

How To Master Crossing Shots

By Brad Kidd



Plan the Shot.

We have to gather a lot of information to properly plan the shot. View/show birds and/or the targets thrown for the shooter(s) in front of us is when we gather that information. First identify target's flight path. Imagine the target is a jet leaving a vapor trail. We call that vapor trail the "target line," and can use the background to reference this line. For example, the target may fly by a particular branch on a tree and pass through the top of a bush. Using the background is very helpful in marking and remembering the target line.

There are three points along the target line we must find, mark and remember. The first is the view point. This is simply where we are looking when we call pull and typically should be where the target first appears or comes into view. Just in front of the trap if we can see the machine. If not just in front of the tree or bush the target first appears from behind. Our eyes should be in "soft" focus at the view point, meaning you are looking "big" into the area. It's like we are looking at everything and nothing at the same time. Our eyes will immediately grab the target when it comes into view if they are in soft focus.

The next point along the target line is the break zone. This is the area where we are going to break the target. Find the highest percentage shot or easiest place to break the target. When looking for the break zone, locate the area where the target is the biggest and where you see the target best. How well we see the target is governed by distance, speed, the target's profile, and the target's background. The closer the target is, the bigger it is and the better we see it. It is also easier to see a target that is showing a wide or big profile, such as the belly or dome, than when it is showing only an edge. A black target has more contrast in a light background, such as the blue sky, and orange targets are easier to see in solid-green backgrounds. The most important part of shooting a shotgun other than safety is seeing the target as best you can when you fire. Seeing the target clearly is about seeing detail on the target, and to look hard at the part of the target you see best when pulling the trigger.

The third point on a target line that we must identify is the hold/connection point. This is where we are going to hold the gun when you call for the target. On a crossing shot, the hold/connection point is typically halfway between the viewpoint and the break zone as close to the line of flight as possible without risking being over the line. The hold point is also where we will connect the gun to the target/placement position.

Connecting

On a crossing shot, I recommend starting with the gun slightly off the shoulder to use the speed of the gun mount to get connected to the target. You can also use a "cheat mount" (gun shouldered, head slightly off the gun). Timing the gun mount properly is crucial. Start the gun mount between the target release and the target approaching the hold/connection point. Always time the mount so the stock hits your face and shoulder and the muzzle of the gun hits your placement position at the same time. All of this happens at the hold point. We don't move the gun laterally with the bird as we mount. Simply time the mount to meet the target at the hold/connection point.

The placement position is where we put the muzzle in relation to the target at the hold/connection point, and depends on a target's angle, speed, distance and line in the break zone. Let's imagine a relatively slow left-to-right 30-yard crosser with a relatively flat target line. I like to use a clock face to describe the shot. When this target enters the break zone, it is moving from 9:00 to 3:00. The leading edge of this target is at 3:00, and in this example so is the placement position. If the target is arching, placement position is determined by the direction of the target in the break zone. For example, let's assume a target moving from left to right, rising as it passes through your hold/connection point, then tops out and falls as it enters the break zone. Even though the target is moving from 8:00 to 2:00 at the hold/connection point, our placement position is determined by the direction of the target in the break zone, which is 10:00 to 4:00.

As a target's angle, speed and distance increase, the placement position becomes farther in front of the leading edge. Think of this in general terms. In simplest terms, crossers that require less lead (slow and close) require a placement position on or close to the leading edge. As the lead increases, (faster/farther) we place the gun farther in front of the target at the hold/connection point. Again, think of this in general terms. Slow=close to lead edge, medium speed=a little more space, and fast=a lot of space. The placement position on a crossing shot is always going to be somewhere between the lead edge and the required lead to break to break the target.

Technique

Technique is defined as what we do with the gun in relation to the target. Our technique is simple. We have timed our mount and connected to the placement position at the hold point. Now we are simply going to stay on/maintain that position. The gun will travel the exact same speed and direction of the target from the hold/connection point to the break zone. I call this "matching/feeling the speed" or "getting control of the target." As the target gets close to the break zone, the gun moves slightly faster than the target and stretches to the lead. The stretch happens automatically/subconsciously if we execute visually (keep our eye on the target through the trigger pull). There are elements of both maintained lead and pull away into this technical approach to crossing shots.

Vision

To hit a baseball, you don't look at the bat; you keep your eye on the ball. Shooting a shotgun is no different. We must keep our eye on the object we are trying to hit, especially when that object is moving - and they always are in our sport! From the moment the target comes into view, we never look away from the target. Through the connection at the hold point, the control phase and pulling the trigger we must remain visually focused on the target. It's not as easy as it sounds because our tendency is to look at the gun as we are trying to put the gun and keep the gun in position. This simply won't work because the target is moving. Shooting a shotgun is about getting good at putting the gun where you want and keeping it where you want without having to look at the gun to do it. Very similar to pointing your finger. I don't have to look at my finger to point at you. I look at you. Visual focus on the target does not end when you pull the trigger. Pulling the trigger is more like the beginning of the end. Think of the follow-through as driving your eyes onto the target through the shot. My job when shooting a target is not to break the target, but to see the target clearly through the pull of the trigger. If I can do that, the result will be a broken target. Vision is by far the most important part of shooting a shotgun. If you are not looking at the target nothing else I've talked about in this article matters. We must focus on getting good at looking at the target. Every shot you take ask yourself if you saw the target as well as you possibly could through the shot. Wrap the mind around improving visually. Two major factors in seeing the bird properly are focus and confidence. We must make a conscious effort/be mentally focused on seeing the target. Also we must be confident and trust our hands/gun. If any doubt enters the mind we will look at the gun. Believe that if you see the target as well as you possibly can through the shot, it will break.

Stance/mechanics

Our feet should be about shoulder width apart and knees slightly out of the locked position. We want to remain very balanced. The body rotates using the ankles, legs, hips, and torso to turn through the move with the target. Our feet should stay planted/flat footed. Weight on our heels and the balls of our feet. Our torso should stay centered over our base and the upper body slightly leaned forward. Our neck should be stretched forward slightly towards the front of the stock/comb. Not so far forward that we feel any strain in the neck or feel our weight shift completely out of our heels and to our toes. Everyone has a natural point of aim. Our natural point of aim is similar to a boxers natural point of attack. It's not completely closed off like a golfer. It's not wide open with our chest facing our target like a basketball player shooting a jump shot. It's somewhere in between. We must set our natural point of aim to the break zone and twist back to the hold point. That way the body unwinds/uncoils through the shot. A common mistake is setting our natural point of aim to the hold point, which causes us to wind up and fight our body through the shot.

Tension fights what our eyes want our hands to do. We want to remain very loose and relaxed. Think of the gun as an egg. We want a good grip and don't want to drop the egg but can't squeeze so hard that we crush the egg. We don't pull the gun firmly against the shoulder. Simply place the gun against the shoulder. Soft hands and feeling loose and relaxed are key if we want to be smooth and precise with our hands. Tension in the hands will ruin the subconscious/automatic stretch to the lead at the end of the shot. Work on these five key elements of the game for every target you encounter. Get good at gathering and processing the necessary information to plan the shot. Improve your ability to connect to the target using a well timed gun mount. Practice feeling/matching the speed and perfect your technique. Remember that vision is the engine that drives all of this and we must see the target as well as possible through the shot. Keep your hands soft and weight balanced maintaining a proper shooting stance and mechanics.

Most importantly relish the journey. There will be peaks and valleys no matter what level shooter you are. Good luck and have fun enjoying this wonderful game called sporting clays!