



DEE ORR IN CONVERSATION WITH
TARGET SETTER JOE SCULL OF
CEDAR CREEK SPORTING CLAYS

WHAT ARE THEY THINKING?

this year will also be setting layouts at the World FITASC at Caribou Gun Club in Le Sueur, Minnesota.

Having always been a hunter, Scull saw a magazine ad for sporting clays but didn't know much about the game, so he went to a local New Jersey club, started shooting and fell in love with sporting clays – that was in 1992.

■ How did you get into this game?

■ I had a landscape business and was used to working outside. Sporting clays seemed to be right for me since I'd still be outside. In landscaping you need to be able to envision and design a layout of your work beforehand. I was always creative in that regard, which helps me when it comes to setting targets and designing a course.

In 1994, an opportunity to buy a Club came my way – Cedar Creek – which at that time only had one 50 bird course with hand traps and trappers. At that point I had never shot in an NSCA competition and knew it was something I needed to do to learn how it was done and how to run such events. I quickly found out how much fun it was to shoot and made a lot of friends along the way. I felt I should travel around the country and see how the larger tournaments were run, so I shot a lot of competitions across the country and continued to learn what to do and what not to do.

It's target setters who make this sport fun and challenging – not nearly, in my opinion, sufficiently appreciated by shooters. Their talents and imaginative presentations make us better shooters and keep us coming back for more.

Last but not least in this series on probing the minds of target setters, we talk to Joe Scull of Cedar Creek Sporting Clays in Millville, New Jersey. He has recently started to get the recognition he deserves for his wily ability to tease and taunt, by being selected, repeatedly, to set courses at the Nationals and the US Open – and

I applied to the NSCA to set targets at the Nationals and three years ago (after several years of applying), I got the opportunity. I've been back every year since. Working with the great group of target setters at the Nationals has really shown me that there is always more to learn. Last year I got to go and set targets at the US Open and this year, Randy Voss of Caribou Gun Club who is hosting the World FITASC in July, invited me to assist in setting targets. This is a great opportunity and I'm very excited about it. I'm pleased to say that I'll also be setting courses for the 2015 Nationals in October.

■ Tell me more about your club, Cedar Creek Sporting Clays in Millville, New Jersey.

■ Over the years, I've really focused on making improvements to the club for the shooters, carving out another 50 acre course out of the woods and adding automatic traps to the point where I now have 84 such machines, making up three fully automatic 100 bird wireless courses.

Anyone from a novice to the top shooter in the country can come to Cedar Creek and find targets that they can enjoy and can work with. We change the targets about every two weeks to keep things fresh for

our members and regulars. We host NSCA registered competitions about 10 times a year. In 2014, I threw just under 200,000 registered targets at Cedar Creek and over 1.5 million practice targets. (That number earned him the rank of 25th among High Volume Clubs.)

■ When it comes to target setting, what is your first step?

■ The most important thing is to make sure everything is safe – knowing the lay of the land, knowing that you're not dropping shot on shooters on the other side of the course and knowing that everyone is always shooting in a safe direction. In this sport we have so many different age shooters – some shoot targets right off the trap and others shoot the target at the end of the flight. I pay close attention to this because I need to make sure no matter where they shoot the target it's safe for everyone.

■ Do you have a pre-setup plan when you go out, or a goal of what the top score will be?

■ Usually I try to make the top score around 95-97. But at the same time, I need to have the lower class shooters hitting a lot of targets. I really try to make sure

that everyone enjoys the shoot. No-one likes to be embarrassed – after all, the sport is supposed to be fun.

■ How closely are you watching the weather forecast and predicted winds?

■ Very closely. It's important to know for each day of any event how much wind we will have and from where. If it's going to be overcast, we might need a different color target. Blue sky vs. grey sky makes a huge difference in target visibility. I have two or three weather apps on my phone that I am constantly checking. Then we go back and check the targets again the morning of the shoot to see if the wind is going to negatively impact any of the presentations.

On other occasions, the sun can be a problem. I try to keep the targets below or out of the sun for the entire time the shoot is running – but it's not always easy. Working on my own property much of the time, I have a pretty good idea of where the sun is throughout the course and throughout the day. It's obviously harder when I'm setting targets at other clubs and that's where my apps are so valuable. I also like to arrive a day or two early to check the fields where I'll be setting targets so that I can see how the sun is going to be all day long.

■ When you are setting the course, is the difficulty level more about challenging the Master class shooter or giving the lower class shooter a chance to do well?

■ I take all shooters into consideration – from Master to E, from the shooters who can't see well to the shooters with 'young eyes' who see very well. Yes, I want a certain level of difficulty –

but that only needs to be 10-15% of the stations. Out of 15 stations, I like to put in about two stations as separators – sometimes it turns out that those aren't the targets they struggle with! It's the little goofy targets that give many shooters problems.

What's hard for one person is easy for another. Just the thought of shooting in a tournament adds pressure on most shooters. I also like to leave my targets up after the shoot for everyone to come back and shoot them after the tournament. When they shoot the course again for fun, scores sometimes go up 5 to 10 targets.

■ How about when it is a State, Regional or National Championship? Should some courses be set harder than others?

■ Yes, they should be a little tougher – it's a Championship. The targets should be a little more technical, but not necessarily farther and faster. However, as a Championship, you are competing by class and concurrent and usually, the best shooters in each will rise to the top.

Most of the time, shooters become derailed before they even get to the course. A shooter will listen to his buddy say, "The orange course is really tough" or "That 60 yard rabbit was impossible," when in reality, it might not be that tough, but he's getting into the cage with those negative thoughts and losing targets before he even sets up to shoot. When it's a multiple day shoot, that pressure just builds.

■ There are lots of ways to make a target challenging, by pairing, distance, speed, transition or simply by throwing off the shooter's rhythm. Which do you most employ?



■ All of those tactics – depending upon the background, the opening and the terrain. Some of the time I use off-speed targets, or I make a fast target look bigger to make it seem like it isn't that fast.

■ **When you are planning the course, how much attention do you give to the time it takes to shoot the pair? What other methods do you use to keep things moving?**

■ I try to ensure most of my targets take under 5-6 seconds to complete the pair. I usually make the 8 bird stations true pairs to move things along. Further, keeping shooters off of any raised platforms helps as the transition can eat up a lot of time.

There's also a lot of behind the scenes work that goes into keeping the course moving and running smoothly. Especially important is making sure all machines are well-maintained and keeping fully charged batteries on them, particularly in the winter when the cold can kill a battery. We change all of the batteries on the course

two days before a shoot and have extra machines ready to go at all times in the event of a breakdown.

■ **How important is the shoot window and giving the shooter, whatever their age, ample time?**

■ Very important. I try to give large windows so everybody has time to shoot my targets. There's nothing worse than going to a shoot and watching shooters not even get a shot at the second bird because it's on the ground before they get a chance to pull the trigger. A true pair splits the shooter's focus. A lot of shooters try to shoot the pair too fast, without letting the pair develop.

■ **Do you test the course as a whole for presentations or distractions?**

■ I don't shoot the course as I go along, but I will go back and check the tougher targets and usually have someone who is working with me shoot those targets – an average shooter, just to see how they do. Then I'll shoot them myself as a comparison and make

adjustments if I need to. On my grounds, they are usually spot on first time. We also make sure that targets on one state aren't seen by the next station – that can be a major distraction and is not acceptable.

■ **How important is the background to the target you are setting?**

■ Background changes everything. In dark, low foliage, we always try to use orange or pink targets. If it shows belly, we use a bio target. Personally, I prefer the orange domed targets with a black ring that go from a wooded background into sky. The shooter can see the orange against the tree line and when it gets into the sky, the black ring makes the orange dome stand out. Targets in the sky most of the time should be black – the same goes for a rabbit or a battue.

■ **How about FITASC and 5-Stand? Is there any difference to target setting from your point of view?**

■ FITASC is a meant to be

challenging. You have a little more leeway with the targets because most of the shooters are A, AA and Master class and expect to be challenged more than conventional Sporting. I tend to give the targets a little more distance. However, it's still about giving the shooters time to see the birds and enough time to allow them the full use of the gun.

I also like to design my layouts so that if a target is difficult on the first peg, it's not as difficult on the third peg to keep the layout three-dimensional and give it variety. A target could be quartering on the first peg and end up crossing by the third peg or vice versa.

As regards 5-Stand, you don't have to set the targets particularly hard because there's so much going on. One technical target on a 5-Stand layout is usually enough to separate the scores, since the targets are being shot from so many different positions. The shooters can often get confused and defeat themselves.

Summary

That wraps up my series on Target Setters. I've learned a lot and want to thank Joe Scull and the others for sharing so much of what they have learned over the years.

Cedar Creek Sporting Clays is a great place to shoot for both competition and practice. Almost monthly, Scull will throw a very reasonably priced multiple event NSCA tournament. Except for the 5-Stand or FITASC events, trapping and scoring are done by the shooters, so shooting in squads of three or more is required. The targets are world class and it is a great opportunity to hone your skills and have a good time too. ■

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