



Avid game shooter Will Ashby says having a custom-fitted gun gives him complete peace of mind on the peg.

Fit for purpose?

Gunfit is often described as a dark art. *Shooting Gazette* looks into what lies behind the mystery and what benefits a custom-fitted shotgun give you in the field.

The definition of a beautifully-fitting shotgun is one that can be mounted instinctively and consistently, as if the shooter were pointing his finger at the bird. A mounted shotgun is said to fit properly when the shooter's eye is centred on the rib and positioned just above it.

While off-the-shelf shotguns are designed to answer an average situation and can fit some shooters reasonably well, significant improvements in performance can be gained from using a bespoke, custom-made gun. Many people can, of course, pick up and shoot with any gun, but shooting successfully with a poorly-fitting one can only be achieved by compromising technique, with the shooter having to adapt to the weapon to achieve a proper eye-muzzle relationship. The result is a split-second pause or break in the natural mount or swing – enough to result in a miss or at best inconsistent shooting.

Four elements of gunfit

Adam Calvert, one of the UK's best known independent shooting instructors and an expert gunfitter, lists what he sees as the four most important elements of gunfit: consistent mounting of the gun; correct comb height to ensure the shooter can see down the barrel accurately; stock length; and cast.

But it doesn't stop there, as Adam explains: "There are different levels of gunfit, depending on how deep you want to go. For example, if I am fitting a pair of guns for a double-gunning grouse shooter I may add palm swells to the pistol grips to ensure the hand is put in the right place quickly after changing guns. But it doesn't matter if you are using a £50 gun or a £50,000 gun, if it doesn't shoot where you are looking it will be useless."

Off-the-shelf or bespoke?

There are two routes to ensuring a gun fits properly. The first is for the shooter to buy an off-the-shelf gun that fits ▶



Former model and television presenter Mel Sykes is a seriously competitive shooter these days and she is pictured here at the Zoli factory in Italy discussing a custom-made gun with the boss, Paolo Zoli.



Paolo Zoli explains how stock dimensions are all-important in good gunfit.

relatively well and then use a gun-fitter to make the necessary adjustments, after taking into account shooting style, build, posture and so on. The second is to have a bespoke gun made.

One company renowned for building high-quality bespoke shotguns is Zoli of Italy, which has been making guns since the early 1500s. Sold to clients in the UK by Edgar Brothers, Zoli shotguns can be customised in one of two ways, as Paolo Zoli, the company's boss explains: "Many of our off-the-shelf shotguns are close to what a shooter needs, thanks to their adjustable comb heights, stock lengths and triggers, so these will fit up to a certain level of shooting. But for shooters who want to compete successfully or obtain the best results with their gun, it is necessary to go further and have a custom shotgun made."

According to Paolo Zoli, the most important elements of customising a gun are related to stock dimensions, length of the barrels and the adjustment

"Mounting the gun in the gun room won't replicate shooting in the field."

of the trigger mechanism in terms of crispness and pressure. "But there is an almost endless list of variables for someone that wants a highly customised gun," says Paolo. "For example, we will take into account barrel weight and bore diameter, the customer's height, weight and build, the length of their arms and neck, the angle of the neck to the head, the angles between their hand, wrist and elbow when they shoot, their posture and how they move, how they shoot, and how they handle the gun. We also have to ensure that the stock weight meets the needs of the shooter

in terms of balance, swing, stance and so on. It is a very personal thing."

Peace of mind on the peg

Adam Calvert agrees that studying the biometrics of the client and how they move is crucial, and to this end will watch a client shoot for quite some time to analyse how they move. He also believes it's vital to take the client into the environment in which they will be shooting to ensure measurements are accurate. "Asking them to mount the gun in the gun room is not going to replicate how they shoot in the field or on the clay ground," he says.

Will Ashby, an avid game shooter and one of Zoli's custom clients, has seen improvement in his shooting since taking delivery of his pair of bespoke shotguns. "Having a custom-fitted gun eliminates any doubts in your mind regarding your choice of tool for the job. To put it into a game-shooting context, when you're standing on that moor or in a valley, it's one less thing

to worry about because the gun has been made for you and you can trust it. Having a gun custom made is the ultimate way of helping you be as good as you can possibly be."

Becky McKenzie, a sporting and FITASC clay shooter, agrees: "Having a custom-fitted Zoli has raised my performance and has undoubtedly contributed to me winning the British Grand Prix FITASC, British Open Sporting, English Open FITASC and World All Round. It is paramount for a shooting athlete to have equipment that fits him or her, to achieve the best performance possible."

Improved results

The big question, of course, is how much difference a custom shotgun makes. For Adam Calvert, it is significant: "I can see an improvement of between five and 25 per cent when a client uses a correctly fitted gun. It enables the shooter to mount consistently, to shoot accurately and is hugely important at the extreme end of shooting, such as high pheasants. After all, if you are one-eighth of an inch out on the cast or the drop measurement at face, this equates to the centre of the pattern being six inches off the target at 40 yards."

Robert Cross, a shooting instructor at the Royal Berkshire Shooting School with 23 years' experience on both clays and game, agrees: "A well-fitting shotgun goes a long way to improving a shooter's success whether on the clay ground or in the field. It is vital to get elements such as drop, comb height, stock length and cast right. On top of that you need consistent gun mount, which of course is far more achievable if the gun fits. So a nicely-fitting shotgun will help the shooter a great deal."

For Paolo Zoli, while the gunfitting process is undoubtedly complex, its benefits are simple: "A bespoke gun is comfortable to use, has little recoil, feels like part of the body and gives the user confidence. To sum up it up in one sentence, a bespoke shotgun turns a mere shooter into a hunter." 🦅



A custom-made gun is a fabulous thing to own and you can cherish using something which has been lovingly crafted by experts in their field.