

## Creating and Mapping a Shot Plan

Written by Don Currie

There are certainly many elements to breaking a pair of sporting clays targets. Some shooters believe that the key to success is all in looking at the target and pulling the trigger. Pre-shot planning however is essential to understanding the character of the target and determining the path and pace of your movement. In essence, good pre-shot planning is the foundation for good movement.

A pre-shot planning process is at the heart of consistency and one of the keys to higher scores. If practiced and faithfully employed, shot planning will become as natural as loading shells into your gun.

Two instructors early in my shooting career helped me establish a great foundation for shot planning: Bill Maguire and Richie Frisella. First came Richie who, in my shooting infancy, schooled me in the practice of shot planning. He taught me to observe each target of a pair throughout its flight and to pick out a breakpoint and hold point for both targets. Years later, Bill Maguire really elevated my level of sophistication and got me to think about planning as more of a mapping exercise.

When you step up to a station, survey your target area. Look at the terrain, the vegetation, the trees, the slope of the ground and the locations of the traps. When viewing the targets, follow each target through its entire flight path with the forefinger of your outstretched non-firing hand. Pick out at least two, preferably three, landmarks through which the target flies, visualizing and establishing an imaginary line across the background terrain or sky. Correctly identifying your target line is a critical piece of information as you plan the movement of your gun.

While observing the flight of the first

target, identify your pick-up point - the area closest to the trap where you are first able to see the target clearly as it emerges from the trap arm. Now identify your break-point. Ideally, this should be the point along the target line at which you are most comfortable breaking the target and, ideally, where the target is moving at a constant speed and direction (not in transition). The area where you feel most comfortable breaking the target may be different from that of your squad mate.

Strictly speaking, there is no right or wrong place to break a target. Depending on your experience and proficiency, you may feel more comfortable taking a target as it is rising, instead of at its apex or as a dropper for example. Your experience, confidence and visual acuity will determine your ability to break a target at different locations along its flight path. So, your break point is the place where you feel comfortable breaking the target.

While we have referred to the break point and pick up point as "points," you should think about them as "areas" rather than points. Your focus on the pick-up "point" should be very loose and diffused, thus maximizing your peripheral vision and ability to pick up the target with your eyes.

Similarly, you should also think of your break point as an area, rather than a point. Unlike the pick-up point, your focus on the target just prior to and through the break point should be very narrow and sharp. I have always believed that the moment of your strongest focus on the target should determine the point at which you pull the trigger, thus providing you with more flexibility as to the exact location of the break. If you compel yourself to break the target at an exact predetermined point against the terrain, it is more likely that your focus will be drawn

off the target.

Unlike the pick-up and break points, your hold point should be a definite point on the terrain or in the sky, rather than an area. The hold point is positioned along the flight path of the target between the pick-up point and the break point, and is where you orient the muzzle of your gun just prior to calling for the target. Exactly where you place your hold point will largely depend on the character of the target you are engaging.

As an example, if your first target is a left to right crosser, your hold point would normally measure about two-thirds of the distance back from your break point to your pick-up point along the target line. For quartering and going-away targets, you would normally move your hold point farther out and closer to the break point. In any case, your barrel should return to the hold point of your first target prior to calling for each pair.

What about the second target of a pair? There are too many possible target scenarios to cover them all here, but at a minimum you should know where your eyes need to go immediately after firing at the first target in order to successfully pick up and engage the second target. I call this my second pick-up point. As in the pick-up point of your first target, this should be an area not a point. If your gun is moving with your eyes, you shouldn't have to worry as much about a hold point for the second target unless you have a longer time interval between the first and second targets.

After shooting your first target (providing time allows), you should allow your focus to soften momentarily to pick-up the second bird and then re-focus on target #2 to break it. The interval between your concentrated focus on the first and second targets will be dictated by the

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timing of the pair. Your hold point is perhaps the most critical element of your move because it is the point from which your move starts.

Andy Stanley, a well-known Christian writer, developed and published *The Principle of the Path*. Basically the principle says that your path, not your intention, determines your destination. While Stanley was applying this as a life principle, it is no less true as it applies to the path from your hold point along the target line through your breakpoint.

In order to breed consistency into execution and achieve higher scores, you must consistently determine and use hold points. The great majority of my students who are newer shooters have three tendencies when it comes to establishing hold points: 1) they gradually move their hold points back toward the trap unconsciously with each subsequent pair, 2) they establish their hold point too far out, resulting in either a sudden upward move to the target line or a movement back toward the trap once the target is launched, or 3) they establish their hold point too far back, resulting in the target beating them, and a quick "catch-up" move along the target line.

Any one of these three of these mistakes can cause a miss. If, after your first pair, you feel as if the target got ahead of you or that you had to move back to the target after the target launched, then adjust your hold point accordingly...but then, keep it there. A change in hold point should always be conscious rather than accidental.

One final tip on planning: The best way to make sure that your plan is sound is to test your assumptions by visualizing or rehearsing the shot to insure that you have the correct hold points, pick-up points and break points.

Use the non-firing arm and forefinger to perform dry runs prior to stepping into the box. Simulate going to your hold point, watch the target launch, pick up the target with your eye, move your finger along and slightly under the target line through your first breakpoint, move to your second pick-up point moving to and through the second break point. If the timing works, go with it. If not, adjust your hold points and possibly your timing on the pair and test again. If it is your turn to shoot first in the squad, forget about changing chokes and make the most of your first look at the pair.

Now there are only four things left to do: take a deep breath, clear your mind, orient the barrel of your gun on the hold point and yell "PULL." While you may not break them all, a well rehearsed and faithfully executed shot planning process will improve your consistency and scores. Of that, you can be sure. - - - End



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