

ENHANCED MARKSMANSHIP PROGRAMS FOR HUNTERS II: Meeting the Challenge to Increase Participation in Hunting and Shooting

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On October 5-7, 1999 a symposium was held by the National Shooting Sports Foundation and the International Hunter Education Association with the goal of developing specific recommendations for increasing participation in hunting and the shooting sports. A report discussing their findings entitled "Meeting the Challenge to Increase Participation in Hunting and Shooting" was later compiled and released. This project was motivated by the fact that while the American population is increasing, active participation in shooting and hunting is declining. The traditional "answer" to this problem has revolved around hunter education programs. As the report concludes, however, hunter education can not solve this problem alone. In fact, it may be a hindrance in some cases.

In no way is this an indictment of hunter's ed. programs. Standard hunter education held throughout the country provides needed basic training for everyone that takes the field. And, unless hunters or shooters take it upon themselves to attend a private sector class or participate in organized events, hunter's ed. is the only formal learning experience they receive. The problem is these programs shouldn't be viewed as a catchall recruitment tool. If the shooting sports and hunting are to grow, we need to look above and beyond. As Wisconsin DNR hunter education director Tim Lawhern has wisely inquired to his instructors, "Where do we go from here?"

Just as hunter education can never serve as the be-all end-all program for hunter recruitment, neither can any other single program. What is needed is a variety of programs made widely available to all interested hunters. For success, we need to work with current hunters/shooters, with hunters/shooters who aren't currently active for whatever reason, and with folks who currently have no interest in shooting or hunting.

Working with Current Hunters

One of the important points discussed in the IHEA/NSSF paper is the need of more opportunity for current hunters/shooters. In order to increase our base of participation it is essential to provide more options beyond basic hunter's education and annual hunting seasons. Quoting the report, "Agencies should provide opportunities for hunters to develop and satisfy multiple motivations to encourage their long-term participation." Three motivations that the conference decided as primarily important are *Achievement*, *Affiliation*, and *Appreciation*.

Hunters motivated by Achievement are looking for ways to demonstrate skill and garner a little recognition. Those motivated by Affiliation are looking to develop their own identity and relationships with others through hunting, while hunters driven by Appreciation are interested in "escape" and value "getting away" to nature. The conference concluded that working with people roused by the first two motivations would be most productive in promoting hunting because "[h]unters driven solely by appreciative motivations may not be good candidates for mentoring unless they see hunters as essential supporters of 'wilderness' and open-space." The report is *not* trying to imply that appreciating nature and hunting is a bad thing, rather, those hunters who are motivated primarily by their interest in the solitude of nature may not be the best candidates to actively spread the word outside the hunting community.

Given that our efforts within the hunting community should focus on hunters that are Achievement-Oriented and Affiliation -Oriented Hunters, let's look at each group.

Achievement-Oriented Hunters

Achievement-oriented motivations are satiated by a test or demonstration of technical competence. They are willing to make the effort to be better hunters and are able and willing to demonstrate prowess. These traits are certainly noteworthy and should be encouraged. However, in some instances these traits can lead to problems. In the opinion of the conference, Achievement-oriented hunters may be the most likely to exhibit negative traits, or even do something illegal or immoral. The hunter may feel the need to harvest the most animals, or the biggest, or to make an attempt at an animal the furthest away.

This is not to say Achievement-oriented hunters cause problems. Certainly there is nothing wrong with being achievement oriented, provided the hunt is approached appropriately. But hunting “appropriately” may mean going home empty handed some days. That means going home a “failure” and having to wait until next season for another “test.”

This is a perfect example of how hunter’s education and hunting seasons can not provide the total solution. By definition, hunter’s ed. is basic, minimal training. By necessity the courses have to be simplistic because no single course could possibly cover all the possibilities encountered afield. The Achievement –oriented hunter may feel the need to test his skill in order to assess if he “measures up.” Achievement is the basis of any worthy pursuit. Goal setting and accomplishment is what allows good things to happen. However, there is a proper time and place. In the field, an attempt to “out do” a rival hunter or to best your last trip may lead to an act that is illegal, unethical, or even dangerous. Hunters should *never* experiment or try something “impressive” on a living creature. I would wager this, coupled with poor marksmanship skills, accounts for nearly all of the lost and wounded game every season; the hunter was overconfident and his skills failed to deliver.

A study in skill - How the Germans do it

One possible solution to satiating the needs of the Achievement-oriented hunter and eliminating deficient skill is to emplace strict testing requirements. In Germany, obtaining hunting privileges is as rigorous as obtaining an associate’s degree from a university. The hunter spends years in training before a license is ever granted. Even after the *Jager* becomes properly qualified, he must retest at least annually proving his skills in marksmanship are still up to snuff. Though not mandatory, the *Deutscher Jagdschutz-Verband* (DJV), or “German Hunter’s Association”, sponsors competitions for hunters throughout the year, one of the most prominent being the *Jahreschiessnadel*. The badge granted to successful shottists isn’t a one-time award. To keep their badge, hunters are required to attend and pass the minimum standards of the *Jahreschiessnadel* event every year.

Herd management in a given area is assigned to a local *Revierpächter*, who is a specially assigned hunter responsible to the local authorities for taking a certain number of head in a given area each season. The *Revierpächter* handpicks the hunters in his area and results at the DJV courses weigh heavily in the decision. So, even passing regular mandated tests aren't enough. A hunter that is fully qualified may still be denied to hunt simply because other hunters in the area proved more skillful.

The advantage to this system is clear: The hunter is forced to demonstrate a high level of skill before a hunting license is even considered and he must continuously maintain and demonstrate that skill. An example of how the average German hunter's skill compares to the average American hunter can be observed in the clothing they wear. German hunters wear green in the field. Blaze orange clothing isn't necessary.

Despite a few imprudent claims to the contrary, HSA does not support adopting such a system for American hunters. Making the process so difficult provides a major roadblock in encouraging more participation. We feel the disadvantages far outweigh the benefits and such a policy would greatly reduce the number of hunters, thus, it would prove counter productive. Instead, we seek to instill similar high standards through voluntary programs, not by government decree. Our goal is to motivate hunters into choosing excellence in their field marksmanship skills on their own.

Fostering Achievement-Oriented Hunters

I believe a better system would be to encourage those folks who already possess a strong drive to excel. They would likely prove to be our most effective promoters. You can tell someone all about marksmanship, but you can't make them care. The Achievement-oriented already care and should be encouraged. They wouldn't need German-style hunter's education because they are already motivated to become educated on their own. Furthermore, these dedicated folks will encourage others to do the same. Courses and programs beyond basic hunter's ed. should be readily available and widely promoted but completely voluntary.

The best way to encourage the Achievement-oriented is to provide a forum that simulates hunting and is available all year long. This would allow these hunter-shooters to test new skills with virtually no risk to themselves or anything else. They can also demonstrate their skills to their friends and the general public 365 days a year. As a bonus, a simulation can be used to isolate specific problems and let them be corrected before the hunt begins. New hunters choosing to attend can learn at their own pace. Plus, this forum automatically indicates who the best potential mentors are. Just check the score board.

Consider pro sports. I'll use golf as an example. Golf can be conducted without restriction all year long. The most Achievement-oriented players can join a pro tour, win hundreds of thousands of dollars and garner the respect of millions. The major events are televised in their entirety and the results reported in the news. Winning pro golfers are international celebrities. New golfers can easily tell who can "walk the walk" and know who to learn from. Of course, new golfers are allowed to learn golf at their own pace.

Golfers have established systems for learning top-notch play. One cannot learn to be a great golfer by simply playing the occasional round. Playing 18 holes without a game plan may be an enjoyable way to spend an afternoon (that is, if you can stomach the idea of golfing when you could be at the range shooting...) but it won't lead to much improvement. The smart golfer will analyze his game. Where is the score lagging? That will show what needs work. Let's say our Tiger Woods wannabe finds he is wasting a lot of strokes because he has problems driving. If he simply goes out next time and plays another round he won't improve much, if at all. Instead, he should spend the time working specifically on his driving skills. Golfers realize this. Their publications are filled with ideas for improving specific parts of a person's game. They build and are willing to pay for specialized training facilities in addition to golf courses, such as driving ranges, just to work on one part of their game. This work will be done long before "opening day" of a tournament.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of hunters have not yet become this sophisticated. This situation is even more appalling when you consider that the golfer stands to injure nothing but pride by playing without properly preparing. A hunter is planning to invade another living creature's home turf with the intention of killing it. A mistake can cripple or lead to a slow, painful death. That may sound like a bunch of anti-hunter drivel, but it is essentially true and I say it only to make a point. Hunting should *not* be approached casually. We are literally discussing a life and death issue for both the prey and the hunter. Carelessness will hurt! The hunter should have developed and proved his skill *before* taking the field. Anything else is unethical and possibly dangerous.

Hunting live animals should be the basic execution of skills already obtained; not a proving or testing ground. The proper proving and testing ground is the range. By using a proper format Achievement-oriented hunters can test all they want, and demonstrate to all interested parties at the same time.

Affiliation-Oriented Hunters

A hunter motivated by Affiliation seeks to create and develop relationships with others through hunting. These hunters pursue game because they mostly enjoy the interactions with family and friends. They hunt for the social support the activity provides them. Coming home with a trophy is secondary. Any venison is merely a bonus. The emphasis of this group is focused on “being a hunter”, that is, developing an identity as a hunter, not just on “going hunting.” This social interaction creates a fabric, with members recognizing and adopting qualities and beliefs, along with the skills, associated with being a hunter.

The Think Tank participants brainstormed a list of barriers and opportunities to increasing hunter participation. They then selected issues they felt important and ranked them in priority order. Social support was listed as the most important factor in encouraging participation. In the opinion of the Think Tank improving social support, especially increasing positive influence from social groups outside the program, is possibly the most important factor. The committee stated, “Social competence is developed through socialization and social control.” The “social control” is exerted by others in more senior roles, mentors fostering apprenticeship. The mentors provide role models and enhance social support providing an understanding of hunting culture.

Fostering Affiliation-Oriented Hunters

The best way to encourage Affiliation-oriented hunters is providing them with plenty of opportunity to interact through hunting. The biggest obstacle to satisfying Affiliation-motivated hunters is the lack of opportunities to actually hunt. For example, a big game hunter living in Wisconsin has a scant nine days all year. Occasions to meet for a “bonding experience” are restricted by game laws.

Ideally, hunters could participate in hunting at their leisure, all year long. Obviously, we can't just change game laws in order to encourage recruitment. Instead, we need to find alternative programs. A program that can put hunters in the same situations they will face in the field and can be participated in all year long would be an ideal substitute during off-season days. Mentors fostering apprenticeship create social competence. A program that tests relevant skills in an organized fashion is ideal. Experienced hands can demonstrate and assist novices. Progress should be easy to evaluate and monitor.

The Think Tank concluded the issue of working with Affiliate-oriented hunters with a call for many options. “The issue of social support for hunters and hunting is complex and pervasive. It is far beyond the scope of any single program, agency, or organization to solve by itself. However, there are many actions that individual programs, agencies, and organizations can take to move in the right direction—to help introduce more people to hunting and shooting activities and to increase their participation at every stage in their hunting/shooting ‘careers.’ ”

Working with Current Non-Hunters

So far we've analyzed how we can encourage current hunters to become more active in the hunting community. In this section we'll look at strategies to recruit current non-hunters. Non-hunters consist of two groups: People who have been hunters/shooters or might be interested but aren't currently active for whatever reason, and folks who currently have no interest in shooting or hunting.

The Think Tank came up with a basic formula for working with this crowd: Awareness, Interest, and Trial. In other words, to get current non-hunters involved we need to peak their awareness and get them sufficiently interested so they will be willing to attend a trial of hunting or shooting.

Inactive Hunters/Shooters

This group also includes people who used to hunt or shoot, and folks who might be interested but haven't taken the step to actually try it. We don't have to spend much time convincing these folks that hunting and shooting are worthy activities because they already believe this to be true. The inactive hunter/shooter isn't opposed to the activity; they just aren't actively pursuing it.

The first step is Awareness. It is easy to assume that the awareness step isn't necessary for this group, but such an assumption is false. Most Americans are aware of the concept of hunting, but many are oblivious to how to go about it. They will see a piece in the paper on opening day, but aren't aware of what other opportunities are available the rest of the year. They may also be aware that "target shooting" as a sport exists, but most gun owners have no clue about the specifics. For an interestingly frustrating experience, ask a casual gun owner to explain the difference between Trap and Skeet, or the basic rules for High Power.

Awareness is achieved through marketing. Many people think "marketing" is synonymous with "advertising." In truth, advertising is just one of one hundred methods of marketing. Issuing press releases, holding demonstrations, and writing the editor are other types of marketing that are free and even the smallest and poorest organization is capable of. The key is regularity. Marketing experts tell us it takes seven to nine successful exposures to a message for a person to act, if they are inclined to act at all. And only one exposure in three will successfully register. That means a program or idea needs to be presented at least two dozen times to each prospect before you can expect them to act. It is generally recommended to plan to run any marketing campaign continuously for at least six months before the results can be evaluated. And if the desired results aren't achieved the campaign will have to be restructured and started all over again...

Consider that hunting seasons happen once a year and last for just a few weeks or even a few days. Hunter's education classes are held once or twice a year in a given locale. This totally violates the necessary principles needed to market effectively. Contrast this

to how a sports organization like the National Football League conducts marketing. The season lasts for months. During the off season they stay in the news by releasing information on draft picks, training camp, public service announcements (“Stay in school” and “Don’t do drugs”) and by hosting other events, such as the “Quarterback Challenge.” In other words, the NFL keeps its name out in the public all year long.

Once aware of the programs available, the next step is developing interest. This group is already aware that hunting and shooting exist but, for whatever reason, they have convinced themselves they can’t participate. Maybe lack of time or money is a factor. Again, this is why multiple programs are important. The more shooting/hunting venues made available *provided they are properly promoted*, the more folks we can attract. No two people will have the exact same interest, time and funding available (“You are unique - just like everyone else”) Many different offerings will let people choose what works for them. If a hunter/shooter can’t afford to travel out of state for a guided hunt, then there needs to be a readily available, inexpensive off-season alternative to develop interest.

Once awareness and interest is achieved, we need to move to Trial. For this to be successful the operative word is *convenience*. Once interest has peaked there needs to be an outlet immediately available. The prospect should be able to sign up or get information immediately. More importantly, they should be able to participate in an organized event within days after that and at nearly any other time thereafter. When a prospective hunter/shooter reads about opening day after it has already begun, they will have to wait for a full year to try it themselves. Their interest will die long before the season opener next year.

Another area to consider is redefining what “participation” means. When discussing participation, hunters and shooters only consider the man or woman actually in the field. In other words, the only acceptable level of participation is trying to take a trophy, animal or otherwise. Let’s look at the NFL again. They foster a sense of participation through spectating. How many times have you heard a sports fan say, “My team won the game.”? The spectator has a feeling of connection with a sport that they don’t even play! Compare the success of the NFL to the NRA and you’ll see how effective this idea is.

“But hunting and shooting only appeals to people who actually do it,” you say. Decades ago, that was the consensus about golf. Then the golfing-powers-that-be made a few minor changes to the scoring system that made it possible to compare results of players that hadn’t yet played the same holes. Today, golf tournaments are covered on television in their entirety. ESPN has even covered *spelling bees*. (!) I’m not kidding! If a sports venue can’t create a viable spectator event that can compete with all the thrills and chills of a spelling bee, it deserves to die.

Bottom line, hunter-shooters need to create spectator events to promote shooting to the masses. This concept has been tested for centuries on nearly every sport ever invented and the most popular sports are those that can attract spectators and fans. Shooters and hunters need to learn this!

Uninterested

These people have never tried hunting or shooting because they have no interest in it. A few of these folks may be opposed to hunting or gun ownership, but most of them are indifferent. They feel about hunting and shooting the way that I feel about golf: I know it exists, but I could care less.

In developing awareness and interest to people who have no desire to be involved, our primary goal should be to develop respect. We need to give the general public a reason to entrust us as subject-matter experts and destroy the “dumb fat bubba” stereotype. Every well-organized sport has their champions. The best organizations promote and advance these champions relentlessly. I believe this is why the pro-gun lobby hasn’t been able to vanquish the anti-gun forces, despite our overwhelming numbers. The pro-gun side has failed to advance “heroes” that the public can look up to.

Our focus in working with the uninterested should be to demonstrate that hunting and shooting is a safe, honorable, and worthy pursuit. Here is yet another example of how traditional recruitment schemes fail. Typically, recruitment focuses on getting someone with a potential interest to get involved. This does nothing for folks who personally have no interest in pursuing game or winning tournaments. Consider that the most football fans will never pick up a football after high school, but the NFL doesn’t let that stop their promotion efforts.

By publicly demonstrating skills in an organized manner people will have a chance to observe, first hand, what skills are *really* involved. This would effectively satisfy the Trial stage because the spectator would have first hand experience by observing. I’m convinced that the reason traditional ball sports fair so well is because most of the general public has personally been involved in the games (through tax-payer funded high school teams), and the sports organizations effectively promote the skill of the stars. In other words, the Joe and Jane Public have learned to appreciate the abilities of ball players. For someone who has never attempted to hunt game or attended a shooting match there is no frame of reference and they haven’t been taught to appreciate the skill involved. Add in the fact that shooting sports only promotes to those currently active, and even this promotion is ineffective.

Am I saying that the promotional efforts of shooting and hunting organizations for the past 150 years or so have been largely ineffective? In a word, *YES!* At least they have been ineffective when compared to the success enjoyed by professional ball sports. Shooters have made numerous important advances and created a plethora of interesting programs. The problem is, even though raw numbers of hunting/shooting participants are rising, the percentage of the general public participating is decreasing. Consider the National Rifle Association. They are the oldest, largest, most active, most recognizable, and single most important marksman’s organization on the planet. Yet, since 1871, just over 4 million people have signed up. With 1¼ centuries of experience in the field, in a country with 80 million people owning firearms, the NRA still can’t convince 95% of gun *owners* to participate.

Conclusion

If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten.

If the hunting and shooting community is to expand, we have to explore new ideas. Most of the current programs and ideas have been in place for decades. We need to think outside of the box, and not be afraid to apply non-traditional strategies that have been proven to work with other activities. The whole point of this paper is to encourage new thought to this end. I'm not naïve enough to believe that organized tournaments will magically transform anti-gun and anti-hunting folks to our side. These die-hards are a lost cause anyway. But most non-hunters/shooters aren't opposed to our activities; they just don't know much about them. We need new tools to reach them.