

SHOOTING

The UNDEATH *of* TRAP SHOOTING

Trap lives on, and for good reason.
by Terry Wieland

Classic trap in new guise: the Blaser F3, a top modern trap gun, wearing its "unsingle" barrel. With Federal Paper, it's a trap shooter's dream.

There was a time, 20 years ago, when you could hop in your car, drive around Arizona, and find all kinds of top-notch trap guns gathering dust in gunshops. Every rack had a few in the corner. There were Ithacas and Parkers, Berettas and Krieghoffs, and even exotic numbers like the Ljutic. The asking prices were sometimes ridiculously low; even so, there were few takers.

The reason was simple: Arizona is where old trap shooters go to die. When they do, their widows cart the guns off to the nearest gunshop and are paid a pittance for them. "No interest anymore, ma'am." And these formerly cherished firearms are offered at a fraction of their value.

A few writers in the 1990s noted this with sadness, but put it down to the general view that trap was a dying sport, the province of old men and older times. Sporting clays was the new game, and trap ranges around the country were half-deserted on those balmy spring days when a shooter's heart turns to thoughts of gunpowder.

But, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of trap's death were exaggerated. Trap, we're happy to report, is back. New trap guns are appearing, and those half-deserted trap ranges are thriving.

There are several reasons for this, but the main one can be summed up quite simply: Trap is no longer an old man's game. In fact, it isn't a "man's" game at all. It's now a young person's game, in the form of rapidly growing collegiate shooting. The very characteristics of trap that caused many to lose interest through the 1990s makes it the ideal shooting sport for schools and colleges.

Full disclosure: I'm a non-recovering trap addict from way back. I'm not particularly good at it, and I've never shot a registered target in my life, but three things about trap fascinate me: first, its history; second, the highly specialized guns involved; and third, the fact that in informal trap you can have a lot of fun competing, not with others on the line but simply with yourself.

For these reasons, it was sad to watch trap shooting decline from the most aristocratic of shooting sports to become a backwater as sporting clays

ranges sprang up all over the country. But an odd thing happened to sporting clays, and in a remarkably short time: Many of the things about trap that caused declining interest are now afflicting sporting clays, and it's a self-inflicted wound.

People lost interest in trap because it became so regimented it was no longer fun. At the highest levels, shooters were so good that missing a single bird was enough to put you out of even a state-level competition, never mind standing on the line at the Grand.

But it was more than that. In trap shooting, as in no other shotgun sport, the psychological aspects are paramount. It's a game of concentration, a game in which the shooter is at war with himself. When you're on the line, you're not so much competing against the other four shooters on the squad as you are enfolded in a cocoon of concentration, battling your own weaknesses.

In formal trap, there are five positions on the line, and you shoot your birds one at a time, in order; after five birds, you all move over one position, shoot five more, then move again. A round of trap is 25 shots.

In a bizarre way, it's a team sport with all the drawbacks and none of the virtues. How you shoot can be affected by the behavior of the other people on the squad. A good trap squad gets into a rhythm, with no delays and no chatter. Having a complainer on the line, or someone who mutters every time he misses a bird, upsets the rhythm and concentration. There are enough things to cause you to miss without adding boorish behavior.

Trap also, sad to say, brings out the worst in some people. Some guys become so wrapped up in it they become complete jerks. They complain about anything and everything to the point where they're not fun to shoot with, and the shooting itself loses its appeal. That, I believe, was a major factor in trap's decline.

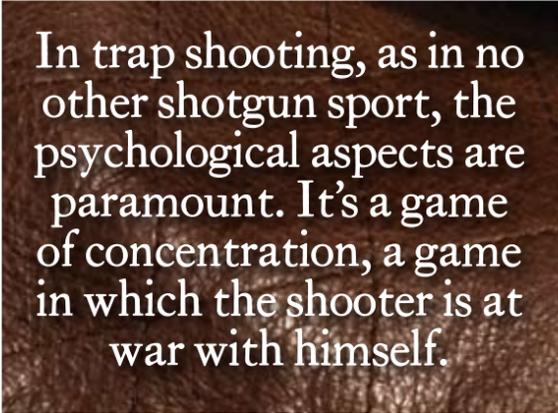
To have fun shooting a round of trap, it's ideal to have four other shooters about the same level as you, or maybe a little better. They should know the rules and take it seriously enough to allow everyone to concentrate and try to do their best, but they should also realize that their manhood doesn't hang on one missed bird.

The key is sportsmanship, not gamesmanship, regardless of what's at stake.

Because trap is a highly developed activity with firm rules and equally firm customs, and because trap fields are all identical, a score shot in New York can be compared directly to one shot in San Francisco. This allows national rankings everyone accepts.

It also means that when a school trap team travels to another state to compete, the ranges they find will be completely familiar to them. Home field advantage, such as exists on a sporting clays range, is eliminated. Because schools group their shooters into teams, there is competition to make the team. After that, though, the shooters root for each other when competing against other schools. It's the best of both worlds.

In case you haven't noticed, one of the changes in sporting clays has been the remarkably rapid evolution of the "sporting" gun, from something resembling a game gun into an exotic and specialized mechanism that makes even a trap gun look austere.



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Traditionally, dedicated trap guns are suitable for absolutely no other shooting sport. The classic trap gun is a high-quality, single-barreled gun with a tight choke. They are, and always have been, expensive. Spending money on a high-grade Ithaca or Purdey trap gun showed you were serious. The prize money was significant, and the competitors wore ties.

Trap guns, as a class, have always been exotic and expensive, as fascinating as a Formula One racer. This counts against them a bit at the collegiate level, but you can determine if trap's your game by starting with any O/U equipped with longish barrels and choke tubes, or even a pump gun. If trap clicks, you can invest in better guns as your interest and knowledge increase.

Collegiate trap shooters of my acquaintance have parents willing to invest in a good trap gun for their offspring, knowing that fine guns hold a big part of their value and can later be traded or sold. So the investment, large though it might be, is temporary. Not all of them shoot Perazzis, but they do shoot Brownings and Berettas, and there's nothing wrong with those.

Also, one should add, most of the dedicated competitors are the offspring of shooters who either already have a suitable gun, or have no objection to acquiring one. Parents will spend money on their children they wouldn't dream of spending on themselves. And—a touch of cynicism here—they can inherit the gun when the kid moves on.

Imagine being able to invest in a Blaser F3 with two sets of barrels, merely because you have your little girl's best interests at heart.

The days of finding an Ithaca 6E or a Parker trap gun for \$650 in a remote corner of Arizona are long gone. The renaissance of trap isn't the only reason. The expansion of Internet gun sales has a lot to do with it, and the most obscure gunshop is no longer dependent on random travelers stopping by.

Like any other consumer industry, the gun business follows trends, and the emergence of sporting clays in the 1990s was the salvation of shotgun makers that had endured a long dry spell. As competitors tried to homogenize sporting clays to make scores comparable from one part of the country to another, they adopted the practice of shooting with the gun already mounted—just like trap. Not surprisingly, sporting guns now resemble modern trap guns to the point that, for all practical purposes, they're interchangeable.

Of course, in sporting clays, the traditional single-barrel trap gun has no place and never will, and a few of us can't break the habit of stopping at every Guns for Sale sign to see if there's an Ithaca on the rack, for pennies. There never is, but we keep stopping anyway. You wouldn't believe the things we've found instead. ■

Wieland's addiction to trap travels in roughly 10-year cycles, but his love of trap guns is never-ending. Sometimes he even wears a tie.