



The perfect fit

Seeking the advice of a professional gunfitter will enhance comfort – and improve your shooting

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I firmly believe shotgun shooting is a relatively straightforward process that needs to be kept as simple as possible. Gunfit has a reputation as a bit of a dark art, but it's really all about ensuring the gun shoots where you are looking, or where you want the gun to impact.

When fitting a gun to shoot driven game, I tend to fit it to impact high, either 60:40 (this means 60% of the pellets are above the point of aim and 40% are below) or, my preferred ratio, 80:20. This gives you a better view over the top of the gun

The writer, a shooting instructor, advises on gun mounting at a clay stand

when shooting crossing birds as it allows you to run the gun under the bird and not lose sight of the bird at any point. As a result, you can see the bird die clearly and are more likely to finish the shot. It also produces in-built lead on driven targets, which account for a large proportion of your shots when game shooting.

Establishing eye dominance is the first step in any gunfitting journey. I come across ladies frequently who have been misdiagnosed with eye-dominance issues when the problem is in fact poor gunfit. Beyond that, there are roughly three gunfits in everyone's shooting career.

The first, the gun check, is particularly important for ladies. There are now some ladies' shotguns on the market, but

most guns are still designed with men in mind and are frequently too long in the stock for the majority of women. And because most ladies have higher cheekbones and smaller heads than men, many guns tend to be too low in the comb, forcing women to look into the back of the gun or lift their head off the stock to see what they're shooting at. Put simply, if you can't see it, you definitely can't shoot it.

The second fit comes when your gun mount has settled – if the mount isn't consistent, you are not ready for this stage because a gunfit is only as good as your gun mount. It is well worth spending a little bit of money to get the second fit right, because it will act as the foundation of your shooting for years to come. →



The third fit is probably eight to 10 years in, when your gun mount should have settled completely; this will allow an experienced gunfitter to get the very best fit and gun combination to suit your individual shooting style.

When buying a new gun, most people seek advice from the gun shop. A good shop will go through several different guns in order to find one that's best for you. A vital consideration here is the position of your eyes: they should be level and the view, when looking down the gun, should be out of their centre. The eye should sit on top of the rib, almost like a marble placed on top of a table, and shouldn't be biased to either side.

If you are unable to find a gun that fits you off the rack, you may want to alter an existing one and this is where I suggest you invest in a session with an experienced gunfitter. A gun can be shortened, lengthened, have recoil pads fitted or have comb height and cast adjusted. Please be aware, however, that this has its limitations. It's a bit like altering a pair of trousers: you can take them in or out slightly and shorten the leg, but thereafter it becomes quite difficult – or there are compromises that you have to make. Take comb height, for example. The most



Above: checking gun mount, which must be consistent before progressing, from in front
Left: a rubber butt extension will increase the length of the stock and help to reduce recoil

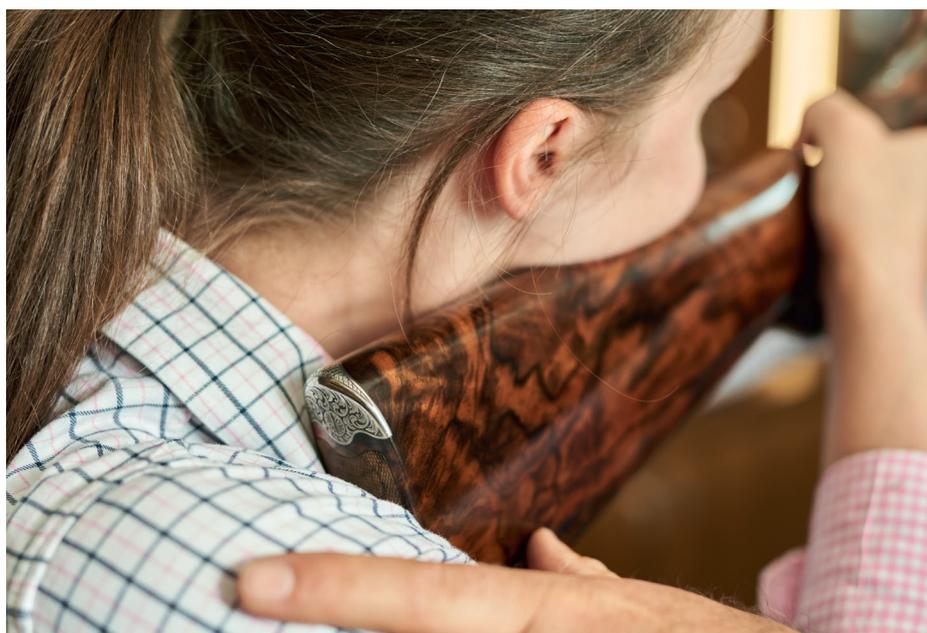
common process to alter a stock to specific dimensions is for the wood to be heated by oil, steam or infrared. Once it becomes pliable, the stock can be bent to the correct measurements. Depending on the wood, however, there is only so much you can bend the stock without risking it cracking, which means it's not always possible to reach the desired dimension.

If you are at your second or third stage of gunfitting, you may want to have a fully custom-made gun, shaped from scratch to fit you perfectly, down to stock shape, pad

(if required), grip shape and size, and even the thickness and size of the fore-end. In this situation, you need a specialist gunfitter to get the best results.

The gunfit process itself comprises several steps. The first is to ascertain your requirements and any other critical factors, such as the main type of shooting that will be carried out with the gun, whether the fit is for an over-and-under or a side-by-side, and whether eye dominance has been checked. The gunfitter should then watch you shoot your current gun. With 75% of the clients I fit, the gun mount in the lodge bears no relevance to how they actually mount while shooting.

A try gun should then be used to produce measurements; I often use a variety of guns with different measurements to allow the client to feel a particular size of grip or fore-end. You should then shoot a few clays, to build confidence and relax with the new measurements, and a pattern plate, to ensure that the gun is impacting where you want it to. Although there are a few clients who struggle at



Pitch, the angle of the butt, is often overlooked – here, it is incorrect as the toe of the gun is digging into the top of the chest forcing the gun to be mounted high



Here, the grip is too large, which can increase felt recoil and make it difficult to fire the second barrel

shooting pattern plates, this part of the process is vital for an accurate fit: even the best gunfitter will struggle to get it exactly right without the use of a pattern plate.

Finally, you should receive a full set of detailed measurements, including length, cast and drop, but also grip dimensions, butt height and width, and front of the comb from the breech face. I take measurements of the client's hands to determine the correct grip shape and give the stocker a better visual picture of what they are trying to build. It is important to remember that the stocker rarely meets the client, so the more information on the fitting sheet, the more accurate a job they can do. For the ultimate, perfectly fitting gun, however, you should try and have an additional fitting with the stocker present – it is amazing how a millimetre taken off a grip shape or comb height can have a large impact on how the gun feels and where it shoots.

“ Try and have an additional fitting with the stocker present ”

Many people attempt to cure poor gunfit or shooting by buying a more expensive gun, but, put bluntly, this doesn't work. I would recommend spending about a quarter of the value of whatever gun you are buying on making sure it fits. Although the majority of the steps in a gunfitting process are nonspecific to either gender, some elements are particularly crucial for women.

USEFUL QUICK FIXES BEFORE YOUR GUNFITTING

COMB HEIGHT This can be fixed easily by using a comb raiser taped onto the top of the comb to increase height. Recoil Systems makes a comb raiser that, as well as raising the comb, adds a degree of cushioning to help with face recoil. A number of gel pads are available, but I would urge caution with these as they often lead to the face being pushed away from the gun (altering cast measurements), as well as making the comb higher.

FACE RECOIL The best solution I have found for this is a neoprene stock cover. Occasionally, it is possible, if the gun is fitted with a pad, to add a spacer to adjust the pitch of the stock.

SHOULDER RECOIL In most quick-fix situations, the best solution is a shoulder pad. The best one I have found is a brand called Past Field, which can be used on either shoulder. For a longer-term solution, I would highly recommend having an Isis XPad fitted to the gun.

LENGTH OF PULL Shortening is the most likely thing you are going to be doing for a lady, but having a gunsmith shorten a gun is not a quick fix; in certain circumstances, I have entirely removed the pad (if the gun has one), but this only tends to work for a day and usually when clients are wearing thick enough clothes to protect them from recoil, so I don't really recommend it. If the gun is not long enough, then you can get butt extensions; the best ones I find are rubber ones that grip the stock tightly.

I believe that becoming a better shot depends on a combination of factors, many of which we can control, including gunfit. A correctly fitted gun is vital if you are to perform consistently and to the best of your ability – and it should make it more comfortable to shoot, helping you make the most of your days.

RECOIL

In my experience, this is by far the biggest problem most women have when shooting. I frequently advise my female clients to shoot 12-bore over 20-bore, with the proviso that it must be a →

well-balanced one, with the weight of the gun firmly between the hands. I cannot stress how important this is. Everyone tends to focus on weight rather than balance, but a correctly balanced gun should not feel heavy. Gunfit has a large impact on recoil: a gun that fits you correctly will be almost moulded to your body and more comfortable to shoot, rather like a pair of trainers that fit you well makes running much easier. In particular, pitch – the angle of the butt – is key, yet often overlooked: if the gun has too much toe on the stock, it will dig into the top of a woman's chest, potentially causing bruising and lead-

ing to face recoil, as the gun can move upwards into the cheek when it's fired because there's a gap between its heel and the shoulder. As a result, it is often necessary to fit what we refer to as negative pitch: this is slightly longer at the top (heel) than the bottom (toe). It's also possible to cast the toe of the gun away from the top of the chest to make shooting more comfortable. There are other things that can help, such as a specialist recoil pad or even a full recoil suppressor, but these are not to everyone's liking and I suggest trying one first before committing. Correct grip shape and a palm swell can all aid towards reducing recoil.

GRIP SHAPE

Generally, ladies are likely to have smaller hands and shorter fingers than men, so many standard grips don't fit well. Although commonly overlooked, this can lead to a number of issues, such as increased felt recoil – because you cannot grip the gun correctly you therefore cannot mount it properly – or only being able to fire one barrel with a single trigger, because the finger is at the wrong angle, causing the trigger to be pulled upwards rather than back, which in turn makes it difficult to release and reset.

COMB HEIGHT

Comb height for me is by far the most important measurement when it comes to shooting driven game. I frequently use a Montecarlo stock (which has a raised level comb) to make sure that the gun stays in the shoulder pocket and does not rise above the top of the shoulder, while the cheek and head position can be maintained correctly aligned with the rib.

TRIGGER PULLS

As part of a full gunfit, trigger pull should also be inspected, as it can inadvertently affect your shooting: too heavy and it could lead to checking your swing or, worse still, to a flinch as you squeeze the trigger. ■



Left: fitting a comb raiser to a stock, which makes the comb higher and can reduce recoil. Below: here, the stock is too long, making it difficult to mount

