquisition of the target at the eye hold. By approaching every target with patience, the shooter is looking expectantly to detect the emergence of the target and acquire it properly.

The SEAL Team maxim "Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast" applies to skeet and especially doubles. Rather than rushing the first shot, patience allows the shooter to detect and acquire each target of the pair efficiently. It requires a subtle pause in gun movement after the first shot to allow time for an eye shift.

A correct eye shift has two elements: a shift in depth of focus, and a shift in point of focus. The second target is also the shooter's friend because it will tell the muz-

zle of the shotgun where to point. Visually, the pair of targets in skeet doubles is just like shooting two single targets. The shooter looks for the first target in expanded soft focus, detects movement and acquires the target, and then executes the hard focus and fire in the break zone. As the shooter shifts the point of focus to look above the muzzle, the eyes also must shift from hard focus to expanded soft focus so they can detect and acquire the second target, and then execute a repeat of the hard focus and fire.

Many shooters struggle with doubles because they believe the targets are too fast. They rush their mechanics in a misguided attempt to gain an advantage over the targets. However, when I am able to convince shooters to make the targets their friend, they patiently wait to see where the targets are going. These "friendly targets" magically appear to be much slower, the shooter's mechanics seem to be much smoother, and the targets actually break more efficiently. Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast! **CTN**

▶ John Shima is a five-time World Skeet Champion. To view previous articles or order John's books, go to www.johnshima.com.

