

Too Old to Rock and Roll, Too Young to Die

By Todd Bender

Last year, I was working at my friend Michael Ferchaw's club, in the small village of Addison, New York. It was there that I was reunited with one of my favorite clients, William "Bobo" Bobownik. Bobo had just turned 88 the day before; he looks better than ever, and seeing him again was the highlight of my trip.

I first met and taught Bobo a few years back at the same club. He was a young, 83 years of age at the time. I will always remember Bobo for a number of reasons, but will never forget our initial conversation during our first meeting.

"Son..." he started sternly. He called me son—I got a kick out of that. He said, "Son, have you ever seen the world out of a pair of 83-year-old eyes?"

I responded, "No sir, I haven't."

He then pointed at me and said, "Good, you remember that all day!"

"Yes sir," I replied meekly and respectfully.

After my usual consultations with the rest of the group, we started our first round of skeet for the day, which is my daily ritual with students to determine what is going on in their game and what issues need to be addressed. When it was his turn, Bobo got up to Station 1, and started at me again.

"Son, do you know why I don't shoot trap?"

"No sir," I replied, having no idea where this was going.

"Because I'm too young!"

If I were texting right now, I would be LOL-ing and LMAO. That's why I love Bobo.

That's not the best part of the story. The next spring at the Master's in Savannah, at the age 84, Bobo broke his first 100 straight in the 28 gauge! Bobo has repeated that feat on numerous occasions, and recent at age 87, broke a 100 with the 12 gauge. And, thus is the purpose of this article. Is age a factor in shooting skeet, and more importantly, shooting competitively?

Over my three decades of coaching, I have been privileged enough to work with shooters from the age of eight to 85. I have seen shooters of all ranges of human abilities, and disabilities, and have never run into anyone who didn't have the eyes, reflexes and physical capabilities to shoot American skeet successfully.

Adaptation

My coach at Trinity University in Texas, Col. Tom Hanzel (USAF Ret.), as far as I am concerned, was and still is arguably the best skeet coach in the history of the game. Col. Hanzel coached more World champions, more Hall of Famers, etc. than most of all the other coaches in the sport put together. "Colonel," as his "kids" affectionately called him, routinely bested his students in competition, even into his 80s.

During my many conversations with the Colonel, he often spoke of changing his game as his physical abilities, eyes and reflexes, changed or in some cases deteriorated. In fact, during our long conversations in his office when I was in college, we spoke of present day shooters and how they would have to change their approach to the game as they aged—and if they would. Therefore, the key to maintaining your game as you age is to understand what is happening to your body and make the appropriate adjustments.

Hold points

The definition of a perfect hold point for a sustained lead shooter, is that the gun starts at a particular point, usually defined as 20 feet from the house, give or take a few feet, and as the target leaves the window, movement is initiated, which assumes a very important role of the eyes is controlled correctly, and by the time the target is 20 feet from the window, gun speed and target speed are matched and the correct lead is already established.

This means that hold points are based on a couple of things, target speed and the shooter's reaction time to what he or she is seeing. The hold point should be modified based on these things. If a target is faster than normal or the shooter does not possess the appropriate reaction time to control the target, then the hold point should be moved out ac-

cordingly, as did Colonel's, because of his reaction time. These modifications may be only a foot or two, but significant none the less, until the desired movement to the shot is attained.

To illustrate, during one of our Wounded Warrior Day's in DC, where we work with Soldiers from Walter Reed Army Medical Center, I had one student, a young enlisted man, named Sean. Sean had lost both of his legs above the knee in Iraq and during our time together, Sean was getting used to his new limbs. This caused Sean some problems maintaining his balance. Because balance was an issue for Sean, he could not create the required gun movement for a good shot, and still remain standing. Just the act of moving on a shot, such as high 4, would throw him off balance. So we modified his hold point, moved the gun out to spot, well toward the center of the field, where the gun movement was minimal, but still enough to hit a moving target. After only a few shots, Sean was hitting targets and after it was all said and done, he was the best shooter I had that day. He was successful and had a blast. I still get choked up thinking about it. Modifications can be made to anyone's game given a specific situation and be successful, assuming those modifications are correct and still follow accepted fundamentals.

Vision

Obviously, as we age our visual acuity diminishes. Even though tremendous vision is an asset, it is not a requirement. It is more important how you use your vision, as opposed to how good it is. One of my good friends is Al Magyar, who is one of the best things that has happened to the NSSA since Alex Kerr. Al is a past World champion, past NSSA president, many time All-American, and owner of a number of world record 400x400s. Al is also blind as a bat without his glasses, until now. Fortunately a recent surgery has given Al new and improved vision, so we may all be in trouble now that Al can see. But Al's previous visual limitations did not deter him. Through dedication, practice and desire, Al achieved in this sport what few do.

Even good vision deteriorates with age, and approaches can be modified to allow those of all abilities to succeed. The key is to understand the deficiencies and accurately assess and devise a path to overcome any roadblocks. Again, as an observer of this sport for a long time, I have never seen any physical condition that could not be overcome.

Eye placement, where you look as the target is called for, becomes more critical with age. As I near the milestone of 50 years of age, I have seen the change in my vision in recent years and have made the slight adaptations to my game, with reasonable success. Unfortunately, eye placement is strictly individual from the young to the old, so it would be impossible to lay out a definitive plan for an individual without first understanding the specific circumstances. In these cases, one should seek out the advice of a professional who understands such issues.

Even if you've had good vision all of your life, you need to be weary of changing vision, like my good friend Hank Schmidt from Texas. A few years ago, Hank had an unusual amount of difficulty breaking doubles, especially at Station 4. Then, during a trip to his internist for a physical, the doctor asked how long it had been since Hank had his eyes checked. Hank responded, "So long ago I couldn't honestly remember." He made an appointment and found out for the first time in 64 years, he need distance correction and glasses.

"It happened so gradually, I honestly had no idea that I needed help with my vision. I never realized that my eyes were not working like they used to. Now with the glasses, my eyes are picking up the target clear and sharp. (It's) all the difference in the world."

Also be aware that eye dominance can change with age, or at least conditions can occur where an eye that has been dominant for years starts to lose its dominance. As your eyes change, strengthening or weakening, when one eye loses strength, the stronger eye at any time can become dominant. Gradual loss of sight pictures or decline in scores over time can be indicative of this problem.

Do you shoot better in the morning than in the afternoon? Or do you shoot better in the first 50 as opposed to the back 50? Blaming all the above on your lack of ability to concentrate? These scenarios are indications of fatigue, which is more prevalent as we age, that can cause cross-firing. Although fatigue may not change dominance, fatigue can cause a breakdown of fundamentals that lead to cross-firing, which can indicate a shift in dominance. Again, consultation with not only a shooting professional who understands such phenomena and also an ophthalmologist is strongly recommended.

Fitness

Obviously, as we age, the body starts to experience more pain and limitations. Joints are of particular interest because joint flexibility controls our movements in sport. The key to protecting any joint in the body is to strengthen the muscles that support and control movement of that particular joint. That covers the upper body, which provides a stable platform for gun mount and the legs, which provide more controlled and efficient movements with the target.

In my next article, I will address fitness issues in more detail. The following is an excerpt from that article and my conversation with respected orthopedic surgeon and shooter, Dr. Bill Dannenmaier. "A lot of exercises which build big legs in young people can hurt older people," noted Dr. Dannenmaier. "An arthritic knee or patello-femoral joint can make the Bender stance more difficult as you age. Lunges, leg presses, knee bends, stair and hill climbing are fine for college kids, but they hurt 50-year-old knee caps on a regular basis.

"The patello-femoral joint, where the kneecap rides and rubs in the femoral groove, experiences three to five times body weight force in a normal stair climb. A semi-squat which you (Todd) use so effectively to make a living can be painful and maybe difficult for many middle-aged shooters." So accepted modifications may be necessary when developing a fitness routine and or a shooting posture. Again, this will be covered more next month.

A brisk-paced daily walk can do wonders in reducing weight, which stresses joints, and increasing cardio vascular fitness, both of which can be an effective compliment to good shooting. Cardio means better transport of oxygen, which will improve the function of everything, from the eyes to your mental ability to focus.

Do skills deteriorate?

It is a given that as we age, we slow down. But some people still maintain skills at advanced ages. In Geoff Colvin's book, "Talent is Overrated," research has revealed that across "a very broad range of domains—management, aircraft piloting, music, bridge, and others—show consistently that excellent performers suffer the same age-related declines in speed and general cognitive abilities as everyone else does, except in their field of expertise."

This is because these elite performers continue to push themselves and practice their skills, and over the years pathways in the brain are fortified and protected to some extent against the ravages of age. It has also been found that mental abilities can be trained much later in life than previously believed. Previously medical thought was that once we reached adulthood, we can only lose neurons, not add them, and our brain's ability to adapt itself to new challenges, known as brain plasticity, shuts down. More recent research shows that none of this is true. Our brain is able to still add neurons well into old age when conditions demand it. Given the right training, plasticity will increase in the regions that normally show the greatest atrophy.

This means that as we age, we can still practice skills that are necessary to your success in a chosen endeavor. All activities that exercise hand/eye coordination, fitness, and reaction times should be undertaken, to stave off the deterioration of these skills. In the end, it is a choice about how much effort we want to invest in our performance.

The National Basketball Association great, Karl Malone, once said of aging athletes, "It's not that their bodies stop, it's just that they've decided to stop pushing it." This is great news, except of course when considering Wayne Mayes. As long as he continues to push himself, his learned skills should not diminish. That could be a problem for all of us.

For information about

BenderShima Worldwide and for Todd's 2011 clinic schedule, go to Bendershima.com or contact Todd at bendershima@aol.com. For Todd's newest videos on skeet shooting, contact Sunrise Productions at 800.862.6399.