

The Sporting Life

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It was a blustery February Sunday, two years ago -- a few minutes before eight, a bitter morning. The temperature had dropped at least twenty degrees overnight. Nonetheless, Rob was sitting alone in his car in front of my house, which was our agreed rendezvous. I spotted him while retrieving the Sunday papers, and hustled him inside out of the cold. As he walked into the kitchen, my wife went back on her heels and shrieked. This was, after all, the first time she had encountered someone dressed head to toe in insulated camouflage gear, save for a black baseball cap emblazoned with one word – “Survivor.” The surprise was understandable, but inauspicious.

After Stan and Mark, the rest of our foursome arrived, we set out on our quest. Per established ritual, our first stop was Awakenings coffee shop on Hyde Park Square, for coffee and croissants. Rob’s appearance at Awakenings occasioned pretty much the same reaction as in our kitchen. I’m told the regulars refer to it even now as “the day the survivalist appeared.” We did manage to leave before the police appeared.

Our destination was Owenton, Kentucky, about an hour south of downtown Cincinnati, in the middle of the inverted “V” formed by I-75 and I-71 after their split. Our purpose was a day of shooting sporting clays.

For the unfortunates in the Club who are unaware of the sport, it's said to be the fastest growing shooting sport in the country, and is sometimes called "golf with a shotgun." Fortunately, the analogy is a rough one, otherwise the cry of "Fore" would have a whole new poignancy. The only thing that sporting clays shares with golf is that participants go from station to station, as golfer go from hole to hole, and, like golfers, sporting clays shooters find a different challenge at each new venue.

The genesis of the sport was the desire to create a shooting game that prepared shotgunners for hunting better than the older games of trap and skeet. In trap and skeet, uniform clay pigeons are thrown in only slightly varying patterns from one, or in the case of skeet, two, traps. The traps are electric or spring-loaded machines that throw Frisbee-shaped discs about two and a half inches in diameter. Although called "clay" pigeons, the discs are actually made of a hard tar-like material, strong enough to be thrown at considerable speed without breaking. Strong enough, in fact, to sometimes take the hits of a pellet or two of shot without damage visible to the shooter.

The vocabulary of "trap," "bird," and "pigeon" traces to the "sport" (if it can be called that) of shooting live pigeons that would fly out of wire "traps" when the "trapper" pulled a cord attached to the trap, causing it to

collapse, sending the startled birds off. Even in the era of button- or voice-operated traps, the shooter still calls “pull” to have a “bird” released.

Although sporting clays may have originated as a way to hone hunting skills in off-season times, on most courses the “birds” do things that no real bird would ever do – like fly straight up in the air, and of course, fall right back down again. And the clays can be thrown at speeds that a pheasant would have to be shot out of cannon, after a meal of methamphetamine-soaked feed, to attain.

For even more variety, the birds can be thrown in pairs, usually either simultaneously, or with the second thrown when the shot at the first is heard by the trapper. Sporting clays targets are also more varied than in trap and skeet, with multiple shapes and sizes, including flat, thin “battues,” and tough “rabbits” that are typically bounced along the ground.

The sport is, as Mark puts it, “cheaper than therapy.” And I’d add, “Far more effective.” It is elemental, and all about instinctive motion. Unlike actual golf, there is nothing fussy about it. After I had finally convinced Stan to try clays, he demonstrated his fine judgment by resigning his golf club membership, and buying a shotgun – all within three days.

No one has yet written “ZEN AND THE ART OF SPORTING CLAYS,” but someone should. In the time between “pull,” and “bang,” nothing exists but you and the bird. You pull the trigger, the gun goes “bang,” and (except in rare cases such as one I’ll describe later), you know you’ve either broken the bird, or you haven’t.

So, this was our quest on that frigid day as I drove the four of us to Owenton. The roads of Owen County, Kentucky, wind over hills and through dales, and anticipation usually has me picking up speed the closer we get to the range. A few miles from the hunt club it began to snow. Hard. So, naturally, I sped up to get off the road quicker. This selflessness went unappreciated by my passengers, who claimed they were being thrown from side to side of the boxy, high-center-of-gravity SUV I was driving.

We did arrive intact, and pulled on coveralls, boots, gloves-within-gloves. The wind was gusting at perhaps 25 miles per, and we felt the joy of being smacked in cold-stiffened cheeks by 12 gauge shotguns.

The frozen birds broke too often coming out of the traps, but increasingly any chip big enough to shoot at seemed good enough as we tried to move smartly through the course. We reached the fourth station, which fronted

a small lake, still unfrozen due to yesterday's higher temperatures. The birds were incoming, and would land in the lake. On one pair, given my superior vantage point on the stand, I saw that I neatly broke the second bird just as it hit the water. Of course, I did what anyone would do under such circumstances. I yelled "I got that one!" Sadly, this statement of obvious fact elicited the most unsporting behavior by my companions, including mutterings about "harpoon loads." I missed the next six birds, to the continuing mirth of the gallery.

The snow became a blizzard, but we soldiered on, feeling more and more the Scott Expedition of sporting clays. We finally reached the last station, number twelve, which stood on a rise, jutting up into the fierce wind. At my turn to shoot, my cold-befuddled brain led me to pull a recently purchased nylon balaclava from my shooting bag. Unfortunately, I found this balaclava wouldn't fit anyone with a head bigger than a navel orange. As I struggled to get it on, a lens popped out of my glasses, and I was later told that three fingers edged toward three triggers as the rest of the party contemplated when I was going to get them off that wind-blasted ridge.

Happily, I lived to tell the tale. A tale that's been told and retold, with advantage, by we few, we happy few, we frozen sporters.