

HOLTS IN THE FIELD

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A HAMMERGUN IN THE LAND OF THE OVER AND UNDER

THE ESSEX MASTERS 2019

He slapped me on the shoulder and said "it could only be you – a side by side at the Essex Masters and blood all over your wellies". Charlie Stewart-Wood of Atkin Grant & Lang Shooting Ground noticed my unwitting, rustic look. I had been culling deer all month on several different Norfolk estates and had forgotten to wash my wellies down after the season had finished. The beginning of April not only marks the end of the season for the management of female deer, but also marks the start of the clay shooting season with the Essex Gun Masters. This event has steadily grown over the years and is now one of the biggest sporting clay competitions anywhere in the world.

For many competitors entering they book as a squad. Five or six friends who regularly shoot with each other. It may be because it gives them a sense of camaraderie – they feel comfortable shooting with people they are familiar with. They know each other's strengths and weaknesses. They can guide each other through the trials of working out how the course designer is trying to encourage your error. I was flying solo. You take the squad you are given. Personally, I prefer it this way. Clay shooting is an intensely cerebral exercise; at this level it's a psychological test as much as a test of technical ability. Perhaps I am trying to translate what I like about a day out game shooting to a clay shooting competition. I like not knowing the team I will be shooting with. Part of the pleasure is meeting people from all walks of life. As it turns out I had met three of the four briefly in the past. One of them was a professional shooting instructor. Somehow shooting in the company of a full-time clay shooting coach enhanced the nerves I was already feeling. There was a childlike feeling of wanting to impress, or at the very least not be ridiculed. This was unexpected and I was going to have to deal with it as well as the knowledge that I was not in the best form.

Recently I have been shooting my rifle like a shotgun and my shotgun like a rifle. Having pulled a shot on a muntjac mid-March I had taken some advice from a rifle coach who pointed out that many game shots suffer this problem. We spend January shooting pheasants and then expect to pick up a rifle for the doe cull and shoot flawlessly with no practice.

"How often do you dry-mount your shotgun?" she asked.

"Several times a week"

"And how often do you dry fire your rifle?"

"Not very"

It was the sort of obvious diagnosis that makes you shake your head.

I had gone back to the range to work on my breath control, shot release and check zero with my .308. I also began dry mounting and firing it to get the feel back of my trigger. It had worked and my accuracy had come back with a rifle. The problem is I had begun to 'poke' with my hammergun in my build up to The Essex Masters.

Taking this mentality into a major competition I know is not a recipe for success. For this reason, I was on edge. We were assigned the red course to start. The etiquette is the score cards

are shuffled and the strike is rotated through the squad as to who shoots first. Stand 1 was a standard clay coming from the left side on a raised platform quartering away followed on report by a relatively simple standard going away. That is how it appeared anyway. I broke the first pair and normally my nerves would have dissipated. The knowledge that I might be below par was having an effect – I missed the next two. The overhead as I gave it too much lead – a classic mistake of game shooters shooting clays that are not particularly far away. The going away I fell into the trap that course designer wanted me to. I left it too late and shot over the top as it dropped. Because of the nerves I kept over-leading the overhead and didn't hit it again. The going away bird I concentrated on a spot on a tree below the clays flight path and didn't miss another. I had self-diagnosed and fixed an easy mistake on the going away bird, but couldn't fix the overhead. In hindsight the nerves were making me rush. After missing the second pair, part of me wanted to move to Stand 2 as quickly as possible, the other part of my brain wanted to stay and fix the problem. This is the psychological test in real time. The 'fight or flight' response was taking hold and the internal battle played out on the scorecard: 4/8.

Stand 2 presented fewer problems with two relatively innocuous simultaneous going away birds. The orange clay was higher than the white clay, and having fixed the problem on Stand 1 I was set to tackle these. Pick two points on the trees the clays were sailing towards, below the line of flight and shoot. It worked fine until the last clay when I lost focus by allowing my conscious brain to think about the result, not the process. I missed it and finished with 7/8.

So far no one had commented on the fact that I was using a hammergun. We didn't know each other well enough yet, and we were all trying to find our own mental equilibrium. On the first few stands there had been nothing at any great distance requiring any dramatic lead or choke. It was to be a theme of the red course. A W.J. Jeffrey live pigeon gun choked 5/8ths and 7/8ths was overkill on these targets. Perhaps, for an average clay shooter like me, such chokes were more of a hindrance than a help.

Stand 3 had me beaten before I even got in the cage. I had shot badly in front of these trees the previous year and been unable to work out why. It turns out some of that mental baggage was still with me. This year a dropping orange battue from right to left was followed by a white standard quartering away. I hit the first pair and then my brain got in the way. I could hear in my subconscious become conscious. The residual thought from the previous year that the undulating woodland background might have been an optical illusion crept forward. It took my focus away from the targets and I began missing. I was falling in to the trap that had been set up by the previous going away targets that could almost be rifled, this one needed to be up the right hand side to kill it, but I couldn't quiet the mind and do it.

After a poor start I began to settle into the rhythm of the squad and now that my target of improving on last years score of 165 / 200 was probably out of reach, I stopped worrying and began to enjoy myself.

Stand 8 had a target that is almost impossible to prepare for. There are very few grounds that will throw a rabbit clay across a pond. Having struggled with rabbits for about 2 years I had worked hard on them and have recently cured my issue. Rabbits should be simple to shoot as they slow down quickly. Rabbits across a pond slow down even quicker. Once you are aware of this simple fact the fear of the unknown recedes and you can get on and shoot.

Stand 9 was a cause of much frustration. An orange mini from the right followed by a white, slow crosser from the left on report. I have yet to work out the trap I fell into here and it maybe that I misread both clays because of the background. Looking at the scorecards of others posted on Instagram it fooled far better shots than me which is some small comfort.

Stand 10 also made use of water. This had what appeared to be a standard clay fired upside into the water surface where it bounced off at an angle. Again this style of target is found almost nowhere else and cannot easily be practiced.

Coming to the end of the Red course and I had one of the few comments about my apparently eccentric decision to use a side by side in this arena. "Blimey, you're braver than I am. I find it hard enough with an over and under". It was not unexpected. In an environment increasingly dominated by Krieghoffs a hammer gun is a highly unusual sight. They may not be best suited to breaking clays but this is our gun making heritage and for me it is important that that heritage is cherished and not disregarded.

After twelve stands of four pairs the final stand were the only clays at any distance on the Red course. A long looping clay at 60 yards was followed by a fast quartering away target that gave you little time to prepare. These final four clays brought you to the total of 100 targets of which I had hit 64. Not a disaster but for me I felt I hadn't done it justice and the sense of disappointment was inescapable. As the referee handed over my card I muttered to her that it looked like a bombed out runway in a war zone. She smiled in sympathy.

A break of an hour allowed us to rest, and fully switch off the mental focus. Shooting 200 clays in a day, and a three hour round trip to do it, is draining. You need this rest period and it is important to refuel and rehydrate. By now the morning fog that chilled the air had cleared and the temperature had jumped ten degrees.

It is perhaps a mark of the change in my state of mind that I cannot clearly recollect all the targets on the black course. I had stopped over thinking the clays as they were more conventional targets and their familiar feel meant I could quiet the mind more easily. It showed on the scorecard as I 'straightened' the first two stands. I was shooting fluently and the gun felt alive in my hands. There were some misses through a lack of focus but I was happy with my performance overall. That was until Stand 9 when I stumbled. It was a simultaneous pair of orange targets looping from the right. The higher one was fast and difficult to pick out through the background of bare branches. The lower clay you didn't see until late because of a fence panel designed to shield it from view until the last moment. Neither were very far away but you were always short of time.

Failure on a stand is not final. It is how you react to the disappointment that matters. Part of the fascination of competition clay shooting is the internal battle between your hopes and fears. It is a searching self-examination of your strengths and weaknesses. You have to let the disappointment and frustration pass almost like a form of active meditation. It is not easy to do. I managed it and only missed three more clays on the round for a 76 / 100 and a combined total of 140 / 200.

I get huge enjoyment from using vintage guns. When you cock the hammers there is a feeling of connection to the highly skilled bench gun makers of the past who poured care and expertise into every stroke of the file that went into their construction. The heritage they represent matters to me. It probably matters more than the score on the card at the end.