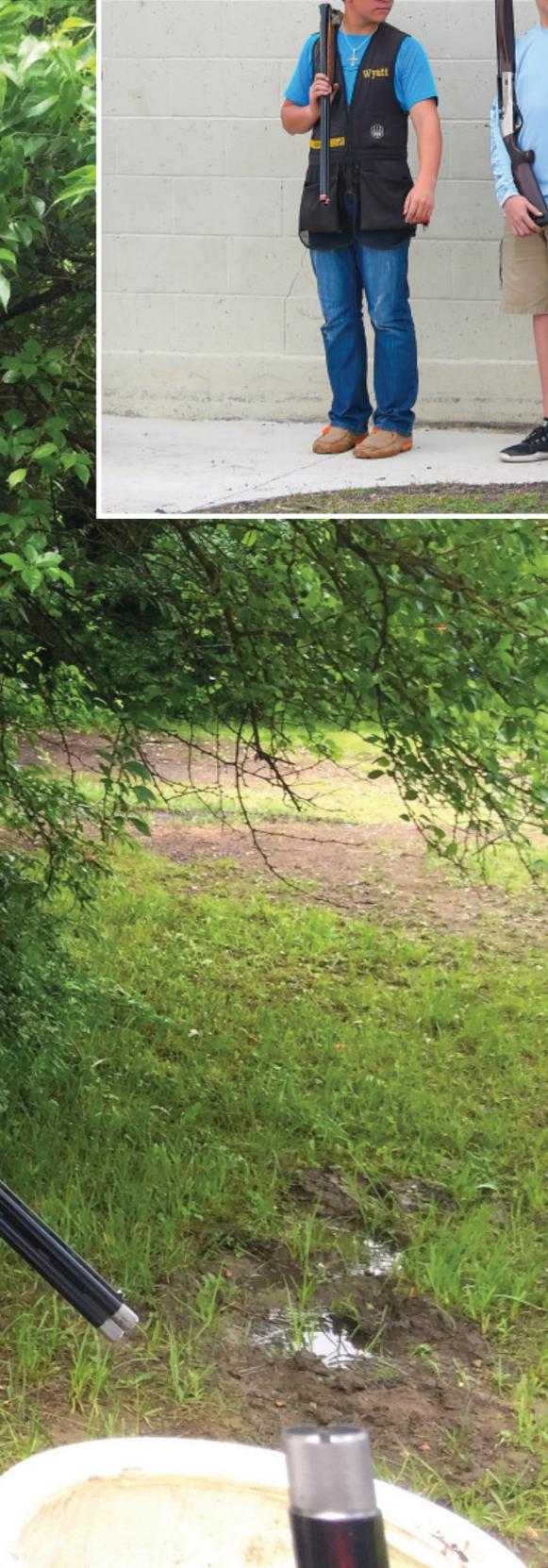

Forming A **YOUTH** Clay Target Team





TRADDIUS BEDFORD



Developing a youth skeet and sporting clays team requires commitment and a lot of work, but the pay-back is the priceless smiles and the future of our sport.

BY TIM LE CRAS

Ask any skeet or sporting clays shooter their thoughts on marketing our sports, and very soon, if not immediately, the conversation goes to getting youth involved in shooting. While there are many ways to do that, there's probably no better way to develop lifetime shooters than to have them join a youth shooting team.

Whether you're a club looking to bring in more youth, a parent of a young shooter who would enjoy this team sport, an interested adult wanting to give back to the sport, or a teen wanting to be part of a team, you should consider starting a youth shotgunning team. And there's plenty of help available.

Why start a youth team? Simply put, because it is so great to see kids shooting clays and having fun. And it is our future, voting support for shooting sports, future members of every skeet and sporting clays club, and new shooters on our national teams, our organizations and the shooting sports industry.

As the founder and coach of a youth shotgunning team, I'd like to share how we made it happen. I have two sons who love to shoot clays, so in the spring of 2015, I decided to start a Scholastic Clay Target Program (SCTP)

team to develop their skills and help them compete in skeet and sporting clays tournaments. SCTP is the largest youth shooting program in the U.S. and is very well organized; as part of the Scholastic Shooting Sports Foundation (SSSF), it emphasizes scholastic achievement as well as shooting skills.

Shooting clays is still a relatively rare sport when it comes to youth — although it's growing rapidly due in large part to SCTP — so having the opportunity to shoot with other youth makes the whole sport more fun and gives kids a peer group they can relate to and enjoy the

sport with. Receiving encouragement and coaching from SCTP-certified coaches helps kids get better and break more targets.

For many kids, competing as a team at tournaments fulfills their competitive need and gives them a reason to want to improve their skills and reach their goals. There's no sitting on the bench while the better athletes get all the playing time. Everyone participates. For my sons, it has transformed their love of the sport. We still go shoot on our own from time to time, but shooting with the team is fun and it fosters camaraderie.

Like NSSA and NSCA, skeet and sporting clays are complementary, and the skills acquired by shooting one help the other. Many can probably come up with a long list of

We have some youth who enjoy both skeet and sporting clays. We let our youth choose which they prefer, and the other kids sooner or later invite them to shoot the

▼ Good coaching will help kids improve more quickly, which makes them more likely to stick with shooting.



what each discipline will help teach and how it complements the other. Some of the kids on our team love skeet, with its rhythm and striving for perfection. Skeet helps kids develop consistent technique if they get good coaching. Then there is the game of skeet Doubles once they have mastered regular skeet, and some of our kids are learning international skeet.

Sporting clays is very popular with youth who enjoy the variety of targets, the challenge and traveling to different courses and clubs. We have youth who only want to shoot skeet, so we take them to NSSA registered shoots at other clubs to develop their competitive skills. Other kids only want to do sporting clays, and we take them to other clubs around Ohio so they can learn how to shoot different targets and do not get bored with shooting the same course. Shooting in registered NSCA shoots pushes their competitive skills and adds challenge.

other discipline once they realize that it's fun, too. The key is having skeet coaches and sporting clays coaches who agree on a consistent approach and work together to help the kids progress in whichever discipline they are working on.

ORGANIZING A YOUTH TEAM

When I started the team, I had a plan in mind that is akin to most professional teams — I recruited great coaches and motivated kids with supportive parents, and I did the organization. I plan the dates and the practices, talk to the clubs about youth discount rates, organize which coaches are coming and communicate with our parents. Then I let our coaches do what they love best — coach the kids. My payback comes from watching the kids progress. It is a joy to see them work through struggles and enjoy triumphs, with our coaches encouraging them along

SCTP VIRTUAL MATCHES

One of the challenges teams can encounter is the need to travel to compete against other teams. SCTP has provided an answer. Starting with the 2017 shooting season, SCTP is offering a National Virtual Match series for all member skeet and trap teams across the country.

SCTP teams will be able to log into the SCTP registration and recordkeeping system and register their athletes for any of its cyber tournaments. Teams may shoot these virtual competitions each week at their own local gun clubs where practices are normally conducted. Coaches then enter scores into the online system, where results are compiled and compared against other teams at the local, state, regional and national levels.

SCTP will conduct three National Virtual Matches in 2017:

- ▶ January 2 – February 12
- ▶ February 27 – April 9
- ▶ April 24 – June 4

Each of the three tournaments in the National Virtual Match series will run for six weeks, and every youth on the team gets to participate. The top five skeet scores or top five trap scores from the team will be used for that week's total score. Everyone plays and everyone has a chance to be "top shot" for the week. Teams may participate in any or all of the tournaments.

There is no additional cost for SCTP teams to participate in the National Virtual Match series; however, all teams, coaches and athletes must be currently registered for the competition season. You can do that, as well as get additional information, at www.sssfonline.com.

the way. We are fortunate to have very talented NSCA and NSSA coaches working with our kids. They are excellent role models and give selflessly. My younger son (14) has already stated that when he is old enough, he wants to be like our coaches and teach kids to enjoy the clay target sports.

Some SCTP teams are based out of high schools, but in our area, the school districts are not supportive. We went for a composite team approach, as this was the only alternative. I started the team with my two sons, their Boy Scout friends who had taken the shotgun merit badge, and kids from my sons' wrestling teams. Some saw notices that we put up in gun clubs and stores and others found our team website, www.buckeyeelite shootingteam.com. Having a well-designed website is essential in my view, as parents today expect to get information online and see what the team is doing. A website is the perfect medium for that.

One of the best recruiting approaches has been that one of the clubs in our area holds a youth summer shotgun camp every year. Several of the coaches from our team had been organizing and volunteering at the camp even before our team was started. After this camp was over, some of the kids wanted to carry on shooting, so we talked to the parents about our SCTP team. Several signed up right away, eager for their kids to have the opportunity to continue shooting. Summer camps like this are a great way to attract youth into our sport. If every

skeet and sporting clays club ran a summer camp for youth, the impact would be huge, especially if those clubs had SCTP teams for kids to join after the camp was over. The NSSA and others support clubs that set up summer camps, and this effort must be applauded.

STARTING A TEAM AND BUILDING TEAM SPIRIT

This year we got team shirts and hats, designed by my older son, who has a passion for design. The kids love them! Kids know better than we do what other kids like to wear, and many



▲ When starting a team, it's best to let the kids decide if they want to shoot skeet, sporting clays, or both.

of the kids wear their team gear around town. It is also great advertising. So let your kids have a say in what their team gear looks like! Competing together at tournaments has helped our youth, coaches and team parents grow closer. Going to SCTP state and national championships has really energized the youth and their parents.

Many of those larger events are registered by NSSA and NSCA. We also compete in adult tournaments and registered shoots, and they enjoy these, too.

SCTP offers many re-

endowment account to help fund the team, and personal assistance from its staff. You can learn more and find contact information at www.sssfonline.org.

While we certainly do

▼ One of the best things about youth teams is that no one sits the bench — all shooters participate all the time.



not have all the answers, we encourage skeet and sporting clays clubs to step up and support youth development, give youth discount rates, and most importantly, start SCTP teams. It takes time and commitment, but the benefits are so worthwhile, when you see those young smiles as they break targets and compete in a shoot together. Who knows, they might also go on to be part of our U.S. teams or at the very least, you will have given them a lifelong sport they can enjoy. Take up the challenge and start an SCTP team today. You will never regret it and might even look upon it as one of the best things you ever did! **CTN**

► Tim Le Cras is an SCTP registered coach and the team coordinator for the Buckeye Elite Shooting Team (BEST) out of Cincinnati, Ohio.