I say this because another endeavor that I also have a great deal of expertise with, the art of hand engraving, has many of the same sort of people involved. Engraving is also a rather esoteric skill that like Olympic Shooting has specialized equipment that requires a great deal of practice to excel in it. I have been a practitioner, counselor and teacher in both areas for many years and see many beginners who attempt to short cut their way to success with high dollar equipment purchases, just like my airgun customers who want to buy a gun.

So what is the best airgun? For those without one and looking to invest a substantial amount of cash, they want a cut and dried answer, like “A Feinwaltschutz XYZ or Steyrinipard 89TEN.” If only life were that simple. It’s a lot like buying a car, and what is the best for you? Just like most autos made today are extremely reliable and perform at speeds well beyond legal limits, any 10 meter airgun is going to be accurate and reliable. Anschütz, Feinwerkbau, Morini, Pardini, Steyr, Tau and Walther all have good products. Though any company occasionally may have teething problems with a new model, on the whole, they all make a solid gun. So if reliability and accuracy are not discriminating factors, what are?

There are many variables that define what best suits your purposes. Planned usage, budgets, filling logistics and ergonomics are all factors that must be considered in determining what the best gun is for you. My idea of the best air gun might not be the best gun for you, based on any of the listed criteria. So let’s examine some of these and see what you need.

Planned Usage: What is your goal for this purchase? Is it for occasional recreational shooting? Just about anything will do, even something heavy or awkward or hard to cock. Do you want to participate in a local club or league? You can certainly look into used vintage models to save some cash. Even 40 year old guns can be as reliable and as accurate as the top line models today.

Are you thinking you are going to make a serious attempt at excelling in this sport such as a college scholarship or even the U.S. Olympic Team? In this case it makes sense to take advantage of the latest technology if
for no other reason that if/when mechanical problems happen, there are immediate support systems in place to keep you going. It may be a coach with some spare parts or a teammate with back up action to keep you going.

Budget: This is usually an overriding factor for most recreational shooters. There are very few instances where I would say that the price tag is principal to success. Often times I see parents who think by spending top dollar they are doing the best for their child, and in some cases, I think overspending can create situations that hinder a shooters success.

Filling logistics: For the serious competitors reading this article, there is only one serious option these days and that is compressed air or its British name Pre-Charged Pneumatic (CA or PCP). Personally, I’m against it. If I was king of the world, then heads would roll, and air gun rules would reflect that an air gun should be self-sufficient for each shot. CA guns would be allowed as long as you start with an empty cylinder and fill it during your prep time. However, I realize that Pandora’s box has long been opened in this regard, and we are not going back. But for a club or recreational shooter, both rifles and pistols using older Recoilless Spring Piston (RSP) or Single Stroke Pneumatic (SSP) technologies are more than adequate; for many shooters, the additional rhythm of the long cocking motion between each shot can be a relaxing part of their mental game. I remember watching a Cuban girl at the 2003 Pan American Games win Women’s 10m Air Rifle with a very rusty Feinwerkbau 601 when nearly all of her competitors were using modern, less fatiguing CA guns. A lot of junior clubs still faithfully use CO2 and there is nothing wrong with that for 98 percent of the world’s shooters.

Ergonomics: Whatever your physical stature, you need a gun and stock sized accordingly: If the gun is too big or too heavy for you, it is not what you need. You will not enjoy shooting it even a few shots. A parent who calls wanting to buy their 10-year-old son a full size Steyr LP10 because it has won Olympic Gold medals is not doing him a favor when he really needs something small and light that fits his hands and doesn’t fatigue his young muscles. Or trying to force a tall person to adapt to small rifle is not going to lead to success. It is true that top of the line models from all major makers these days offer many adjustments to custom fit them to your individual physique, but this can be a double edged sword, especially for younger shooters. More on this in coming articles.

Scott Pilkington is a curmudgeon of both the Artistic Engraving and Olympic Shooting worlds living in Monteagle, Tenn. He has gunsmithed for the U.S. Team at Olympic Games, Pan Ams, and World Championships and currently owns Pilkington Competition.

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