

MANAGE YOUR WATCHING REFLEX



BY JOHN D. SHIMA

Watching simply means to look at or observe an object, attentively, over a period of time. When I instruct a clay target shooter to just “watch the target continuously until it breaks,” the admonition sounds too simple to actually work. Most shooters think that if it were that simple, any avid clay target shooter could achieve master class very quickly.

The purpose of this article is to explain the elements involved in watching clay targets during flight, to suggest ways shooters can optimize their watching reflex, and to introduce a training drill to help shooters reliably manage their watching reflex during competition.

The Elements of Watching

I think we can agree that watching a target continuously during its flight is easy for anyone standing on a station empty-handed because the eyes would watch the target naturally. Watching the flight of the target naturally becomes considerably more challenging when a shooter stands on the station, mounts a loaded shotgun, and calls for the target with the intention to break it.

Shooters must understand how their eyes function naturally to overcome the emotional and environmental distractions that precipitate visual deceptions that occur while shooting at a moving

clay target. I explain how the eyes should focus on the clay target by dividing the target’s flight path

tracking, and breaking.

ACQUIRING ZONE - This zone is defined by the shooter’s eye hold.



I believe it is the most important element because it establishes the shooter's ability to watch the target continuously until it breaks. Moreover, it is the only way a shooter can eliminate visual distractions. Three things occur in this zone:

Awareness. When the shooter settles his or her eyes in expanded soft focus it quiets the mind. This means distracting self-talk is eliminated. The eyes are in a state of readiness, which means they are not looking for the target. Conversely, the eyes are just waiting for the movement to enter the visual field.

Detection. The "flash" is commonly used to describe the initial perception of movement as the target emerges into the shooter's visual field. By maintaining "soft focus" the expanded peripheral vision instantly detects the movement and determines the target's speed, direction, and distance. This critical information is transmitted to the visual cortex of the brain to tell the shooting reflex where to point the muzzle of the shotgun.

Acquisition. As the flash of the target approaches the eye hold it enters the central vision of the shooting eye. At this moment the

flash becomes a distinct target and appears to slow down. My maxim, how you look determines what you see relates to this process. If a shooter looks for the target with the intention to see it sooner the peripheral vision contracts and compromises optimal acquisition of the target at the eye hold.

TRACKING ZONE - Watching the target continuously with central vision occurs during this zone. There are two components of central vision: primary focus and secondary focus. The shooter's objective is to maintain the image of the target in primary (clear) focus while the muzzle of the shotgun remains in secondary (blurred) focus.

Synchronization. When the shooter watches the target continuously the swing of the muzzle automatically synchronizes its movement with the speed of the target.

Focusing. Soft focus (expanded peripheral vision) allows the shooting eye to detect vertical changes in the flight of the target. The greater the distance between the acquiring zone and the intended breaking zone the longer the shooting eye must maintain soft focus. The transition



to hard focus begins as the target approaches the intended breaking zone.

BREAKING ZONE - Two things occur as the target approaches the intended breaking zone: engagement of the target with the muzzle of the shotgun, and the transition from soft focus to hard focus by the shooting eye.

Engagement. Inserting the muzzle slightly below the flight path of the target with the appropriate forward allowance should be delayed until the target enters the breaking zone. Premature engagement of the target with the muzzle causes the shooting eye to hard focus too soon. The tendency for premature engagement of the target occurs more often among pre-mounted shooters than low-gun shooters.

Hard focus. Hard focus occurs when the shooting eye centers focus on a specific portion of the target. It requires extra concentration and extra visual effort to hard focus, so the shotgun must fire almost simultaneously. I refer to this as the "focus-fire gap." The goal is to minimize the time between the hard focus and the firing of the shotgun. Any increase in the focus-fire gap compromises the hard focus on the target causes "focusing fatigue and results in a

sudden decrease in muzzle swing.

Optimizing the Watching Reflex

For purposes of simplification, I use the terms watching reflex and shooting reflex to differentiate the conscious and subconscious aspects of shooting clay targets. When the shooter pays attention to consciously managing his or her watching reflex it allows the shooting reflex to perform automatically. Eventually, the watching reflex will occur semi-automatically if the shooter concentrates on watching each target continuously.



PREPARATION - I recommend the shooter use pre-station and pre-shot routines to prepare his or her eyes to watch each target. The intention of the pre-station routine is to develop a strategy for breaking the target. The intention of the pre-shot routine is to concentrate exclusively on watching the target continuously until it breaks.



Kinetic visualization. The pre-station routine should include "seeing and feeling" the next shot. Essentially this is a rehearsal of the next shot.

Point A to Point B. Rather than engaging the target with the muzzle too soon the ideal strategy is to think in terms of starting the muzzle at Point A (Acquiring Zone) and moving toward Point B (Breaking Zone). This promotes efficient muzzle swing and allows the shooter to concentrate exclusively on managing the watching reflex.

PROTECTION - Humans are born with a sensitive startle reflex to automatically alert us to a sudden surprise stimulus. This protective reflex often works against clay target shooters when they are not prepared for the flash of the clay target. Nevertheless, the startle reflex can work for the shooter if it is managed properly. There are two components to the startle reflex: the reaction and the response.

Startle Reaction. Since the startle reaction is automatic the best way to manage it is to properly prepare the eyes to see the flash of the target. If a shooter looks too hard for the emerging target the startle reaction will increase. When the shooter settles

his or her eyes in expanded soft focus at the eye hold the peripheral vision will instantly detect the target's speed, direction and distance, which minimizes the startle reaction.

Startle Response. Although the most common startle response in humans is to blink the eyes, the most common startle response among clay target shooters is to abruptly move the muzzle upward toward the movement of the target. Since the eyes are naturally attracted to the largest and closest moving object their focus will instantly shift from the flash of the target to the end of the muzzle. By patiently allowing the target to emerge into the expanded peripheral vision the shooter will be able to initiate a correct lateral move with the lower body toward the breaking zone.

CONSERVATION - It is my opinion that every shooter has a certain focusing capacity. Young shooters obviously have a greater focusing capacity than most mature shooters. Regardless, hard-focusing fatigue occurs in every shooter before the onset of physical fatigue. Therefore, I encourage all shooters to conserve their hard-focusing capacity to enhance the consistency of their watching reflex.

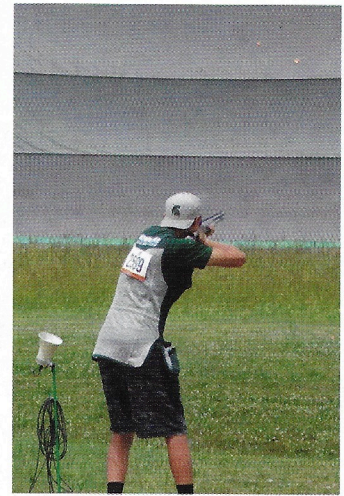
Focusing capacity. I think of focusing capacity as the batteries in a camera's flash. The brighter the flash the more energy is used so the batteries become weaker after every flash. Focusing too hard, too soon depletes a shooter's hard-focusing capacity more rapidly.

Focusing intensity. I think of focusing intensity as hard focus on a specific portion of the target. I've coined the phrase, "point of focus determines depth of focus" to emphasize the importance of hard focusing on the target as it enters the breaking zone to ensure proper engagement of the target while maintaining a synchronous muzzle swing.

Focus-Fire Gap. I use the flash and shutter on a camera as an analogy to explain the phenomenon I call the focus-fire gap. The timing between the flash and the activation of the shutter is essential to obtaining consistent clear images. If too much time occurs after the light from the flash illuminates the object and the activation of the shutter the picture will be too dark or blurred. Reducing the focus-fire gap means the shooter must hard focus on a specific piece of the target and fire the shotgun almost simultaneously to achieve the best outcome.

Managing the Watching Reflex

The ideal place to strengthen the watching reflex is a skeet field. A modification of the Basic Incomer Drill allows shooters at every level to improve the monotonous mental - visual discipline that is essential for an effective watching reflex. The relatively slower low house targets on stations 1, 2, 3 and high house targets on 5, 6 and 7 allows the shooter to concentrate on each



element of the watching sequence:

Soft focus. Settle eyes in expanded soft focus at the eye hold. Expanding the peripheral visual field, enhances target detection and acquisition.

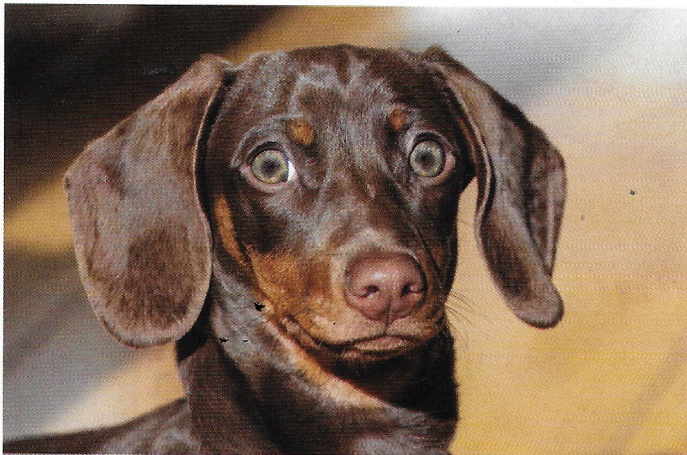
Patience. Patiently watching the target flight in medium soft focus further enhances perception of vertical changes in the target's flight path as well as synchronizing muzzle swing to target speed.

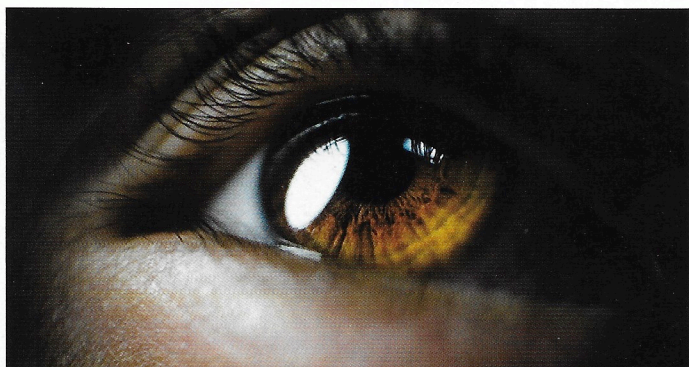
Commitment. Shooters must commit to their desired break point. rigorous commitment to the break point is necessary to program the shooting reflex to function automatically.

Hard focus. Hard focus facilitates point of focus, and point of focus regulates depth of focus. This visual tactic maintains the focus of the shooting eye above and beyond the muzzle and on the flight path of the target.

Focus-Fire Gap. Finally, firing the shotgun at the break point with a narrow focus-fire gap completes the programming of the watching reflex. If a shooter allows the focus-fire gap to widen the shooting eye will defocus from the target and alter muzzle swing.

It is nearly impossible to maintain hard focus on the target for more than an instant or so.





Defocusing from the target in the breaking zone disrupts the shooting reflex. Instead of firing the shotgun automatically at the break point the shooter is forced to “ride the target” to analyze the lead picture in an attempt to consciously salvage the shot beyond the desired break point.

Summary

It goes without saying that shooters who develop a consistent watching reflex will experience consistent responses from their shooting reflex. Including kinetic visualization into the pre-station

routine will prepare the watching and shooting reflexes to act. Simplifying the pre-shot routine to emphasize settling the eyes in expanded soft focus at the eye hold will optimize detection and acquisition of each target. Patiently watching each target until it approaches the desired breaking zone enables the shooter to hard-focus on a specific portion of the target - and instantly fire the shotgun.

The tension of execution and the twinge of uncertainty are a competitive shooter’s nemeses. The tension of execution is an emotional distraction used by the Ego Self to take-over the shooting

reflex before the shooter calls for the target. The Ego Self uses the twinge of uncertainty to override the watching reflex during the shot, which causes the shooter to focus too hard, too soon, or defocus in the breaking zone. These faults give the Ego Self extra time to look for the muzzle to calculate the lead picture. Unfortunately, these visual faults alter depth of focus and adversely affect muzzle swing and proper engagement of the target. Therefore, the development and consistent application of a proper watching reflex will enable clay target shooters to achieve and maintain peak performances

during competitions. ■

John Shima is a former five-time World Skeet Champion and was high average in 12 gauge for two years. John is the leading authority on detection of visual deceptions and prescribing appropriate visual training to unleash the power of reality for clay target shooters. For more information about the Shima Shooting MethodSM, the Clinic Schedule, his new Shima Shooting ExperienceSM, or to arrange a Private Consultation, contact John via email at john@johnshima.com. To order his books or view previous articles go to johnshima.com/publications.

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