

SHOOT BETTER

THIS MONTH: Learning from others

WATCH AND LEARN

Even experienced shooters like Andrew had to start somewhere, learning from someone; here, he recounts some educational tales, and tells us why we should always be watching and learning

When I consider the people who guided and influenced my shooting career – such as my dad, John Gibbs, who ran the rifle shooting at Clifton College; Jeff Cooper; Ross Seyfried; Colin Willock (Town Gun); Kevin Robertson; and latterly, Craig

Boddington – I feel proud to have gathered so much valid information from time-served practitioners; old hands in the shooting world.

I remember a chance meeting with Craig that changed my perspective of my own experience. In Paso Robles, California, he had an office at the then

American factory of Rigby (welcome home by the way and top job, Marc Newton). Craig and I had a chat while I was passing through, following a Safari Club International show in Reno about 10 years ago.

He told me his writing and profession was based on having grassed some

BELOW: You can learn a considerable amount from studying and discussing mistakes



PICTURE: DOM HOLTAM





PICTURE: BLICKWINKEL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

200-plus game animals on a number of continents. This sounded impressive. I then remembered that I had grassed some thousands of deer, far more smaller species, many large cull animals, had used calibres from .22 to .458, had gralloched and pulled bullets from nearly all of them, and likely knew a bit also. This gave me some of the confidence I needed to provide what WMS offers. However, I hope I bring humility with me, because you learn the most when it goes wrong; not with the one-shot wonders.

lightly wounded it across the shoulder... bugger.

The herd took off and so did we after them. Long story short: after I outran my PH, I shot the clipped wildebeest, hitting three out of four shots on the run. When we finally caught up with it, I took a 300-yard Texas heart shot off a baking termite mound, and a coup de grâce in the camel thorn at five paces – we finally had it.

At dinner that night, after the sundowners and chat, Murray walked

ABOVE: Practising standing shooting, moving targets and rapid reloading put Andrew in good stead for hunting wildebeest in Africa

RIGHT: When watching others shoot, the focus should be on the person rather than downrange

\\ I SHOT THE WILDEBEEST, HITTING THREE OUT OF FOUR SHOTS ON THE RUN //

When I do some of my training work with zoos or the police, I have a tendency to wear an old Rann Safaris bush shirt, which my wife rightly critiques (it, like me, is past its best visual presentation date). In Botswana, about 12 years ago, I went on a hunt. The buffalo went down perfectly after an eight-hour stalk; the antelope all collapsed or ran briefly to die after being well chest shot; but my wildebeest started badly and swiftly got worse. I misread the angle, shot it too far forwards off wobbly sticks, and

up behind me and dropped a sweaty shirt in my lap.

I enquired why, feeling a dolt. He said: "Boy, the way you hunted and followed up that wildebeest yourself, you can wear my bloody shirt any day."

Before leaving for Africa I had practised like mad at shooting from standing, moving targets, and rapid reloading in the shoulder. I guess this was what enabled me to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

My thanks must go to the remarkable John Kynoch of the British

Sporting Rifle Club – one of the most experienced, and yet modest people in the business, to whom I undoubtedly owe my running shot skills. I have since washed the shirt.

At WMS, we learn much more from watching and helping others to shoot than we do from firing rifles ourselves. So much focus and attention is taken and commanded by larger calibre rifles that it can actually be hard to be aware of our peccadillo as the 'nut behind the butt'. The snatch of the trigger, the flinch, raising your cheek off the butt at the moment of the shot – all get lost in the blast and process. A friend videoing the moment can be a great teacher and a big wake-up call when the results are looked at.

My advice is to always admit, study and discuss your mistakes, your misses and your imperfect moments. In the video world of Facebook, people put up perfect shots, perfect stories, macho tales and one-hit wonders, which are likely 'take 27', not 'take 1'. This is a great shame, a block to learning, and tends to promote 'instant experts' quite falsely. When someone tells you about their longest shot, or the perfect moment in a way that arouses suspicion, the best response is: 'You are only actually as good as your next shot, and by the way, don't tell me, show me.'



\\ AT WMS, WE LEARN MUCH MORE FROM WATCHING AND HELPING OTHERS TO SHOOT THAN WE DO FROM FIRING RIFLES OURSELVES //

« People watching others shoot targets generally focus downrange, hoping to see what happens and how the shot went. While this is interesting, the focus should be on the person shooting; note the position, hold, cheek weld, eye relief, trigger control, any blinking or flinching at the moment of release, then the follow-through and reload.

While the hole is likely to still be in the paper, or the splat on the steel, 90% of the information we require to understand whether the shot was set up and delivered well will be gone in the instant of recoil. This leaves those watching to guess about what might have gone right, or wrong. While exterior ballistics take over when the bullet leaves the muzzle, the actual shot release will have a far greater impact on the bullet's destination than the wind or gravity.

Interestingly, relatively few people who shoot demonstrate perfect shot preparation and release every time they shoot. I aspire to, but not every day is good, not every rifle is easy to shoot, and not every opportunity allows time for perfection unless it flows easily.

Muscle memory developed through constant practice with the same rifle is required for excellence. This is where dry firing, lots of practice, absolute familiarity, and sticking to one rifle all combine to make master marksmen. Owning a cabinet full of rifles, only shooting when the hunt is on, and an inability to visualise a successful conclusion makes amateurs of us all. Before anyone writes in, yes, I have



ABOVE: *The target only tells us a very small amount about the shot set-up and delivery*

\\ RELATIVELY FEW PEOPLE WHO SHOOT DEMONSTRATE PERFECT SHOT PREPARATION //

too many rifles and would hunt more successfully if I focused on one, I admit it.

One reason I maintain a 'go-to gun' (my Blaser R8 .308 scout rifle) is that it is of a type that I use often, and it works for me without any fuss. It is ready to go with the batch of 180gr ammunition it is zeroed for. It has a point-blank range of 175m when zeroed 4cm high at 100m on an 8cm diameter precision target, also known as a beer mat.

BELOW: *Constant practice with the same rifle is required to become a master marksman*



PICTURES: DOM HOLTAM

I know this stuff works, because almost every time I don't follow the simple rules, things have a tendency not to go to plan. I missed a once-in-a-lifetime shot at a Blandford urial in Pakistan because I changed rifles just before the hunt and added confusion to a tough shot in a tight spot... damn.

I have mostly been reasonably successful, and occasionally lucky, when hunting away and abroad, notably when I have followed the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Stupid), and even more so when using rifles and calibres I am familiar with. My clients are mostly very good at heeding my advice, and regularly contact me with fine pictures of the results. I must endeavour to follow my own advice and that of my mentors at all times, while remembering that to err is human. I guess the people I noted as major influences on me will have learned by their mistakes as well, as will the next generation, hopefully.

Next month: If you are going to stick to one hunting rifle, which one should it be? **RS**

CONTACT

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