

SHOOT BETTER

THIS MONTH: Learning from the best

THE PROFESSIONALS

What is it that separates the amateur shooters from the professionals? Do they have better kit? Maybe they simply practise harder... Andrew Venables considers the question

Being 'professional' is to be engaged in a specified activity as one's main paid occupation. I've spent much of my adult life being paid to shoot rifles. Whether the task was pest control, wildlife management, hunting, or training, there has always been pressure to succeed, to make the shot, stay safe and enable others to do the same.

What are the skills that give professionals the edge when it comes to success? And how can amateurs learn from them? (By the way, by 'amateur' I mean someone who shoots as a hobby, rather than someone who isn't very good at it.) I've had a number of experiences when serious professional hunters have shown me skills I lacked. Did they show me how to shoot little groups, how to set a bullet five thousands of an inch off the lands, or how to shoot from a bench rest? No.

Robbie, a South African professional hunter, watched patiently as Philip, Ed and I tried to shoot empty cartridge cases off logs in the Bushveld (a

woodland ecoregion of Southern Africa). When we had demonstrated our skills, or lack of, he said laconically: "Well boys, that's all well and good, but it's not going to save your life when an old dagga boy's charging in looking for payback."

While he was talking, he had picked up the cardboard base of a tray of Castle Lager that happened to be nearby and had assisted with hydration on the last hot afternoon of our five-day hunt. He wandered over to a huge, castle-like termite mound and spiked the tray on a piece of wood sticking out of it. Walking back, he thumbed through the many .375 Holland & Holland rounds in his leather cartridge belt, picking ones with dented soft points or discolouration of the brass. Snapping each cartridge into the magazine of his battered old BRNO rifle, without looking down, he said: "This will sort out the problem." At about 40 yards from the mound, he span around, snapped the bolt shut and opened up.

As if in one extended fluid movement, the five rounds he had

chosen smashed into the box in fast, merciless succession. I counted in elephants... one elephant, two elephants, and got to six when the thunder stopped. Five deadly rounds of .375 H&H from a rifle most people would have thought looked worn out. We walked up to the cardboard tray, which measured about 18 x 12 inches. There was a dinner plate-sized pattern of five large holes in the middle. At 4,500 ft/lbs per shot, he had dumped 22,500 ft/lbs of

BELOW: Animals quartering towards present a more difficult target



PICTURE: DON HOLTAM



"A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PROS AND AMATEURS IS THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF QUARRY IN 3D"

energy into the relevant kill zone, in less than seven seconds. At full tilt, a Cape buffalo will cover about eight yards per second. He had life-saving skills I lacked, despite my extensive shooting background and the thousands of deer I'd grassed. I took note of the lesson and promised I'd practise to perfect my own reloading technique until I was similarly competent, sufficiently accurate and rapid. But what is sufficient?

I listened to another first-class lesson delivery on the Gunsite stand at the Safari Club International show in Reno, Nevada some 10 years back. Buzz, the new owner of Gunsite, was on the stand with a few of his chiselled professional instructors around him when a small group of smartly dressed shooting types wandered on. The loudest proceeded to tell the Gunsite team how every shot he'd ever fired was on top of the last one, producing

photos of tiny clover-leaf groups to demonstrate his skill at arms. Buzz listened patiently, as he went on to talk of his desire to hunt, learn self-defence shooting skills and more.

After about 10 minutes the aficionado had to pause for breath. As he did, Buzz drawled, "D'yall wanna know what y'all doin' wrong?" Flabbergasted, the chap said, "Wrong, what do you mean wrong?" Smiling, Buzz continued: "Yep, wrong... y'all shooting too slow..." He motioned with his hands. "If you're grouping like this [finger and thumb an inch apart] y'all shooting too slow. If y'all shooting like this [he put his hands about a foot apart] y'all shooting too fast. Ya jest needs to shoot like this [he cupped his hands, as if around an orange] and y'all shootin' jest right."

If your first shot is perfect, then that's great. However, you should plan and practise for a series of equally

RIGHT: It's easier to visualise the lethal zone when the quarry is side on

well-delivered, suitably rapid shots, should your first not cut the mustard. If you take the rifle out of your shoulder to reload, lift your head off the stock, lose the target, or all three, you won't be ready to follow up the first shot should you need to. The main difference between professionals and amateurs is their readiness for any second or subsequent shots. As Robbie said, this is what can save your life – and also prevent unnecessary suffering to the quarry.

The next significant difference between pros and amateurs is their understanding of the quarry in three dimensions, i.e. how to take a perfect shot from an imperfect angle and still achieve a humane kill. Additionally, this familiarity with anatomy can prevent unnecessary meat damage, as well as preventing us from firing at the wrong moment and into the wrong part of the quarry. Targets are two-

BELOW: Keeping the rifle in the shoulder when reloading avoids missed chances





"IT IS VITALLY IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND YOUR QUARRY, ITS ANATOMY AND ROUTES TO THE KILL ZONE"

« dimensional, they don't move and they don't feel pain. Quarry is three-dimensional, fast and sentient.

The vast majority of quarry has four legs, a heart and lungs between the front legs, and a little fore and aft. Most shots are rightly placed to pass through the centre of this lethal zone and it's also an area that's easy to visualise from exactly side on. Animals quartering towards, or away, present a more difficult target. Quartering away, the bullet must be placed further back, so it quarters forwards, towards the shoulder on the opposite side. An animal quartering towards you is putting the onside leg and shoulder between you and the perfect path for your bullet. Will it make it through? Slower, heavier hunting bullets probably will; fast, fragile varmint or target bullets probably won't.

The reason professional hunters often use solid, non-expanding hunting bullets is to meet their need to be able to put the bullet through the heart, lungs or brain of dangerous game at any angle. Imagine trying to put a bullet through a rugby ball suspended somewhere in a 1,200-litre domestic fuel tank and you are starting to get the picture. Bullet design, materials and construction have improved significantly over the past 20 years. We now have expanding bullets that can retain up to 100% of their weight during penetration. This greatly improves the straight-line performance, energy management and ability to kill humanely in tough quarry and from imperfect angles. Brand names such as Interlock, Interbond, Corelokt, Barnes X, A-Frame, H-Mantel, Partition, Fusion and others all control penetration, reducing or eliminating bullet failure, core fragmentation and separation.

If you can guarantee all your shots will be on light-framed animals such as deer, and delivered side on to the chest cavity, then the general run of bullets with simple copper jacket, lead core expanding construction and soft points or ballistic tips will work well. If you are shooting non-edible pest species, when meat damage is of no concern and fast kills at all ranges is a prerequisite, then the fragile, fast expanding brands work perfectly well. I once dug the copper jacket of a separated bullet out of a Père David's deer I had grassed with a single well-placed shot. Noting its state, I said, "Oh look, the bullet

FIVE WAYS TO PREPARE TO SHOOT LIKE A PROFESSIONAL:

1. Lose the bipod and practise dry firing, then live firing from standing, kneeling and sitting.
2. Learn how to shoot really well off sticks, either bipod or quad pod versions.
3. Practise making the shot quickly, within two to four seconds of mounting and aiming when the quarry is best presented.
4. Perfect reloading with the rifle in your shoulder, your sights on the target and your cheek welded to the stock. The brass will still be there later, the animal won't be...
5. Assuming a five-inch diameter kill zone, sight your rifle in two inches high at 100 yards. Your bullet will likely be dead-on at 200 yards (zero) and three inches low at 230 yards. If you are within 230 yards, just aim for the centre of the kill zone. This is point-blank zero.

I'm becoming increasingly burdened with the theory of rangefinders, ballistic solutions, scopes with more knobs than the International Space Station, 'zoom' this and 'twiddle' that stuff which distract me from the real job: getting close enough to the quarry, then acting quickly and decisively once the decision to kill is made. That's the job, so keep it simple.

failed." The pragmatic pro next to me said: "At what stage in the humane kill of that stag do you think it failed?" Doh, point taken.

So it is vitally important to understand your quarry, its anatomy and three-dimensional routes to the kill zone. Then it is important you use the right bullet for the job. Knowing the angle for a quartering towards chest shot is useless if the bullet fails before entering the chest cavity. Shooting a deer at longer range and hitting the mark perfectly is only effective if the bullet then expands and dumps lethal

force into the kill zone. If you used a match bullet because it shot the tiniest groups on paper it may well zip through like a solid. This can result in a lingering, slow kill, a lost animal, and much angst for you.

The last thing that separates the pros from the amateurs is that professionals always use simple, well-worn, quality kit. Their rifles, sights, ammunition, game plan and actions suggest straightforward, practical solutions to age-old questions. They eschew theory and rely on proven practice. **RS**

BELOW: Correct stick technique is one skill that sets professionals apart



PICTURE: CHRIS PARKIN