

Blasting out of the rough

Written by By Bernie Dotson For the Sun
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Sporting clays game hits Gallup

They call it “golf with a shotgun,” and it is this comparative name that has thrust the target game of sporting clays to the forefront of outdoor recreation in the Indian Capital.

Sporting clay is a target game played with a shotgun and “birdshot” ammunition. The clays are launched by a machine called a “trap.” In virtually every situation, automatic traps are used at stations (holes in golf), and the presentations of these targets in flight to a shooter replicates game bird-shooting.

In some game scenarios, there are rabbit targets that run on the ground like jackrabbits. Just like no two golf courses are the same, no two sporting clay courses are the same, either.

The game was developed in the 1920s in England to allow shooters to stay sharp between hunting seasons. In Gallup, Shon Lewis, an Alabama native, U.S. Navy veteran and administrator at Miyamura High School, brought the sport to McKinley County this past December. Lewis works with Gallup businessmen Rudy Piano and Nate Yale in the budding

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Gallup Patriot Target League, a sporting targeting league for local youngsters.

“This is something that we hope takes off as a sport around McKinley County,” Lewis explained. “This has absolutely nothing to do with school shootings or anything like that taking place around the country. It’s sport and that’s how we approach it.”

The Background

The GPTL is a trap shotgun team which boasts eleven members ranging in age from 11 to 18 years old. It is part of the New Mexico Youth Clay Target Association and, nationally, part of the San Antonio, Texas-based Scholastic Shooting Sports Foundation. The GPTL operates as a nonprofit organization supported by Gallup Shooters—which operates under the auspices of the City of Gallup. Membership is open to anyone with a thirst for gun knowledge, but that could change should the group become part of the Gallup-McKinley County School District and classified as a varsity sport.

Lewis, who served 26 years in the Navy, said the Gallup trap shooting team is not recognized by the New Mexico Athletic Association, a sanctioning body, as an official sport, so team funding comes via donations and sponsorships.

“Students can earn scholarships through the (Scholastic Shooting Sports Foundation) if you are recognized as being part of a league,” Piano says, noting the fact that the National Rifle Association is a source for scholarships and grants. Piano is a Gallup native and an assistant coach with the Gallup team. Lewis is the head coach and Yale the line supervisor of the Gallup team.

The Game

The shooting range is owned by the city of Gallup and is located west of the city in Mentmore. It is the same range used by professional law enforcement for practice and training.

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Members of the Gallup trap team use Remington 1100 rifles and the accompanying rounds of ammunition. The targets are “clay pigeons,” redneck slang for small circular objects released into the air from a propeller. The guns are real and safety and professionalism are paramount.

The athletes on the clay trap team must maintain good grades and cannot have disciplinary concerns at school. The beauty of clay shooting, organizers say, is that males and females participate on an equal footing. Lewis, Piano, and Yale note that the game is statistically much safer than golf or even walking down the street, as accident incident levels are virtually non-existent.

Like with most sporting clay teams, shooters use 12-gauge shotguns with low recoil ammo. Approximately 15 percent of sporting clay shooters are female.

“It’s fun and I learn a lot,” Rhonna Shultz, 11, and a student at JFK Middle School in Gallup said. “The exciting part is when I hit a moving target.”

Typically, shooters encounter distances between 15 and 50 yards, and a more open “choke” is used for close targets, while tighter chokes are needed for targets shot at a distance. The choke is a restriction of the bore diameter of the muzzle of a gun.

It is a sport that relishes safety, discipline, knowledge, and precision. The sporting clay game has no physical performance barrier, so it is a game that an entire family can play.

“We hold our athletes to high standards and want them to represent Gallup in a very positive manner,” Lewis said, adding that coaches are trained as well as background-checked.

The Team

One of the goals in creating the team was to give youngsters who like to shoot the opportunity to gain gun knowledge and to get better at the skill, Nate Yale, a U.S. Air Force veteran and

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Michigan native, said.

Yale oversees the shooting line, from the moment a shooter yells, "Pull," to the finality of bullet contact with a "pigeon." A partner in the Gallup firearms training firm Bear Arms, Yale said clay sporting teams provide positive avenues for kids and adults, some who may not be athletic-types.

"The sport teaches skill and confidence, things like how to stand and hold a gun," Yale said. "And most of all, the sport promotes safety no matter the age group. This really is something that everybody can do."

Current Concerns

The trap shooting team is getting its start at a time when many students and others across the country are calling on state and federal lawmakers to take action on gun control in the wake of school shootings, most recently at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla. That incident took place on Feb. 14, where 17 people were shot.

Lewis said he believes that teaching team members the proper respect and knowledge for guns goes a long way. He said the team's expenses for guns, pigeons, and ammunition are, for the most, part, covered by donations from parents.

Yale said hunting is part of the sport's culture and background. The competitions and practices are not only a mechanism for team members to develop better shooting skills but a way for members of the team to meet others in their age bracket who might have knowledge to share.

"The sport is definitely growing in popularity," Lewis said. "We will be here teaching and instructing for a long time."

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