

Mastering The March Hare

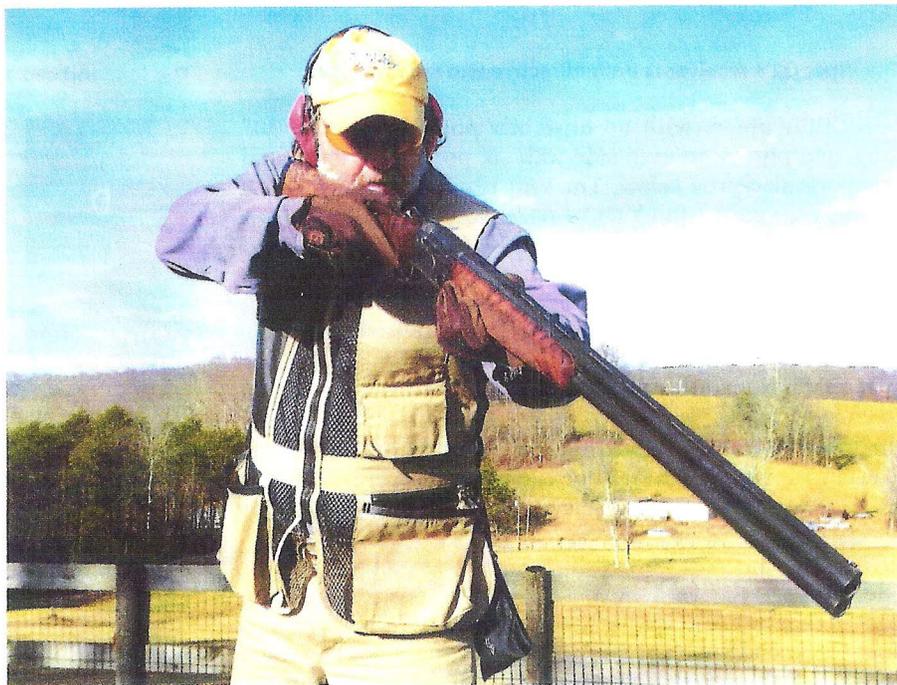
It's one of the targets we told all our shotgunning friends about the first time we came home from shooting sporting clays, the target, perhaps more than any other, that makes our favorite shooting game not trap.

It's the rabbit target—spinning, skidding, bouncing, stalling—causing some of the coolest heads to ever hunker over a marriage of pretty wood and exquisitely engineered gun steel to morph into red-faced Elmers, fudd-flummoxed once again by that “wascally wabbit.”

Enter my friend Dave Dobson, a renaissance man if there ever was one: MBA, professional guitar virtuoso, Level III Instructor certified by the NSCA as well as NSSA, and now coach to an upstart sporting clays, skeet, and trap club at Jacksonville University in Florida. As any musician turned wingshooting instructor might do, Dobson works constantly with his students to get their gun move in harmony with the target. He says the rabbit poses a particular challenge to making good trigger music.

“The problem (with rabbits),” Dobson believes, “is that shooters overwork them. Rabbit (presentations) tend to have short windows. People overreact and take their eyes off the target. There's too much gun speed and not enough rhythm.”

Dobson credits frequent *Sporting Clays* contributor Dan Schindler with the acronym “RGM” to describe how



On rabbits, balance your stance just slightly forward, but not too far, so the body remains fluid throughout the process.

many of us botch bunnies. At Schindler's Paragon School Of Sporting, RGM stands for Random Gun Movement.

“It comes down to poor visual pick-up,” Dobson says, “Either we didn't see (the target) well, saw it too late, held too close to the trap and had too much gun movement, held too far out and weren't able to run with (the target) enough to get good harmony.”

Dobson notes, “On rabbits, people

don't focus well. They panic, get rushed, jerk control of the gun from the forward hand to the back hand. Every single target should have the same rhythmic feel, the same sense of fluidity—rabbit, teal, tower, incomer, whatever.”

On rabbits, especially, Dobson maintains that we have a tendency to “muscle up. We fight the gun, we fight the target. That's not what we're after. When we call ‘pull,’ it ought to be like saying, ‘Start the music.’ It's dance. It's ballet,” all in time with the target.

Dobson lists a cadre of shooters who model all the right moves, including, John Woolley, Gary Greenway, Wendell Cherry. “Guys like them are beautiful to watch. They have flawless fundamentals, great hands. It's like watching water flow—graceful, rhythmic, the same every time.” But we can't “come dancing,” as the Kinks used to croon, if we don't know how to find

To bust bunnies consistently, begin your hands on the blur. Let the gun find your cheek, your shoulder pocket, and then, just for an instant, run with it—move, mount, work it, kill it.

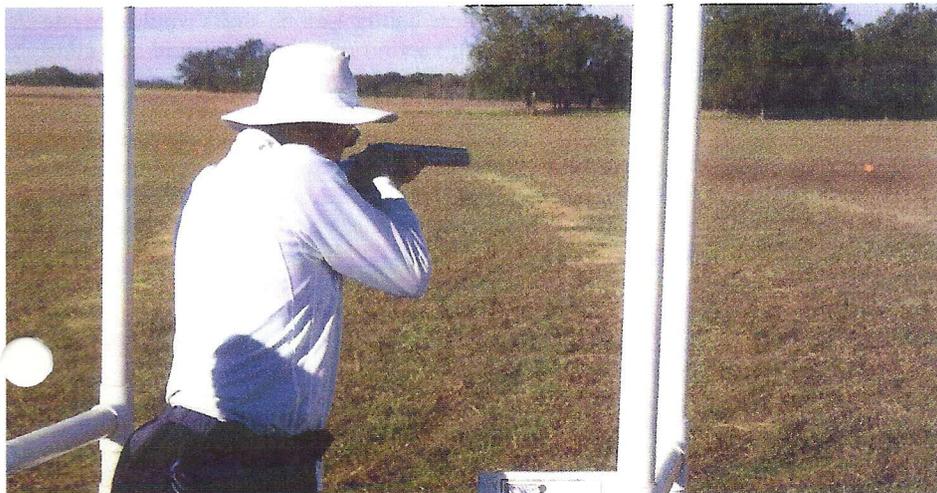


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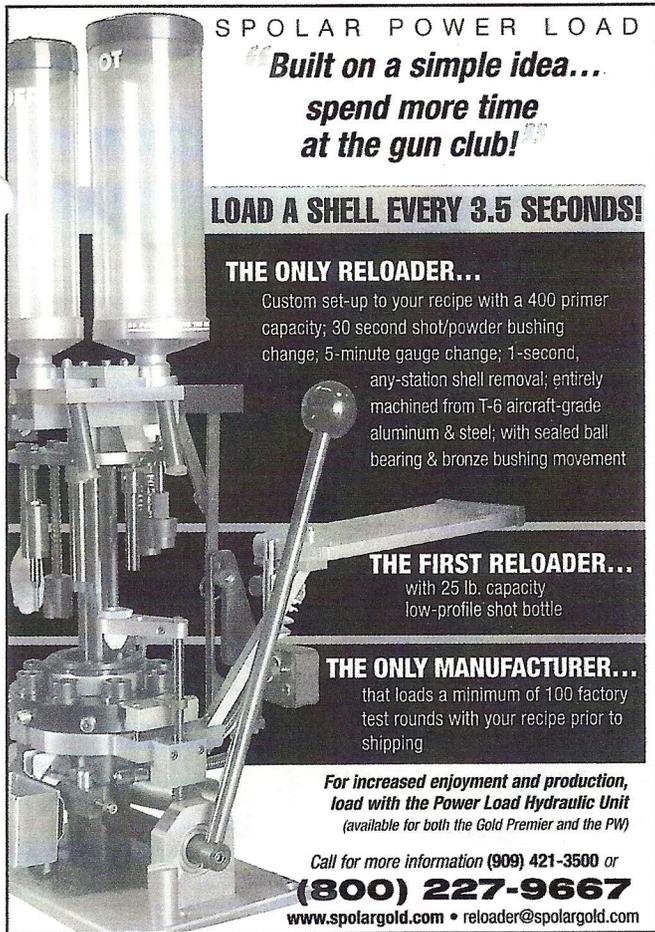
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our partner. We have to know where, and how, to look for, and at, the target.

Dobson says, "If you have a visible trap and no obstruction, you want to 'watch the pitcher serve the ball.' Where you first can see the bird, that's where your eyes need to be."

Dobson coaches the mantra, "Breakpoint, visual pickup, hold point right in the middle, and all of this with m-i-n-i-m-u-m head movement." When he describes the setup, Dobson draws out "minimum" for emphasis, saying, "We have to learn to use our eyes more without moving our head. If our head's moving, that master eye has to work too hard to achieve what my buddy (NSCA Level III) Jim Arnold calls 'ocular alignment.' Ocular alignment is critical for letting our hands run with the target."

Dobson brings up another point about ocular alignment. "Our visual system and our balance system are interrelated. Head movement affects our balance as well."

For rabbits, Dobson's students bias that balance just slightly forward. "Not a lot," he cautions. "Maybe 55/45 in terms of percentage. Otherwise, it's the basic standard: heel to toe, comfortable width of your feet." For a frame of reference, Dobson asks, "If you have to stand for the next four hours in the sun, how would you want to stand?"

Dobson coaches his students to relax their knees, "so they're not locked, so the body remains fluid. We drive the shot with our legs, not just our upper body." On rabbit targets, he insists, "Way too much forward lean makes us lose control. When we overreact (with any part of our move), bad things happen. For example, we might roll our shoulders and miss below or above the target."

In short, Dobson would have our weight as evenly distributed as possible, "so no matter what the (target) does, we're pretty well balanced." That's Dobson's cure for the bad hop we've all seen with rabbits, particularly later in a shoot when bunnies bounce on debris in the target line. "If we stay balanced, stay focused, stay in rhythm with the target, it doesn't matter what it does. We can find it and kill it."

For Dobson, the short course in wreaking revenge on the rabbit target is to look at it, really look at it, run with it, and kill it. More on that "run with it" part later. We surely can't run unless we can see where we're going.

"Most people respond to the notion of that center (target) ring (for visual focus)," Dobson says, laughing. "For little kids, we call those rings 'the smiley face' as in, 'I want you to go right to Mr. Smileyface, put the gun on it, and shoot.'" He also uses the ubiquitous clock face, especially, "...for those who haven't learned to match gun speed with the target. For them, it's 4 o'clock/8 o'clock" numerals superimposed on the target's face (depending on the direction it's rolling).

Dobson takes a page from mentors Dan Carlisle and Dan Schindler when he says, "You've got to let your brain see the target, allow it enough time to get the hands in sync." Ideally, Dobson says, "we want to feel lead rather than actually see it, particularly so we're not tempted to look back at the muzzle." That's where the "running with the rabbit" comes into play.

Dobson calls running or "working" the rabbit the surest way to give us harmony with target speed and angle. "We begin the hands on the blur," he says. "We let the gun find our cheek, our shoulder pocket, and then, just for an instant, run with it—move, mount, work it, kill it."

It's important to see that sequence in context. "Move, mount, work it" absolutely doesn't mean spending a lot of

time with the gun in our face tracking the rabbit. Think of it in jackrabbit terms. "The 'run with it' or 'work it' is never a 'ride it,'" Dobson explains. "It's a sprint, a burst, just enough to get with the target."

With this system, Dobson knows, "it doesn't matter which school (shooters favor): pull-away, maintained-lead, swing-through. As long as we stay connected, stay glued to the bird and quickly develop that rhythm, we can kill it anywhere." Neither does it matter how fast that rabbit is traveling. "We control the speed of the shot with our setup, with our hold points," he insists. The faster the bird, the farther out our setup.

There may not be another target on a sporting course that has more shooters cranking choke tubes than the rabbit. Dobson has his own philosophy on that. "For myself, I don't believe in changing chokes. I went to modified and improved modified many years ago. (NSCA Hall of Famer) Andy Duffy always said, 'Stick a pair in there you like and start thinking about breaking the bird.'"

Dobson jokes, "Maybe you just put a pair of 'light mods' in there and let 'em rust. It's up to the individual. Pick a (constriction) you love, pick a load that you love, and shoot them. My philosophy is that (not changing chokes and loads all the time) makes just one less thing to mess with. I like No. 7 1/2 shot in a fast 1-oz. load through my mod/improved-mod tubes. It makes it easy for me."

Dobson concedes, "A lot of people out there love to change chokes, change loads, think they're giving themselves a leg up. Mathematically speaking, maybe. Spreader loads and 9s at 20 yards, sure. Screwing in skeet or cylinder for rabbits? God love 'em, they should go do that. If your belief system says it's going to give you an advantage..." Dobson's voice trails off. "You just need to shoot the choke and load that you're most psychologically comfortable with."

But in regard to his own shooting, Dobson says, "If I have more wide-open chokes, I'm likely to miss because I'm not paying attention. It's like (George) Digweed says: 'I like MAH-dee-fied. I've got more important things to think about than changing choke tubes.'" Besides, Dobson chuckles, vaporizing rabbit targets can build confidence. "It's the 'Super-Whackola' Jim Arnold talks about. That thing's right in your face, and you just make it disappear."

So how do the rest of us go about making whatever rabbit that gets pulled out of a trap disappear? Whatever you do, don't let Dave Dobson (904-285-9500; www.daviddobson.com) hear you talk about plans for instilling "muscle memory."

"That's mythology," Dobson snorts. "Muscles don't have memory; our central nervous system has memory. Our central nervous system gets programmed and tells the rest of the body—including muscle groups—to execute that function." That programming or, in too many cases, re-programming of our eye-hand guidance system rests in directed practice. But Dobson warns that selecting a good coach is only a starting point.

"You can't blame the teaching community if you're not willing to do the work," Dobson urges. "You've got to allow yourself time to get rid of the bad habits that you've learned, particularly the ones that you sometimes shoot well enough in spite of. The old cliché is absolutely true—there is no elevator to success. We all have to take the stairs."

Randy Lawrence is an NSCA Level I Instructor. He is professor of psychology and sociology at Hocking College in Nelsonville, Ohio, where he is a three-time winner of the school's Excellence in Instruction Award. Email Randy at hlearninglab@live.com.


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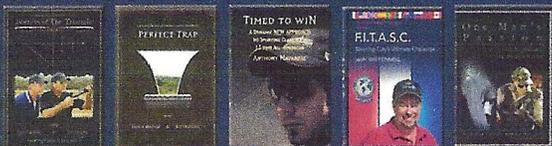
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