The Shima Shooting MethodSM

By John Shima

*John Shima asked me to write an introduction to his inaugural article in the* Skeet Shooting Review*. Our friendship goes back to the 1970s when we got our feet wet coaching at Trinity University in San Antonio. Over the years we have grown together as coaches, sharing ideas and insights into our profession. Without a doubt, John is the only coach I would ever work with. I have a tremendous amount of respect for John and his knowledge and expertise as a shooting coach. His thoughts will be a valuable addition to these pages. Welcome John.*

*Todd Bender*

Siegfried & Roy and Penn & Teller are unique partnerships that complement each other so the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. For the past 30 years, through our partnership in BenderShima Shooting Clinics (BSSC), Todd and I have created a similar synergy of unique skills to create magic for skeet shooters.

I was invited to write a few articles for *Skeet Shooting Review* to explain how my method for teaching skeet shooting supplements traditional mechanical and mental approaches to teaching the game. I’ve been severely dyslexic since childhood so the thought of expressing my skeet shooting philosophy and describing my teaching techniques in writing seemed more daunting to me than winning five World Skeet Championships. Thanks to encouragement from Todd, technology and the editorial guidance of a friend, I finally committed to describing the elements of the Shima Shooting MethodSM in a series of articles.

Everyone Sees Targets Differently

As a child I struggled to read and write. It was as if the words were playing tricks on my eyes. I felt smart outside of school but accepted that my brain was wired to see things differently than my classmates in school. Fortunately, my father was an avid skeet shooter. As compensation for my struggling through school each week, my father would take me to the gun club on weekends. At age 9, I began entering skeet shoots. By the age of 15 I realized that, although my brain was not wired for reading and writing, it was wired for seeing moving targets and shooting skeet better than most adults.

I earned a degree in psychology at Trinity University. Todd Bender and I were on the college skeet team that was coached by the venerable Col. Tom Hanzel. As business partners in BSSC and close personal friends, Todd and I have been teaching skeet shooting since 1977. Whenever I observed a shooter doing, saying or thinking something that created a mechanical or mental fault, I always asked myself, “Why?”

A few years into my career as a shooting instructor I realized my true gift. Almost intuitively, I discovered that I could watch someone shoot and not only see where he or she missed the target, I knew why they missed the target. I could imagine what they were seeing and what they were thinking between the moments they thought to call for the target and when the shot stream passed the target. This epiphany changed my approach to teaching from a focus on how to shoot at targets to an emphasis on how different people perceived the virtual relationship between the gun barrel and moving target, and what the relationship was in actual reality. I call this the moment of truth.

Psychology helped me appreciate the amazing capacity of the human eyes and brain. Humans are capable of finding different ways to see things and integrating them so the mind can interpret the visual input. This phenomenon underlies the idiom, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” I understood this phrase to mean that an individual’s perspective of an object or event is their unique visual perception and their “perceived sight picture” was merely the outcome of various neurological, psychological and physiological factors related to their personal circumstances and life experiences. The more I learned about vision the more I became convinced that the way we look determines what we see.

Evolution of the Shima Shooting MethodSM

In the 1985 comedy, *Spies Like Us*, Austin Millbarge said, “We mock what we don’t understand.” This phrase resonated with me because many clay target shooters and coaches do not understand my teaching philosophy, diagnostic abilities and visual training drills. Moreover, these critics clearly don’t understand why and how I utilize the eye patch to help skeet shooters train their eyes to correctly see targets and perceive lead at various skeet stations.

I know that when I introduce eye-patching aids, I am literally altering the shooter’s perception of reality. I seriously appreciate the eye patch can precipitate psychological consequences. Therefore, my use of eye patching is not a gimmick or parlor trick. My purpose for introducing eye-patching techniques to clay target shooters is to unleash the power of visual reality so all shooters can look at moving targets and see actual lead instead of an optical illusion.

The idea of using an eye patch or eye dot (occulder) is not new. Optometrists commonly used eye patches on children to treat strabismus (lazy eye). In the 1950s and ‘60s most skeet shooters with an eye dominance problem just closed or squinted the non-shooting eye. Ed Scherer, an accomplished shooter and shooting coach in the ‘70s and ‘80s, interviewed several All-American skeet shooters and national champions for an article on the topic. His data revealed that almost all the competitors he interviewed shot skeet with both eyes open, just like hunters, trap and sporting clays shooters, so he came to the apparently logical conclusion that individuals must shoot skeet with both eyes open to be champions in the sport.

There is a underlying fallacy to Ed’s well-meaning conclusion; individuals with binocular visual problems were incapable of realizing their true potential as skeet shooters if they felt compelled to compete with both eyes open the way the champions did. At that time our sport truly favored the natural two-eyed shooters with a dominant shooting eye. Furthermore, Ed didn’t consider things like age of the shooter, how many years they had shot, and how shooters practiced using their eyes correctly. Please don’t misquote me. I believe Ed Scherer did a great job and was a pioneer in teaching skeet. He should be recognized as one of the leaders in elevating the game of skeet to where it is today. Regrettably, the traditional methods for teaching the mechanical and mental aspects of skeet shooting did NOT take visual deception into consideration.

Why We Miss Targets

Anyone that has watched a magician perform “magic” understands the concept of optical illusion. It is the art of misdirection that deceives the eyes of the viewer by producing a false or misleading perception of reality. Intelligent viewers know they were deceived; they are merely perplexed by how the visual deception occurred. Although shooters may believe that some clay targets attempt to trick them during a round of skeet, intellectually they know that is not possible. I came to the conclusion that most shooters miss targets because they were shooting at an optical illusion rather than the actual target.

During the past three decades of coaching skeet and sporting clay shooters, I have made it my life work to solve the riddle of visual deception for my clients. My ability to understand and interpret the factors underlying visual problems is often intuitive. I have developed training aids that change the way the shooter looks at the target to enable him or her to see the actual sight picture (visual reality).

The Shima Shooting MethodSM emphasizes the importance of discovering visual deceptions, enabling visual reality and training visual discipline. To accomplish these goals, two essential items in my bag are moleskin strips and black rectangular vinyl eye patches. These are not gimmicks or quick fixes for shooters; they are diagnostic and training aids that, when used properly, eventually allow me to ascertain the shooter’s visual deceptions and enable shooters to see real sight pictures, and train their shooting eye to develop the visual discipline necessary to overcome optical illusions.

Experts report that the human eye can only focus on one thing at a time. Shooting skeet targets requires the eyes to center the primary focus over a moving barrel at a faster moving target while the gun “points” somewhere ahead of the target. The human eye cannot simultaneously center primary (hard) focus on the barrel of the gun and the moving target 20 yards in the distance. Physiologically, with both eyes open and shooting at a target closer than 20 yards, the right and left eyes see two different images. This phenomenon is called depth perception, which is essential to shooting moving targets beyond 20 yards, but creates optical illusions for many two-eyed shooters at 20 yards or closer. This visual phenomenon explains why a right shouldered shooter that is shooting with both eyes open may need to see a huge lead picture on a high house 4 but almost no lead on a low house 4. The discrepancy between visual reality, as defined by the laws of physics, and virtual reality, as created by an optical illusion, is inherent in human binocular vision.

This article introduced the concept that optical illusions are the cause of the majority of missed targets during a round of skeet. It also provided an overview of the neurological, psychological and physiological basis for the Shima Shooting MethodSM, which emphasizes the importance of discovering visual deceptions, enabling visual reality, and training visual discipline for skeet and sporting clays shooters at all levels of the sport. The next article in this series will examine visual deception in greater detail.

*John Shima is a former five-time World Skeet champion and was 12 gauge high average leader for two consecutive 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 2014-15 Clinic Schedule or to arrange a private consultation, contact John at bendershima@gmail.com*