Visual Discipline

By John Shima

*This article is the third in a series that explains the Shima Shooting MethodSM and the importance of using eyes correctly, along with proper mechanics, to achieve consistent results shooting skeet and sporting clays.*

Looking Beyond the Gun

Experienced shotgun shooters know that we look at a moving target while pointing the gun somewhere ahead of it. I find that most inexperienced shooters attempt to aim the gun somewhere ahead of the target. In fact, one old time shooter would tell his friends to “shoot at the phantom target” in front of the real target.

I encourage my clients to shoot sustained lead because it keeps the gun out of the way so they can watch the target continuously. I introduced many of my clients to shooting the “heads up” method so they could look over the gun. Either the shooter placed his or her chin next to the stock instead of their cheekbone or I “raised the comb” with strips of moleskin to create a 70/30 point of impact. The purpose was to position the shooter’s eyes parallel to the flight path of the target, which enabled them to look beyond the gun so they could see the targets clearly.

Two-eyed Shooting

Todd Bender and I began shooting skeet at a very early age. Todd initially used an eye patch. After he taught his left brain-right eye the lead pictures that worked for him, he removed the patch. This was possible for Todd because he was developing hand-eye coordination as well as learning the pictures it took to break targets consistently. When Todd removed the patch his left-brain already knew what to look for at every station. In addition to his superior mechanical and mental skills, all that was necessary for Todd to shoot perfect scores consistently was to develop visual discipline.

When the target is closer than 20 yards, most shooters with a dominant shooting eye can shoot with both eyes open if they really STARE at the target. I describe this as similar to a temporary hypnotic trance. However, visual deceptions creep into the game of many two-eyed shooters when they lose the ability to continuously HARD focus with their shooting eye due to mental and/or visual fatigue, and the non-shooting eye affects their visual perception.

One-eyed Shooting

I am a one-eyed skeet shooter; however, I shoot with both eyes open, without a patch, when I am doing trick shooting demonstrations or shooting sporting clays because I need the depth of field of two-eyed shooting in order to shoot from the hip and to judge angle and distance for some sporting clays shots.

Unlike Todd, when I was young I shot skeet with both eyes open. Around the age of 35 I noticed the lead pictures were occasionally changing while I was shooting, so I intuitively closed my left eye. When I looked at the targets with one eye, I perceived them to be much larger and slower. Although I didn’t feel as if I was “seeing” the targets as quickly, I was able to run 100x100s again so I wasn’t concerned.

When I shoot skeet with both eyes open, even with a patch in place, I can shoot straights but I have a surreal experience, as if I am standing behind myself, watching me shoot at the targets while I see the breaks from behind.

Eye Patches

Eye patches, whether frosted or solid, are not magic. I utilize both types for specific reasons but introduce an eye patch judiciously because it can dramatically alter a shooter’s perception of reality. Since the frosted patch allows the same amount of light to come through to the non-shooting eye, the brain thinks it can still see through the frosted patch and tries to see the old way, which causes the shooting eye to de-focus.

In my experience the quickest way to “train the brain” to see a new lead picture clearly and allow my client to shoot visually, instead of viscerally, is by completely blocking the visual signal the brain wants to see with the non-shooting eye when the gun is fired. The solid patch not only blocks the visual image but also blocks the light input as well, so the brain more readily “switches focus” over to the shooting eye.

Sometimes the eye patch will cause a shooter to experience dizziness, headaches or nausea. According to Dr. Wayne Martin, these reactions are due to the stato-kinetic reflex (cause of motion sickness) that senses angular acceleration of the head and awareness of any induced head, eye and body movements and is responsible for balance and maintaining equilibrium.

For some shooters the eye patch initially creates serious difficulty seeing the target, especially on base line targets (H1 and L7). Assuming they are shooting with their dominant eye, the only reason the non-shooting eye is putting up such a fuss is that the shooter was using their non-shooting eye to look at these targets more than they thought.

Other times a right-shouldered shooter will see the H1 target come out, but when they pull the trigger, they don’t see the target break. Even though their shooting (right) eye saw the correct lead and broke the target, the non-shooting (left) eye, which is connected to where the emotions live (right brain), didn’t see the target break. So the shooter actually saw the target break, their brain just didn’t perceive the break because the left eye was covered with a patch.

Components of Visual Discipline

If I have convinced you that the way you look determines what you see, then the key to shooting well is to train your shooting eye to see real targets instead of virtual targets. As with any training modality, discipline is the key to success. I believe there are three components to achieving visual discipline for skeet shooters: where you look, how you look, and what you see.

Where You Look: Your pre-shot routine should establish the proper eye hold and gun hold for each target on the station prior to stepping on the pad. The conscious mind (thinking) reminds you to set your eye(s) up on the target path and out to where the target is first visible. This look point determines the position of the gun hold, which is slightly below and farther out from the eye hold.

How You Look: Awareness is a natural state of calm with sense of alertness. There is no anticipation of when the target will appear, expectation of where the target will go, or intention to break it. Trance is an altered state of consciousness (in the flow) that enables the adaptive unconscious to automatically activate a visio-motor response to the appearance of peripheral movement. The shooter merely settles the shooting eye on the target path, soft focuses to activate peripheral vision and allows the natural ability of the visual system to function normally.

What You See: The peripheral movement of the eye will capture the flash of the target as it emerges from the window. As the target reaches the seeing point the pursuit movement will rapidly converge and center focus on the actual target while the barrel of the gun moves ahead of the target in the periphery of the visual field. The visual shooter will fire in the break zone when the picture looks right and he or she will see the target break. The visceral shooter will fire when the picture feels right and usually sees the target break if the shooting eye maintains continuous focus on the target. The break zone is determined by muscle memory.

The Moment of Truth

The critical period of time in the execution of each shot at a clay target is from the time the shooter calls for the target until he or she sees the target break. This moment occurs “in the blink of an eye” and I call it the moment of truth. The manner in which the shooter uses his or her eyes during the moment of truth determines whether the target the shooter sees is real or whether it is an optical illusion. If the shooter centers his or her focus intently on the target and allows the adaptive unconscious to point the gun, the target will look larger, the details will be clearer and it will seem to move slower, just before it breaks!

Training is necessary to establish muscle memory (conditioned response) and maintain visual discipline so the adaptive unconscious can function normally during the moment of truth and complete the shot successfully. A properly positioned solid eye patch will usually accelerate the training of the shooting eye. The goal of visual training is to develop visual consistency – a consistent visual image for each target as it enters the peripheral visual field. This familiar image (stimuli) empowers the adaptive unconscious to activate an appropriate neuromuscular response.

Attempts by the shooter to change visual focus, compensate for an improper setup by anticipating the target, or make adjustments to the sight picture during the moment of truth will activate visual deceptions that result in weak breaks or completely missed targets.

The Power of Reality

The lack of visual discipline usually results from carelessness during pre-shot routine, distracted thinking on the pad or mental/visual fatigue. These behaviors embolden the conscious mind and create emotional distractions such as: anticipation, expectation or misguided intention (outcome).

A shooter’s anticipation of the target, expectation of the target’s flight path or an intention to break the target all result in irregular pursuit movement of his or her shooting eye. This oscillation of visual focus is the primary cause for streaking. The shooter initially sees the target, then it suddenly jumps ahead while the eye attempts to catch up. Streaking often results in flinching, pushing or poking the gun and loss of balance.

Leaving on the call causes the peripheral vision to acquire the barrel of the gun (the larger, closer object) instead of the target. It is also the most common cause for a poor eye shift when shooting the second target of a pair because the shooter moves the gun in anticipation of where the second target will be before centering focus of the shooting eye on the second target.

Moving the gun up quickly to engage the slow incoming target usually results in trapping the target with the barrel. It creates the perception of pulling the target slowly to the break zone and results in missing behind the target due to slow gun speed. Trapping also occurs on outgoers if the shooter fails to move the gun on the flash of the target.

Developing a consistent and precise pre-shot routine that supports visual discipline, along with proper mechanics, is the key to eliminating visual deceptions and unleashing the power of reality for skeet shooters. I developed the Shima Shooting MethodSM to teach skeet and sporting clays shooters how to look at targets correctly by using visual discipline to train their shooting eye to see reality instead of optical illusions.

*John Shima is a former five-time World Skeet Champion and was high average in 12 gauge 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 via email at bendershima@gmail.com*