

Shooters forge strong bonds with shotguns

By AJ MAZZOLINI
Tribune Sports Writer

With the arrival of the 116th annual Montana State Trap Shoot this week, hundreds of shotgun-wielding men and women will flock to the Great Falls Trap and Skeet Club just south of town.

The shooters will be a wide variety of characters, ranging in age, gender, hometown and skill. One thing consistent throughout their ranks, though, is each will fire a shotgun during the competition.

But not all shotguns are the same. Each person has a bond with his or her own piece of equipment and it can be obvious to the shooter which gun feels the best, said Tressa Houseman.

Finding that right one is the



A Caesar Guerini Summit 12-gauge shotgun.

key to success.

"You just know when a gun fits you," she said.

Houseman, 16, who will compete in the junior events

during the week, will be firing a family heirloom in the competition. Her great-grandfather's shotgun, a 12-gauge Perazzi model, has been

The competition

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passed down through the generations before finally coming to her in the last few years.

"It means a lot to me," she said. "My grandfather was great with it, and it's a great feeling if I can win with it."

The gun, worth about \$6,000, feels the most comfortable for her of any she's fired, and she said it shows in her scores. Houseman, who will be a junior at C.M. Russell High this fall, said this is her first contest with the gun, and she hopes it will bring her luck.

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Not every gun enthusiast came across their trusty weapon so easily and cheaply, though.

Jerry Tabacco, who was an avid hunter for years before transitioning to non-living targets, has pumped more than \$20,000 into his shotgun. The costs can be high, but he said he wants it to be perfect.

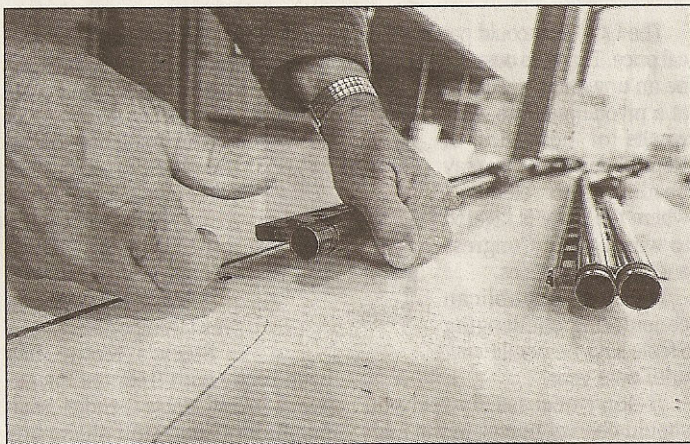
His current gun of choice, a single-barrel Krieghoff K-80 that includes a flashy \$1,200 trigger guard, differs greatly from the old shotguns he used to fire in the field during hunting season.

Firearms for competitions are specifically designed to fire a bit higher than a run-of-the-mill bird gun, he said. The area pressed against the shooter's cheek, called the stock, is built up to allow the head to stand high and straight for added comfort, which becomes important after hundreds of rounds. Also, the guns have a raised "rib" along the length of the barrel that causes the shooter to aim higher, but that's a good thing, Tabacco said.

"It's strictly a trap gun thing because all your targets rise," said Tabacco, who has been the club president for four years.

"They're climbing all the time because of how they're launched. (When) shooting birds, they fly flat."

These shotguns come with a higher price tag than a hunting weapon and because of that, they tend not to stray from the range. To protect that investment, these guns aren't the kind you're will-



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A Caesar Guerini Summit 12-gauge shotgun, left, and a Browning XT Combo 12-gauge shotgun set up to shoot doubles.

ing to get wet and dirty while stalking prey, Tabacco noted.

While Tabacco's shotgun seems pricey, he said there are many people who outspend him by three or four times to craft their ideal weapon.

That may seem outrageous to most recreational shooters, but Jim Burman, secretary for the trap club, said people spend the money because they get high-quality equipment in return.

"They're expensive because they're well-made," Burman said. "Your cheaper guns wouldn't stick around for hundreds of thousands of rounds."

While admitting trap shooting is an expensive hobby, Kenny Schmitz of Cascade said it doesn't have to break the bank. Schmitz shoots a shotgun he bought used 20 years ago that cost him about \$5,000. It's nothing fancy, he noted, but if you can

find a reliable model, then you can more than make do with a lower priced gun.

"Shotguns are all basically the same thing, a tube," Schmitz said. "The most important thing about the gun is it has to shoot where you look."

"Too much emphasis can be put on this," he said, gesturing to a wall of shotguns in the club's office. "Some people have more money than they have sense."

What is most important to having success in the game, he pointed out, is having a strong mental approach. He said trap shooting can be similar to golf in that after hundreds of repetitions, the body remembers what to do and the best way to screw that up is by thinking too much.

"You're trying so hard to win knowing that if you miss a target or two, you're completely out of the running," Schmitz said.

In fact, missing more than two targets in the singles competition hasn't yielded a win in years at the Montana State Trap Shoot. Not since 1958 has a competitor won the event after breaking fewer than 198 of 200 targets.

Tabacco echoed Schmitz's comments, putting even more emphasis on a strong mental facet. By his math, 95 percent of the game is mental. To turn in a top-notch performance, a shooter has to block everything out and not think about anything but the target soaring out ahead of him.

"Earplugs in and blinders on," Tabacco preached. "You need to just focus. Your eyes cannot wander. You can't even watch yourself put shells into the gun."

Despite the amount of money Tabacco and his fellow clubmates plug into their sport, he said none of them focus on competing for cash prizes. It's almost impossible to make more than you spend anyway, he said.

"Only four or five trap shooters in the United States can make a living shooting trap," Tabacco said. "For the rest (it) is just a hobby."

But it's a hobby he feels very passionate about.

Over the holiday weekend, while he and a dozen other members prepared the club for the state meet and the influx of hundreds of shotgunners starting today, Tabacco took a few moments to look around at the club members working with him, volunteers he considers a "whole new family."

He's far from alone in that passion.