receive phone calls every week from shooters who would like to get started on the path to their Olympic Dream. I often get the same question: “How do I get started?” I understand the process may seem rather complicated, so this article will explain the various teams and how to win a spot on a team.

There are several levels of teams within our shotgun program. The entry level team is our Junior Olympic Team. This team is open to anyone under 21 years old and who has at least some international shooting experience at the local club level. The Junior Olympic Team is unique because that it is the only team not selected based on the results of the selection matches.

Athletes must apply for Junior Olympic Team selection and they are selected using a variety of criteria to include shooting, school grades and letters of recommendation. All of these criteria are reviewed by a panel including the National Coaches, and then athletes are appointed to the Junior Olympic Team for the calendar year.

The rest of our shotgun teams are selected based on score and placement in USA Shooting selection matches. These matches are held at clubs around the country and include: a Spring Selection match (between Feb. and April), a Fall Selection match (between Sep. and Nov.), the USA Shooting Shotgun National Championships (between June and July) and the National Junior Olympic Shotgun Championships.

The National Junior Team is strictly for junior shotgun shooters. To make this team you must be a competitor under the age of 21 by Dec. 31 of the year in which you are competing. The first step for the National Junior Team is finish first or second at the National Junior Olympic Championships or at the USA Shooting National Championships (junior category). Thus, the top two finishers in each event at the Junior Olympic Championships will be added to the National Junior Team. Lastly, at the Fall Selection match, the scores from the USA Shooting National Shotgun Championship and the Fall Selection match are combined and the top three finishers in each event are named to the Junior World Championship Team for the following year.

In a normal shooting season for USA Shooting we not only conduct our domestic matches but we compete at four World Cups and a World Championship or the Olympics every year at shooting venues around the world.

We use the above teams to select athletes to compete in these events for the USA. Scores from the Spring Match are also used to fill open slots in these events. Usually, the top three in each event (no juniors) are selected to participate in a World Cup and these athletes are named to the National Development Team. This team is a non-funded or partially funded branch of the National Team.

Olympic team selection procedures must be approved by the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and often change, but for this quadrennial we will shoot a Fall Selection match in Kerrville, Texas (between Sep. or Oct.) and a Spring Match in Tucson, Ariz., in the spring of 2012. These match scores will be added together to select the Olympic Team in London 2012. All these matches are open to any member of USA Shooting up to range capacity. There is also a point system that aids in the selection process. Athletes are awarded a certain number of points at an eligible competition for a finish above seventh place. If an athlete reaches a set threshold, then he or she will be nominated to the team provided no other athletes have accumulated the same or greater number of points. If no athletes reach the point threshold, then the U.S. Olympic Trials are used to select the team.

As you can see, all the shotgun teams, with the exception of the Junior Olympic Team, are selected based on scores. Most of the teams are intact from the National Championship to the next National Championship; however, sometimes the World Championship Team overlaps.

In reality, it is fairly simple—come shoot the National Championship and the Fall Selection match and try to make a team. If you don’t reach your goal then, add the Spring Selection match for a second chance. If you are a junior, then don’t forget to sign up for the National Junior Olympic Championships.

In order to start shooting and competing, first join USA Shooting and visit a local gun club that throws international targets. Practice, shoot often and seek out the help of other shooters or a coach. Then, come to the National Championship and see how you stack up against some of the best shooters in the world. It’s never too late to start on your path to the Olympic dream; I made my last Olympic Team when I was 48 years old and the 1984 Olympic Gold Medalist was 52 years old. So give your Olympic dream a chance and start shooting today!

• National Shotgun Coach Bret Erickson