The Value of Chipped Targets

One of the many confusing issues that clay target shooters of any discipline encounter is consistently chipping targets. I view chipped targets as a negative because that generally means I am not solidly hitting the target with the center of the pattern because of improper execution. For consistency purposes in skeet (where the targets are systematic and never change), chipped targets are a sign that the fringe of the pattern is barely breaking the target. This is problematic in a game where a 98% break rate is considered internationally competitive; solidly breaking the target is a must for consistency when competing against the best.

It is easy to get wrapped up in choke selection and the equipment blame game rather than addressing a lack of fundamentals and execution that causes poorly hit targets. Properly executing each shot with solid fundamentals is a great way to build consistency and confidence shot after shot. When lacking good execution, chipped targets indicate that your mount or move speed may be too slow or too fast, which in turn will change where the target is broken. For example, a chip from the front of the target indicates that you are slightly ahead of the target when firing. While conversely, a chip in the rear of the target is indicative of halted follow-through, delayed firing, or a slow mount. This is especially true for trap, where targets are thrown at different speeds and angles.

Chipped targets can also indicate whether barrel height hold points are too high or too low. A high barrel hold point will yield a move that is back handed, causing the end of the barrel to dip into the target line bisecting from above. A hold point that is too low will cause the gun to bisect the line from below and is equally inconsistent. Uniformity in hold point and your move to the target will breed consistency in the targets breaking harder.

As a training tool, choke selection is often a good indicator of how hard targets are being broken. It is always important to pattern any of the chokes that are going to be used for training and competition to make sure they have a uniform pattern. Pattersoning each of your chokes is crucial because not all chokes of the same brand and constriction will pattern uniformly without holes. It is also important to remember that when patterning your shotgun for any game, a simulated move and mount must be made each time the pattern board or paper is shot.

Matching the move on the pattern board exactly as you would move>mount>shoot at the target will give the most accurate results to where the gun is shooting in relation to where you are looking. The results are usually different if the gun is hard mounted into the shoulder and then shot, as opposed to a move>mount>shoot where the butt of the gun will impact you lower in the pocket than your hard mount will. This process will produce a great representation of the center of the pattern, so that more targets can be smoked and not just chipped.

Selecting tight chokes in training provides important insight on where you are consistently placing your pattern. Skeet chokes (.005) often yield very light breaks that do not show exactly where the shot is being placed, therefore allowing you to make fundamental mistakes and still chip the target. Light modified (.015) and modified (.020) chokes will give very distinct breaks every time a target is hit. Both are great training tools because when targets are chipped off the front or back, easy corrections can be made. This type of precision training will lead to higher scores and fewer chipped targets because there is an increased likelihood of using the center of the pattern when transitioning to a more open choke in competition.

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It is important to remember that success in hitting targets harder begins with a solid pre-shot routine and ends with a clean follow through finish with few chips in the air. Chipped targets are excellent training tools that provide instant feedback on mount speed and follow-through. So whether your coach is standing directly behind you or helping a teammate on the other bunker, you have the ability to self-analyze simply by knowing where and how the target breaks. Keep in mind that a constant drive to improve your move and approach to the target is ultimately more important than the finest firearm, ammunition, and choke tubes. • Sean McLelland