

How to be a better shot

Game shooters are notoriously shy of lessons, but seek out a professional instructor and you will reap the benefits, as **Will Hetherington** discovers at E.J. Churchill Shooting Ground.

Photography: **Paul Fievez**

I shoot game regularly and I am reasonably confident in my ability to consistently bring down normal driven pheasants. But, I suspect like many readers, there are some days, or even just some drives, when the wheels fall off and I am left scratching my head. More often than not I struggle on longer crosses but sometimes my bread and butter overhead driven shooting lets me down too.

And again, probably like most readers, I haven't really done much about it, but this year I decided to face up to my demons and ask a professional shooting instructor what I can do to iron out the flaws. Like skiing, tennis or golf, shooting is a sport where one-to-one instruction is a mixture of technical

input and psychological assistance, so it is important to find the right person for you. There are plenty of good shooting schools all over the country but I was to benefit from the wisdom of Adam Calvert, head instructor at the extremely well-appointed E.J. Churchill Shooting School on the outskirts of High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire.

Apart from overseeing the new gun shop and the shooting ground, Adam also spent more than 90 days in the shooting field last season with clients. So he has a vast amount of experience in how game shooters think and the common mistakes they make. I went to him and pretty much said: "Adam, I want to be a better shot. What am I doing wrong and how can I correct it?"

Problems with gun mount

I have shot with the same gun for the last decade and I have always found it equal to the task, but I have never had it fitted, so this was the obvious starting point. Having ascertained that I am still right-eye dominant (this can change over time so it's worth checking) Adam asked me to dry-mount the gun so he could make an initial assessment.

Immediately he looked concerned. The butt of the stock was not fitting into the pocket of my shoulder as it should and my right eye was not directly aligned over the rib of the barrels. Due to a lack of cast (bend in the stock) I had developed a way of mounting the gun to deal with this, but it was far from ideal.

Have you ever taken your shotgun to a pattern plate? It's a very easy way of finding out how straight you are shooting.

Below: EJ Churchill chief instructor Adam Calvert (right) shows the spread of the shot – wider than you might think!



It's apparent from these pictures that the grip on the author's gun is not right for his hand. In the gun-down position the trigger finger extends beyond the front of the trigger guard. So to compensate, the right hand moves down the grip during the gun mount, causing unnecessary movement and distraction. This is a clear example of how good gun fit can help you become a better shot.



In fact, Adam immediately asked me to change my stance so that my feet face further forward. This means the whole torso is more open and it is easier to get the butt into the shoulder pocket because it is much more accessible. He also spotted that I was mounting into the shoulder first and cheek second – another mistake!

So, within two minutes and without stepping outside, I was practising a different stance and gun mount, with the end result being that my right eye was now looking down the same line as the barrels. It felt a little awkward but I understood everything Adam said, and I knew there had been some game days in the past where my gun mount had let me down. In fact I had always felt my gun-mount could have been better.

How important is gun fit?

So, my gun does not have enough cast for me and this need will vary in accordance with shape, size and eye dominance. But Adam also spotted that the grip is not ideal for my hand shape and size. This is not something I had thought about before, but as soon as it was pointed out, it became obvious that I was sub-consciously making allowances for this as I moved into the gun mount. I wonder how many other readers are in the same boat? The bottom line is that unless you have had the gun made to measure, it is highly unlikely that everything will fit properly. This doesn't mean you can't shoot with it, but if the stock length and cast, grip and comb height are all adjusted to suit you then you will inevitably become a better shot. And it doesn't have to be a bespoke Purdey or Holland & Holland. You can have this work done on almost any gun. Food for thought indeed...

To the clays

Having assessed my gun mount indoors, Adam's next step was to see what happens when faced with the real thing. Now, when an instructor in any sport has asked you to work on a few things, all your years of experience seem to evaporate and novice status is mentally re-assumed. So when faced with the

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lowest of driven clays, I suddenly found I was concentrating so hard on my stance and gun mount that the target was not so straightforward. Thankfully I retained enough composure to break a few but I wouldn't say my instructor looked totally pleased. He asked me to work on a better body position, with my hips and bum further back and head further forward.

Moving to a more challenging stand – with a small tower throwing driven birds to the left, overhead and to the right – started to show up a few more problems, particularly with the clay to the left. Although at least the overhead clay was simple enough and my timing on to the bird was deemed competent.

I asked about how early the shot should be taken because sometimes I think I leave it a little late. Adam's response was that as long as it is a successful shot then it is up to the individual how early or late to take the bird. However, he did explain that



During gun mount the stock should come into the cheek before the butt goes into the shoulder.

waiting for the pheasant to commit to its line of flight is important. If you mount on to a pheasant too early and then it starts to curl off, it is hard to follow the line because you have set yourself up for the straight driven shot. This is something that can really only be learned by observing birds in flight on shoot day. Eventually it becomes easier to ascertain when the bird has committed and when it's time to engage.

The pattern plate

How many readers have taken their gun to a pattern plate? This is not something we have researched but I imagine it's not a high percentage. But it's a really useful demonstration of exactly where your shot is going and how big the spread is at different ranges. Adam took me to the plate after a few stands on the clays and his suspicions were confirmed when my first two shots clearly indicated I was shooting slightly to the left. Once you have had a couple of shots it is human nature to over-compensate for any waywardness and this is exactly what I did. But generally the shot seemed to be hitting the right area, which was reassuring. It's a strange feeling to mount a loaded shotgun on to a completely stationary target but extremely valuable nonetheless. And from approximately 35 yards it is surprising how wide the spread is. To be honest, it made me wonder how we ever miss!



If your gun mount is correct and your gun fits, your master eye should be looking straight down the rib of the barrels of an over-under.

Higher and longer

After the pattern plate we moved to a higher tower to see how I coped. Here things finally started to click into place and I began to receive more positive feedback from behind my right shoulder. Everybody sees lead or forward allowance in different ways and for me it's in the smallest measurements. But it doesn't matter how you measure it – what's important is working out how much more is needed.

I had one drive last season where I was on the left-hand end of the line and I walked up with the beating line as they went through the wood to my left. On this drive I missed a succession of birds on the left as they flew back over the wood. At the time I wasn't sure what the problem was but on this tower everything became crystal clear. A series of similar targets kept flying unscathed after my shot. Adam knew exactly what the problem was but wanted me to work it out for myself. Not easy because a missed clay doesn't leave too many clues. But eventually Adam dropped enough hints for me to decipher that on this particular bird I had to give it quite a lot more lead than I thought.

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The lessons I learnt

At the end of this session, Adam asked me to focus on just two things. The first is practising my gun mount. And yes, he meant I need to take an unloaded gun and practice the gun mount repetitively, until the gun is coming perfectly into my cheek without thinking about it, and my right eye is aligned over the rib. I can't say I have ever done much practice of this nature, but I can certainly see the benefit now. If it worked for Lord Ripon...

The second thing he asked me to work on is being more confident with lead. By this he meant that I need to swing through the bird more swiftly after mounting the gun. It seems that my desire to make sure of the shot has actually been hampering me, because I can spend too long thinking about it.

And one other thing we talked about during the lesson was the advantage of taking a few practice swings on the peg before a drive starts. Self-consciousness usually prevents me from doing this but now I can really see the value. A couple of swings to the left, straight overhead and to the right will really help establish where the birds might come from and what it will look like when they do. This is also a useful routine to help prepare for the action after a social drink and a chat between drives. And it is something to fall back on when things go wrong.

Practice makes perfect

There is a tendency among us blokes in the shooting world to steer well away from one-to-one instruction because we believe we can sort it out ourselves, and it's nothing that won't come right with a bit of practice. Also, we don't want to face up to any long-established bad habits because correcting them might be time consuming and take real effort. But think of all the famous top shots in this country. Don't believe for one second that they don't practice. So go and see an instructor. You will not regret it. 🦅