

*It's Not An Age. It's An Attitude.*

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## Aim High Women Excel at Shooting Sports

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# Aiming for a New Crowd

## More Women Try Shooting

By CLARKE C. JONES

It was one of those great-to-be-alive winter mornings. Warmed by early coffee and an intermittent sun patting their backs, the shooters found the crisp air invigorating as they began the walk to their stations. The partially frozen ground crunched under their feet, while the Labrador retrievers that followed looked like blond and black dragons exhaling their warm breath into the cold air.

As the gunners approached their pegs and slipped their shotguns from gun cases, light conversations were replaced with the adrenalin of anticipation. Shell bags were placed to one side so as to not tangle the feet when the action began.

Leather-gloved hands opened breeches with a metallic click to insert two shells into the barrels of side-by-sides and over-and-under shotguns. The breeches snapped shut with finality.

Focused, the shooters shouldered their guns, tightened their grips and looked skyward, aiming at imaginary targets, waiting.

A horn blast announced the start of the first drive. The demeanor of every experienced retriever changed immediately. They too looked skyward in the direction birds had come from before, anticipating their job of picking up pheasants to bring to the handlers.

The first few birds caught the new shooters off guard. Pheasants are deceptively fast in flight and there is a tendency to shoot behind them, but then two gunners sharing a peg found their range and downed a high, difficult shot.

The lady who shot the first pheasant of the drive was congratulated by her best friend sharing her peg. Then it was her friend's turn to shoot.

A high cock pheasant slipped past a gentleman on the station 50 yards to their right. He fired twice, hitting nothing. With cool precision, the lady to his left brought the bird down.

The gentleman on the next peg over noticed, but said nothing. His focus, however, was distracted, and he missed an easy overhead shot.

This happens at driven shoots more often than you might think.

### More Women Involved

It appears the number of women taking up arms and heading to the shooting range or to the field is on the upsurge.

Brenda Potts is a media consultant for She Safari, an outdoor clothing manufacturer for women (see sidebar). She said the National Sporting Goods Association's statistics show 72 percent more women are hunting with firearms today than five



Sandy Numally, left, gives Elizabeth Lanier a high five at a pheasant shoot in February. The two Richmond women belong to GRITS, a group Lanier formed to bring together women who enjoy shooting sports. (Photo: Frost)

years ago. She also stated, "Surveys spanning 2001 through 2005 show more than 3 million women now hunt and over 5 million women now enjoy shooting."

But why are women more involved now?

"Shotgun sports are just another phase in the natural progression of women wanting new challenges," said one Richmond woman. "When I was growing up in the late '50s, my father and brothers went hunting and I stayed home doing

# Challenge g Sports

what young girls did then. Most girls I grew up with wanted to be considered feminine and, outside of being a cheerleader, your feminine qualities weren't on display as an athlete. Now it seems the teenage girls who are really well-rounded participate in some sport."

As more and more women participate in roles of corporate leadership, the petty social nuances which may have hindered women from doing something only men did—such as shooting—have all but disappeared.

## A Family Activity

Women also have taken up shooting for the social aspect that it provides. A group of women in the Richmond area who meet and shoot on a regular basis explained a strong motivation for their participation in this new-found activity—family.

Sandy Nunnally said she got involved because of her son. "He asked me to go shooting with him and I said, 'No way.' I was just not that interested in shooting a gun. Then I thought to myself, 'How many activities are there where a mother can participate with her 21-year-old son?' So I took a lesson and I was hooked!

"I would highly recommend taking a lesson or two. I was surprised how much fun it was to see those clay targets break," Nunnally continued. "What I really love about this sport is having something in common with my husband and son and the feeling of having learned something that three years ago I barely knew existed."

Some women have become interested in shotgun sports because as their children leave home and as they find they have more disposable income and more time, they and their husbands look for activities in which they can both participate.

Local artist Brenda Bickerstaff-Stanley said, "My husband and I shoot together as often as possible and enjoy shooting at the many places around Virginia."

## GRITS Get Their Guns

One of the most enthusiastic supporters of women shooting

is Elizabeth Lanier, who, along with several other ladies, has formed a fun and active group. They call themselves GRITS—Girls Really Into Shooting.

Their group tries to shoot as often as weather and schedules permit. Lanier and some of the GRITS have even gone pheasant shooting in Scotland with their husbands, whom they affectionately call DOGS, for Distinguished Old Gentlemen Shooters.

Lanier's enthusiasm for the sport of shooting has inspired her to obtain her Level One Shooting Instructor's Certification.

"I love teaching anyone new to the sport, but especially women and children," she said. Shooting well is a function of coordination, not strength, so nearly everyone can become skilled with practice.

A shooting lesson seems to be good advice and many a male shooting instructor will tell you that women make much better students than men. They say that women, when learning something new, pay attention to what they're being told, as opposed to the gentleman who has shot a few times and thinks he knows the game.

Henry Baskerville, an instructor at Cavalier Rifle and Pistol Club, said that women will buy shooting lessons for their husbands, and when they come along to the range, they see "shooting a gun is neither painful nor threatening as they thought it would be. They shoot a few times and begin to break targets. They take to heart a few tips from the instructor and break more targets. Quite often they are shooting better than their spouses. Women want to take the time to learn, where some men just want to shoot."

#### Shooting Sports Vary

In European-style driven shoots—in which game birds are flushed and driven to the guns—a successful day is measured not necessarily by the amount of game in the bag but the number of quality (challenging) shots presented to the guns. And because of the use of pickers-up, the need for the shooter to handle the quarry is rare.

Women who would like to shoot but are not interested in hunting wild game can find that clay target sports—such as sporting clays, trap or skeet—are an ideal outlet.

"Sporting clays—where one rides or walks a course [composed of] a number of stations that simulate various hunting situations—is a growing sport and a lot of fun for the entire family," said Lanier. "There are a lot of great courses to shoot in beautiful places and lots of great people doing it."

One Richmonder new to shooting put it, "I am 50-plus, and a widow. I like to stay active and have found this untapped social scene where you are welcomed immediately when you enter the shooting community."

She said that men are glad to see a woman in what was once considered a "male" sport. Still, she said, "because you are not going to find a shooting range in the middle of town, as you would a golf course, you have to make an effort to find where you can shoot. It's funny to see the look on some men's faces when you pull up to the clubhouse. They have this 'She's found our hideout!' look like my brothers did when they were little and were not interested in being around girls.

"But once men know you are serious about learning, they are more than willing to help. I find men who shoot are different from those who golf. They seem much calmer and at ease

with themselves. Most don't bring their egos to the range."

#### Young Women Join In

There appears to be no age discrimination when it comes to the woman shooter. Haley Bolton, of Washington, D.C., is a prime example.

"My father started taking me to watch him shoot when I was 10," she said. "Now at 12 I wanted to try it and it was fun. None of my friends do it, so it is cool that way."

Twenty-something Amanda Bridenhagen also shoots with her father.

"A large part of what I enjoy about shooting is getting to be outside, usually in beautiful places," she said. "When I go pheasant hunting with my Dad, it is not so much about the number of birds I shoot as the experience, and at this point in my career, it is about learning from my Dad and being consistent."

Whether it is father and daughter, husband and wife, or mother and son, the shooting world is evolving into a family-oriented sport where women can compete equally with their male counterparts. Maybe families are evolving as well. Whereas in the past, men and women thought they had conflicting roles when it came to shooting, now they can appreciate how shooting sports offer another opportunity for couples and families to be together. ■■■

Clarke C. Jones is a freelance writer who spends his time hunting up stories with his black Labrador, Luke. You can visit his web site at [www.clarke-jones.com](http://www.clarke-jones.com).

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## Not Your Father's Camo

Women shooters certainly want to look good, but their primary interest is shooting well. In both cases, they are not well served by clothing designed for men, which can be too large and bulky.

A number of years ago, European clothiers such as Musto, Farlow and Barbour noticed more and more women involved in both driven shooting and clays. They began providing functional and stylish sport apparel for women. Really Wild in England and She Safari in the U.S. are two clothing companies that cater almost exclusively to women shooters.

Driven shoots are not like duck or turkey hunting, where concealment is primary. Therefore, tweed shooting jackets and skirts or breeks (trousers) are often worn by women at these shoots, similar to the traditional attire of men.



From She Safari's Upland collection, this French twill shirt features a padded shooting patch. The twill cargo pants are faced with tightly woven waxed cotton to repel moisture and slip through brush.