

## Shooting: At home on the range

By Sarah Edworthy

There are few mornings in everyday life when you shut the garden gate behind you, saunter off to work, and hours later find yourself called upon to adopt an alpha-female stance - feet apart, arms held out straight ahead at eye level, hands clasped around the handle of a rapid-fire, self-loading air pistol.

In the cause of The Daily Telegraph, I steadied my nerves, took aim and shot. five times in quick succession. Any self-consciousness at holding the classic 007 or Charlie's Angels pose - oh, all right, I loved it - dissipates the minute you inspect your paper target and see, crikey, five hits in the bull's-eye, three shots through the same hole. Okay, so they enlarged the targets a bit, and made the time-frame longer, but what a thrill. Immediately you want to have another go to see if you can improve further.

However, as anyone can vouch after an introductory attempt at pistol shooting, an embarrassing surge of adrenalin engulfs your body. Your hands tremble. Your newly-discovered "natural trigger action" deserts you. One minute you are imagining an unforeseen burst of glory on the world stage of championship shooting, the next minute you are scowling with frustration. The next dispersal of pellets, aimed at five different targets, is not so impressive.

Deep down now, though, you know you can do it. Tom Redhead, of the National Smallbore Rifle Association – who control shooting participation from club level to World Championships and the Olympic Games - describes this particular discipline as "grand prix shooting, it's all about controlled speed".

Thanks to a mixed-target shooting day at Bisley in Surrey - courtesy of The Countryside Alliance Campaign for Shooting, The Clay Pigeon Shooting Association and The National Smallbore Rifle Association - I suddenly could see that relentless quest for perfection that is so readily understood in higher-profile sports. I also experienced its addictive pull.

All around the ranges, clay pigeon shooters cried "Pull!" to signal the release of targets from traps, and competitors in the World Long-Range Rifle Championship lay prone and took aim over an incredible 1,000 yards (calculating the effects of a strong wind into their bullet's flight on to the scarcely visible target). In the crack of gunfire it was not hard to recognise that shooters are a dedicated group who put as much effort into top-level competition as any other athlete.

Target shooting, I knew of previously as a sport Britain excel at, and usually garner medals at Commonwealth and Olympic Games. Richard Faulds was very much bracketed with the rowing boys, the sailors and modern pentathlete Stephanie Cook after his gold medal victory in the men's double trap at Sydney three years ago. Charlotte Kerwood was just 15 when she became the first British woman to win a gold medal in the Olympic double trap discipline at the Commonwealth Games last summer, where Mick Gault also won three golds and a bronze in pistol shooting, despite having had to store weapons and practise abroad because of the restrictive post-Dunblane legislation.

To the uninitiated, shooting is an inaccessible world of initials (CPSA, NRA, NSRA), numbers (.23 calibres, 12g Berettas and so on) and licensing laws. But in its myriad forms, it is one of the largest participation sports in the United Kingdom. More than one million people of all ages and abilities shoot on a regular basis (more than participate in cricket or hockey). Yet - given the nature of the equipment - each one of those will have had a careful introduction.

As Nigel Davenport, from the Campaign for Shooting, emphasised: "There is no relationship between the world of illegal gun misuse - as made prominent by inner city shootings - and the legal and responsible sporting use of guns. It is actually a good way of teaching young people self-discipline and responsibility."

Accessibility, though, is the key. It is only the converted who can relate the shooter's art with, say, Jonny Wilkinson's kicking prowess; the trajectory of a David Beckham goalward bound free-kick; a perfect qualifying lap from Michael Schumacher - and all those whose skills are visible in the open air, or on prime-time television.

The National Shooting Centre at Bisley offer numerous means of introductory coaching or corporate "crackshot day" packages. A visit there is itself an experience, with the camp's eccentric mix of shabby Victorian pavilions and scout huts with verandahs, each with its own flagpole, and the distinctive air of a colonial Indian hill station. You half expect the cast of Carry On Up the Khyber to loom around the corner.

However, it also boasts £6.5 million of Sport England Lottery-funded development - the prestigious Lord Roberts Centre offering the latest state-of-the-art indoor facilities and the ultra-chic design of the National Clay Shooting Centre. Choose a discipline, the experts say, and stick to it.

And so on to the 600-metre full-bore rifle range where it was time to lie tummy down on a mat, ear protectors on, eyes trained through a telescopic view on a black numeral 86 on a yellow background - but three or four inches clear of recoil action. Experts Ken Garside and Stuart Clark supervised the use of a bolt-action rifle of the same caliber as the army use, first with a 5.56mm bullet, then with a 7.62mm.

Fixed targets, I had decided, were definitely my thing as we moved off to the (moving) clay pigeons. Starting with skeet - which are pinged out of a trap in a path across you - David Dale gave excellent advice: "Don't look at the barrel, just follow the clay, it's all about movement." Infuriatingly, clay pigeon shooting relies more on instinct. "You're trying too hard," was Dale's conclusion.

Charlotte Kerwood, 16, was on hand to demonstrate the double trap discipline. Formidably accurate, Britain's youngest Olympic shooting medal hope, quietly lamented the International Olympic Committee's decision to reduce the size and cost of the 2008 Games by dropping her event - women's double trap - along with men's running target, but seemed resolute on switching disciplines after Athens.

As for me, "I'll be back" - as Arnold Schwarzenegger's Terminator says.