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Newsletter

A TALE OF THREE HATS

by Chris Batha



Competitive live-pigeon shoots in the US may be more common than you think, but they are private events by invitation-only because the sport is controversial. To avoid publicity and saboteurs, the etiquette and protocol around pigeon shoots remind me of the rules laid out in the movie *Fight Club*: “The first rule of Fight Club is: You do not talk about Fight Club.” But the history of the sport is much different, with soaring popularity among sporting gentlemen establishing the proving grounds for the modern competition shotgun.

The terms we use when shooting clay targets, such as “pull,” “trap,” “trapper” and “clay pigeon,” originated from the sport of live-pigeon shooting. “Pull” was the call for the “trapper” to pull a cord that triggered a “trap” to release a pigeon (usually what’s known as a rock dove, or rock pigeon—*Columba livia*) into the air.

The birth of the sport of live-pigeon shooting is credited to the young bucks of the Georgian period. In the late 1700s the combination of wealth and spare time created a landed gentry with plenty of resources and nothing but time on their hands. To add a little spice to life, they enjoyed wagering on a variety of sports—horse racing, pugilism and cards, to name a few.

Eventually a small group invented the sport of “live pigeon shooting,” the earliest descriptions of which involved placing pigeons in small, dug holes in the ground and, to keep the birds in place, placing stovepipe hats over the holes. A string was attached to each hat (usually three hats and holes were used to increase difficulty by offering random locations), and on the word “pull” the string was pulled and the hat toppled away, releasing the pigeon.

Public hosteries of the period hosted various gambling opportunities like cards, cockfighting and boxing, and The Old Hats on Ealing Common, just west of London, was such an establishment. It is believed that the name originated from the live-pigeon matches held there, introducing what was to become a worldwide shooting sport.

Of course, as in many games involving wagering, there were those who attempted to increase the odds in their favor, and pigeon shooting was no exception. For example, a large tip sometimes increased the odds that a particular hat was pulled. So the top hats eventually were superseded by spring-operated “traps,” or “boxes,” and the “trappers” were isolated from the competitors. In 1810 London’s Horney Wood House became the first dedicated live-pigeon-shooting club and the first to start using spring traps. By the mid-1800s, as the numbers of both participants and clubs had increased, the sport was being run under an agreed set of rules to ensure a level playing field.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, large-bore, single-barrel flintlock shotguns had predominated for this type of shooting. With time, these large-bore guns were replaced by smaller double-barreled shotguns. W.W. Greener described the early flintlock guns used at live-pigeon matches as “small cannons!”

The development and perfection of the modern live-pigeon gun occurred between 1860 and 1909, during a period of extraordinary wealth and the peak in popularity of the sport. Success in live-pigeon competitions depended as much on the guns as the shooters, and the huge purses being contested could be won or lost on a simple malfunction. These events became the proving grounds for the innovations, patents and developments of modern competition shotguns.

Live-pigeon shooting became so popular that head-to-head matches were reported in the daily papers. The sport was even included in the 1900 Summer Olympics in Paris, though its status there as an “official” competition or as an associated exhibition is somewhat clouded.

At the Olympic Games, pigeons were released from spring boxes in the center of a fenced ring, and the object was to see who could drop the most birds within the ring. The game was becoming more formalized, though shooting stations could range from 25 to 35 yards. This was made more difficult by the random release of the traps and the rule that, to count, the pigeon had to fall within the ring. The bird had to fall dead or wounded fall within the rig to score. If it subsequently flew out of the ring it was a lost bird. Participants were eliminated once they missed two birds in a row. The winner’s purse at the 1900 Olympic Games was 20,000 francs, a prize worth something like \$120,000 today! Leon de Lunden of Belgium won the event, dropping 21 pigeons from six five-bird races to win.

As you might imagine, all of those taking part chose their guns, cartridges and chokes with the same care their modern clay-shooting counterparts do. Because of the “two misses and out” rule and the requirement to drop the bird within the ring, many larger gauges were used. Later a rule was made to disallow gauges larger than 12 in competition. As a result, pigeon guns began to be chambered for 2¾” — at a time when the standard game gun was chambered at 2½” — to increase the amount of shot that could be used.

The larger loads created more pressure, and gunmakers were quick to strengthen their guns’ actions with a combination of weight and size, with extra third bites, dolls’-head extensions to the top ribs, crossbolts, and sideclips to actions. The specialized pigeon guns of the period were comparable to the clay-target competition guns of today.

Following the Second World War, Italian gunmakers continued to develop and innovate their shotguns—over/unders in particular. Because of the single sighting plane and improved recoil control, the O/U was the configuration of choice for many of the live-pigeon shooters still actively competing on the Continent. Italian innovations in developing contemporary O/U designs have produced some of the best-known names in competition shotguns today. Beretta and Perazzi have proven themselves again and again in Olympic competition, while Fabbri has dominated the world’s pigeon rings. There is a reason why the best grades of guns were called Pigeon grades!

Though the sport of live-pigeon shooting was banned in England in 1921, it continued on the Continent for another half-century, ceasing in Monaco in 1966 and in Italy in 1970. Live pigeon shooting remains popular in Spain and Portugal in Europe, and in Mexico and Argentina in the Americas. Pigeon shooting remains legal in many states in the US, but understandably the events are not advertised in the same manner as clay target competitions.

When visiting Spain with clients for driven-partridge shooting, I always offer the morning and afternoon at the world-famous Club de Tiro Somontes, in Madrid. The club annually hosts the “King’s Cup,” the grand clubhouse boasts a fabulous restaurant, and the walls are hung with portraits of celebrities who have shot there through the years. The speed and standard of shooting are exceptional. The pigeons are specially bred for the sport and are small, extremely swift flyers. Their speed of flight, the random release and the distance from the shooting station combine with the pressure of having to drop the bird in the rings to create split-second and very accurate shotgunning. I look up at Hemingway gazing down from his photo in the clubhouse and remember his article stating that a fast-flying pigeon is one of the most testing shots.

The Continentals have different pigeon boxes than those found in the US. Instead of operating with a spring, there is a ball on a small catapult level with the box; when the call is made for the pigeon, the box collapses and the catapult triggers, rolling the ball at the pigeon to ensure its rapid release and flight.

A live-pigeon gun can be any configuration or vintage, though autoloaders are scarce and competitors are limited to two shells anyway. Any malfunction of the gun results in a lost bird, which could be very costly. Guns usually have 30” or 32” barrels and are choked ¾ or Full. They have to have sufficient heft to tame recoil from the hot pigeon loads used and have real knockdown power at distance. Many competitors like their guns to shoot high when tackling such fast-rising birds.

My instructions are simple. Shoot with a pre-mounted gun like in trap. There can be five to 10 boxes, so place the muzzles over the center box and soft focus to increase your peripheral vision (as the pigeon can rise from any box). Call for the bird, let your eyes naturally hard focus on the pigeon, guide your hands—and hence the gun—to the bird, and pull the trigger without hesitation. If the bird does not instantly fall and fall, give it the second barrel. Some Guns always give it the second barrel as insurance that down means dead.

Today’s pigeon ring usually has a 50-yard radius—defined by a low fence of 15 to 20 inches—around the center box. Shooting stations start at 32 yards from the center box, and when they are successful in shooting a five-bird flight, they are handicapped by a yard at a time to 35 yards. The marker from which the shot is taken is determined by the shooter’s handicap. There are usually five trap boxes an equal distance apart in a straight line. The trapper usually sits in a small hut on the edge of the ring. When the shooter is on station and ready to shoot, he calls “Ready,” and the trapper answers, “Ready.” The next word the shooter utters will result in the instant release of a trap.

The shooter has to drop the bird within the boundary ring. He has full use of the gun (two shots) to do so. If he kills the bird with the first shot, he still must fire the second shot into the ring. This practice dates back to the use of muzzleloaders, when firing the gun was the safest and most practical way of unloading it before turning and leaving the ring.

If the bird is missed or flies and falls outside of the ring, it is “lost;” if it falls inside the ring, it is “killed.” If the bird fails to fly, it is referred to as “no bird.” (Note that these same expressions are used in clay target shooting.) If a bird is dropped wounded within the ring, it can be dispatched with the second shot; but if it hops or flies out of the ring, it becomes “lost.” A competition is usually 30 birds, made up of six races of five birds each, with each shot in a different ring, though these details can vary.

There is another form of live-bird shooting where the bird is hand-thrown rather than launched from a trap, called “Columbaire Pigeon Shooting.” The Columbaire ring is twice the size of the traditional pigeon ring and is surrounded by a low fence. A 30-foot square is marked on the ground on the centerline of the ring, and four poles 10 feet tall mark in the corners with a white rope strung between them. The shooter stands behind one side of the box and the spins and throws, disc style, from the other side. By plucking select feathers and showing the pigeon out into the ring in front of them, like a baseball pitcher, the Columbaire attempts to deny the shooter a clean shot. The white rope marking the square is to protect the Columbaire, as any bird lower than this marker is a “no bird.”

Columbaire is especially popular in Mexico, Argentina and other Latin America countries. The columbaire shows the shooter that he’s erratic, and the shooter calls for the bird in the same manner as when shooting in a ring. The pigeon’s erratic flight and direction is the challenge, compounded by the skill and speed applied by the human thrower. Again, shooters typically go through five-bird races, with the number of races and rules varying locally.

The modern clay equivalent of “box bird” shooting is ZZ, or Helice, shooting. This sport is similar in both rules and layout to a live-pigeon ring, though the ring is nearly twice the size of the live-pigeon and the machines are in a curved line instead of lined up straight. ZZ stands for Zinc Zurrito—a name given to it by the Belgian inventor who, in the 1960s, originally made the targets out of zinc and had previously shot a specific breed of pigeon called a zurrito. Helice is the French word for helicopter and winged part of the targets.

A Helice or ZZ target is comprised of a round plastic white “witness cap” affixed to an orange, ringed propeller. Each target is spun to a high speed on the spindle of the launcher, and when released it rises and takes off on an erratic and unpredictable flight. The shooter calls for the target in exactly the same manner as when live-bird shooting, and the target separates from one of the five launchers, selected at random. When struck by pellets the witness cap separates from the propeller, signaling a hit. The cap has to fall within the ring in the same manner as a live bird.

Even if you never shoot live birds in the pigeon ring, all of the competitive shotgun games we enjoy today trace their lineage to this sport. From the challenges of ZZ birds to the straightaway flight of trap targets, each flies the path flown by live birds before.

Chris Batha’s latest book, *The Instinctive Shot*, can be ordered by visiting www.chrisbatha.com. Video-clay shooting tips are available at www.claycatchonline.com.

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1 Comment

John Church February 2, 2023 at 9:55 pm
Chris Batha writes w/ ease and authority as he describes fast-moving pigeon shoots. I am hopeful he might recognize Boniface Petrik, a Czech-born gunsmith (a town named Teumice, in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire) who is given credit for devising the “sliding hood breech” found on the Remington 32 and Krieghoff 32, and others. For three years I’ve been searching for details of his life story. His wife, Georgette Victoria Josephine Poirier, was a well-reputed pigeon shooter; maybe she will provide the access to his story.

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