A Sporting Life

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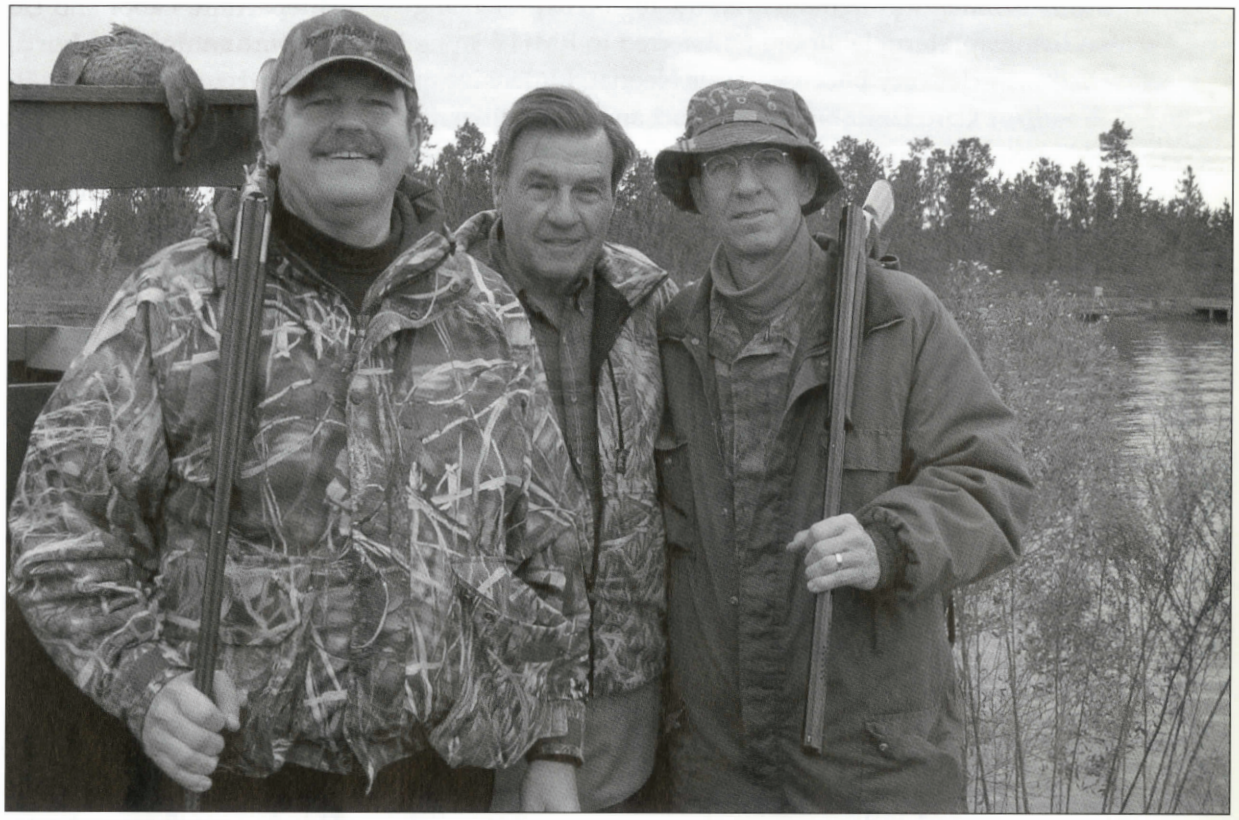

Bill Lanier and friends, Billy Crider and George Bartley, take a break from the morning activities in a south Georgia duck blind. Dr. Bartley, CEO of Mayo Clinic Jacksonville, is a new initiate to the shooting sports, and this was his first trip pursuing ducks.

I grew up fishing and hunting. I was introduced to the former by my grandmother, Audrey, who began taking me fishing with her when I was 3 years old. We would sit in her pond boat in the hot Georgia sun for hours at a time, searching mostly for panfish, and she would implore me to sit still and not talk, lest we "scare the fish." From this, I learned patience. By age 6, farm employees taught me to hunt with a rifle and, by age 10, I began hunting birds with a shotgun.

During my childhood, young gentlemen of the Deep South were typically introduced to shotgun shooting in the dove fields. Neighbors and relatives would get together in fields of freshly harvested peanuts or grains and wait for the birds to arrive for their afternoon feedings. This style of hunting is known as pass shooting since you shoot at the birds as they pass overhead. Instruction typically consisted of a lesson in gun safety, admonishment to shoot in front of the bird, and posting the stationary young hunter far away from others so that he would not be able to shoot another hunter. This geographic isolation would persist until, perhaps influenced by divine inspiration, the initiate would acquire an appreciation for safety and "get the hang of" hitting birds in flight.

Young gentlemen who demonstrated proper etiquette and some skill might, in subsequent years, be invited to hunt quail, a sport that involved walking behind hunting dogs who would point the birds and later retrieve any

kills. Quail hunts involved shooting in close quarters within feet of other hunters and the highly valued pointing dogs; hence, awareness of surroundings and concern for safety were requisites for any participant.

By the time I reached high school, I had become quite handy at shooting doves (and also ducks), where one can see the birds coming from some distance and can mentally and physically prepare for a shot. In contrast, quail were my nemesis. They typically flushed in large groups (called covies) very near the hunters and would weave amongst each other on their way to the nearest cover. For reasons that are still not clear to me, shooting one's scattergun amongst the covie is universally fruitless and will result in a clear miss. Instead, one must pick out a single bird and shoot at it. This requires considerable focus and skill. When hunting in thick timber, the entire process from flush to eventual disappearance of the birds could be over in the blink of an eye.

Not surprisingly, my childhood thoughts of dove hunting are filled with remembrances of impressive shots made; my thoughts of quail hunting are of misses. These memories became progressively etched in my mind during a 15-year absence from bird hunting coinciding with residency training and the early years of developing a career in academic medicine.

With this as background, I had mixed emotions when, a half-dozen years ago, I was invited to shoot quail in Georgia with an acquaintance, and soon-to-be dear friend, Billy Crider. "You should let me take you hunting sometime," he said. On the opening morning of our first hunt in the tall pine timber of south Georgia, Billy lent me a beautiful, prominent-brand shotgun to shoot, and I began by missing the first 13 birds. My awareness of failure was enhanced when I heard the dog-handler quietly tell Billy, "Some fella missed 23 in a row last week." I feared that I might provide the fodder for the conversation the next week.

After a few hours, I got the hang of the shooting, but just did not perform as I hoped I might. The outdoor experience and fellowship were outstanding, but the sub-par shooting left much to be desired. This performance persisted during my hunt with Billy the next year when, in the middle of the morning's hunt, he said, "I don't think your gun fits you." I was not aware of this concept, but soon learned that while one aims a rifle and uses sights to ensure it is directed toward a target, one points a shotgun, much as you might point a finger at a plane passing overhead. When shotgunning, pointing should be accomplished by looking intensely at the target with little thought directed to the gun itself. If the gun fits properly, it will shoot where the hunter looks and will result in a proper connection with the target. If the gun does not fit, there often is insufficient time to look at the target, look at the gun, aim the gun, and hit the target. Billy, who is about my size, then let me shoot a gun that had been fitted for him, and I shot the next dozen quail with a proficiency unlike anything I had ever experienced.

When I returned to Rochester, I began a formal study of shotguns and shotgun shooting. I learned that the development of modern shotguns began more than 350 years ago and was heavily influenced by the British and their Worshipful Company of Gunmakers, chartered in 1637. In Britain, the approach to shotgunning was treated much like affluent Americans would introduce a young person to golf. One would begin by getting equipment properly fitted to the sportsman, then follow this with significant professional instruction and practice before formally engaging "the

game." Until recently, such standards have eluded Americans, where trial and error have long been considered an adequate teacher, and most shotguns are mass produced and proportioned for a man of modest build, 5 feet 6 inches tall and 160 pounds. Not surprisingly, given my considerably larger dimensions, every shotgun I try off-the-shelf tends to shoot high and to the left of where my eyes are looking.

I mentioned my experiences with Billy Crider and newly found knowledge to Beth Fieck, CRNA, with whom I work at Saint Marys Hospital. Beth knew about gunfitting and proper instruction and referred me to Michael Murphy, a gunfitter and coach in Augusta, KS. Mike, his son, Marc, and their collaborating gunsmith, Jim Greenwood, have collectively adjusted guns to fit approximately 10,000 shooters. Mike has also coached 31 national, international, and Olympic shotgun champions. Mike and his team fitted me for a couple of shotguns in the spring of 2003. They then sent me home with practice instructions and an instructional video. I have been back to Kansas for more instruction in 2004 and 2005. Added to this, I have now read some 2 dozen books and innumerable magazine articles and watched a dozen instructional videos on shooting. I have additionally taken lessons with Marty Fischer, a friend of Billy Crider and famed instructor who has long had a nationally televised show on shooting and hunting.

According to Mike Murphy, success at shooting requires properly fitted equipment plus practice, professional instruction, and reading. I have dived head first into all of these. In addition to the above-mentioned activities, I have --in the past 2.5 years-- shot more than 18,000 practice rounds at clay targets and gone on hunting trips to Georgia, Minnesota, Arkansas, North Dakota, Mexico, and (soon) South Dakota. These trips have involved the pursuit of doves, quail, pheasants, Hungarian partridges, grouse, ducks, and geese. Throughout, I have met some of the most wonderful sportsmen: folks who are very much interested in promoting their sport and improving habitat for the game they hunt. We have shared hunting activities, stories of past hunts, and recipes for the harvested game. The activity has allowed me to restore relationships with old friends, strike up relationships with new friends, and create a lifetime worth of memories.

And it all began with a phone call from my friend, Billy Crider, saying, "You should let me take you hunting sometime."