Ellen Nelms Talks How She Did It

By Nick Sisley

Ellen Nelms—how did she do it? Twenty-seven selections to the All-American Team, 21 times to the First All-State Team, and Hall of Fame inductee in 2001. That is quite a skeet shooting record, but Ellen was a little reluctant to talk about herself and her accomplishments for our planned interview. Luckily for all of us, she opened up and you will probably be surprised by her story and also learn good how-to for the framework of any aspiring or long-practicing skeet shooter’s game.

Born in Houston, Texas, Ellen married Bob Nelms right out of high school. At only 18 years old, she followed Bob to Texas A&M where he got his degree and then started working in his father’s business. They’ve been in Dallas for years, both members of the storied Dallas Gun Club.

Before Ellen discovered skeet shooting, she was both a runner and a tennis player, and even competed in the Junior Olympics at age 10— those Olympics held in Houston. Perhaps her best game of all was bowling, which takes great hand-eye coordination—the same as shotgun shooting.

Husband Bob introduced her to shotgunning with doves. Ellen revealed, “In those days there were so many doves that being an experienced wingshooter wasn’t really required. Just pull up on the flock and at least a dove or two would drop.”

Her first gun was a Remington 1100 20 gauge semi-auto with a 28 gauge Purbaugh tube insert. For those of you new to skeet, a 20 gauge 1100 was tubed to a 28 gauge Purbaugh tube, another 20 gauge 1100 to a Purbaugh .410 tube; this was the way to get the one-gun-feel in those days as we do today with sub-gauge tubes in our over-and-unders. That was the gun she shot during her early shooting tutelage with Buck Stark. It was Buck’s 1100, but Ellen kept it for quite a while before returning it.

This occurred in the early 1970s. “Buck didn’t know what to do with me. Here I am getting instruction and breaking maybe 15. He’s trying to explain leads to me and for a long while I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about.”

Husband Bob shot competition skeet from around 1968 to 1974. Ellen thinks he lost interest because the guys he shot with lost interest and quit the game. Ellen started shooting skeet with Bob in 1972. They shot together for a couple of years, then quit for three years. By 1980 Ellen figured it was time to shoot registered targets again, so that’s when her “real” skeet shooting career began. Let me move forward a bit before returning to 1980 where I just left off. I only saw Ellen shoot at the World Shoots I attended. It was easy to be impressed with her—stand up style, a spectacular Krieghoff in her hands, always impeccably attired, a smile on her face that hid the burning fire of competition that any observer knew was there, how well she stayed in the gun—maybe most of all she gave the impression (maybe oozed the confidence) that she was going to crush the next target before she even called for the bird. In 1997, the last year I attended a World Shoot, I talked with her about what I had just written, told her I wanted to do an instructional *Skeet Shooting Review* column with her input.

For whatever reason that never happened, and that’s on me—not her. Until now.

Starting in 1980 Ellen shot Bob’s model 32 Krieghoff San Remo, a four-barrel set. Jumping ahead—in 1985 she and Diane Stumberg flew to Racine, Wis., to get with Don Mainland of Kolar Arms. There she was properly fit by Don and bought a Krieghoff K-80 Bavaria Grade with honed out “carrier” barrels to be shot only with the 20, 28 and .410 Kolar tubes that were fitted to those barrels. That’s the gun Ellen shot for the rest of her career. She shoots a 1 of 1000 Remington 1100 12 gauge in doubles and 12 gauge events.

In 1980 she already had a desire to shoot well, but doing that was anything but easy. Further, more than once in her career she admits to flopping miserably with her scores, but I’ll take up that subject again later in this article. Long before 1980 it was Buck Stark who began instilling the winning desire, and she shot with him two and three times a week. Finally, she started “getting it!”

She admitted to me that she had no great expectations attending her first World Shoot in 1980. However, after a few World Shoots (she thinks 1983) she met Peter Thompson who was a friend of a friend. Thompson came to that World Shoot to observe. You might say this was at least a bit of a life-changing experience for Ellen. Thompson was the four-time winner of the British Open Golf Championship, perhaps the most prestigious event of any golfing year. Talking with Peter at the World Shoot, Ellen’s mind was much further awakened to the mental side of golf, AND the mental side of shooting. Peter told Ellen about the Sports Enhancement Association (SEA) and urged her to attend one of their seminars if she wanted to take her shooting game to a new level. Perhaps SEA was long before its time as far as the mental side of skeet was concerned. Attending their five-day seminar Ellen was exposed to mind control, breathing techniques, visualization, overcoming negative thoughts, the so-called “zone” and how to bring the zone back into her mental state and more.

The Sports Enhancement Association’s seminar that Ellen attended was in Sea Island, Ga. *(around 1983)* where the renowned skeet Hall of Famer and instructor Fred Missildine taught. Ellen stayed over after the mind-swelling seminar to spend five days under the tutelage of Missildine. With shotgun in hand, instructional shooting immediately after the mental seminar really hit home. She also took additional instruction from Fred as the years passed by.

The year after the seminar, her skeet game took a giant leap forward as her 27 straight All-American Team selections began. One piece of Ellen’s advice that stood out to me in our interview was “….each shooter has to have a hand in how he or she should go about winning—as well as where you make your mind go, to let go, to allow your sub-conscious to take over, to make your sub-conscious take over if and when necessary, to achieve incredible focus, to not allow outside distractions keep you from doing your best.”

She added, “If there’s a secret to top shooting, it is learning how to repeat what works—over and over and over and over.”

Further, Ellen has read a tremendous amount of material related to winning. One book she read that meant a lot to her mental development was first published in 1976—again, well ahead of its time at least as far as the mental side of skeet shooting is concerned—Tom Tutko’s *Sports Psyching*. I just checked, and it’s still available on Amazon. From that book Ellen learned more about mind and body control, positive breathing techniques and more, especially how to be at the top of your game all the time. Tutko gained his experience and knowledge to write this book through his training, and he was successful enough to coach a number of Olympic teams with their sub-conscious endeavors. Ellen told me that Tutko also studied what the Russians were doing with their mental coaching when they were capturing so many gold Olympic medals.

Ellen was quick to point out, “I have been incredibly lucky. Look at the names of the shooters I’ve been able to be squadded with over the years.”

In addition to studying books about how to better her shooting, Ellen is a keen observer. Not only did she watch her successful squadmates with the utmost attention, she studied and watched many other top skeeters, carefully scrutinizing their how-to. Getting back to a few of her squadmates —let’s take Jimmy Prall. Jimmy asked Ellen to shoot on his squad in 1986, and she claims he had the biggest influence of all on her shooting. I commented to Ellen that I always thought he looked so relaxed shooting. Ellen came back with a bit of a laugh, “You might have thought that, and he probably did look relaxed, but Jimmy was not as relaxed as you might think. He had a habit on Station 1. He’d kick the heel of one shoe against the wall of the high house four times before he’d call for the target. He told me this was his way of clearing his mind of negative thoughts and putting his sub-conscious into high gear. Jimmy was very big into visualization, mind control and getting negative thoughts eliminated before he shot. He was incredibly focused shot after shot. I shot with Prall a lot. Who couldn’t have their shooting helped shooting behind a guy like that?”

If you ever saw Ellen shoot, it was easy to see how well and long she stayed in the gun. This came from a piece of advice she got from Ricky Pope, from whom she took a number of lessons. Pope’s advice was, “See all the target pieces until they hit the ground.” What a great suggestion to help us stay in the gun.

Another shooter who has long been involved in Ellen’s shooting corner has been John Imbt. They have been squadded together a lot. John instilled in Ellen that she was always so much better than she thought she was. Wouldn’t that be very positive input for any of us at any time?

She also told me that she thought Bob Moore was one of the game’s best technicians. From him she was able to minimize “throwing the gun” and consistently staying in the gun. “Bob didn’t become a Hall of Famer, but I learned a lot from him.” So maybe the point here is we can learn good habits from many people. However, we can learn bad habits as well, if we let that happen, and free, unsolicited advice is usually worthless.

“Wayne Mayes was one of the most giving persons I ever met. I could give you many examples of this, but here’s just one. I was sitting in the airport awaiting my go-home flight. Sitting next to me was an older shooter—if I remember right maybe in his late 80s. Wayne approached us both, asked the older gentleman how he had shot. The fellow had not shot well, so Wayne asked him if he would be attending the next week’s big shoot. The man said he would. Wayne told him, ‘You come a day early. We’ll get together on the field. I’ll see if I can help you.’ That was Wayne, always giving,” Ellen beamed as she told the story.

Here is another piece of advice she received long ago that she thinks is critical. “Don’t lower your face to the stock. Instead bring the stock to your face.” Wayne Mayes was one of the most prominent with that advice to her.

Ellen also shot with John Shima a lot. “John was always a calming influence on me and my shooting, always helping me along the way, especially with his steady demeanor.”

Sort of wrapping things up Ellen revealed, “It takes years of hard-fought effort for anyone to reach the top of their game. To stay on top is just as tough if not tougher. Everyone is going to have days when they don’t shoot as well as they know they can. When this happens the burden can be dreadful. If and when those days occur, just push yourself to move on to ‘get your focus back.’”