Shooting

Quit Leading Targets

Clayton Rue

What if we threw the whole concept of 'lead' out the window when teaching people how to shoot?

For the past 150 years, shotgun shooting instructors, whether they be accomplished professionals or simply well-meaning friends, have been setting their students up for failure. This is because every lesson given has been built around the concept of leading the target. How much lead does a target require? How does one generate the required lead? What does the lead picture look like? Lead, lead, lead. Everything is always about lead. I think it is high time that we, as shooters and instructors, totally throw out this lead-based approach to teaching a student how to hit a moving target.



I know, you might think that this is a radical statement. But if you will carefully read this article and indulge me for just a little while, I think you will at least understand, if not agree with, why I am taking this position. Yes, it is true that every target requires some amount of forward allowance by the barrels in order for the shot string to intercept a moving target. For some targets, this amount of forward allowance is quite large, while for others it may be minimal. The bottom line is our barrels must be on the forward side of every moving target in order to achieve success. The question is, how do we get our barrels into the correct position? My position is: It is not by leading the target.

You see, when you ask someone to lead a target, they immediately start asking barrel-based questions. Where are my barrels pointed? Which direction are my barrels moving? How fast are my barrels moving? Barrels, barrels, barrels. Every thought the shooter has is about their barrels. As soon as a shooter's mind focuses on the barrels, their eyes are soon to follow. And when a shooter's eyes drift onto the barrels, the chances of them hitting the target drop significantly. We know we cannot be successful as shooters and instructors if we are utilizing a barrel-based approach to shooting targets. Teaching someone to lead a target can result in a barrel-based approach.

I know some of you will say that what lead really describes is the bird/ barrel relationship, otherwise known as the gap between the bird and barrels. In this situation, the shooter begins to ask gap-based questions. How much gap do I have between the bird and my barrels? Is that gap above or below the target line? Is the gap increasing, constant or decreasing? Gap, gap, gap. Every thought the shooter has is about the gap between the bird and their barrels. As soon as a shooter's focus is on the gap, their eyes are soon to follow. And when a shooter's eyes drift onto the gap, the chances of them hitting the target drop significantly. We know we cannot be successful as shooters and instructors if we are utilizing a gap-based approach to shooting targets. Teaching someone to lead a target can result in a gap-based approach.

So, what can we do? We must utilize, and teach, a system that keeps the shooter's mind and eyes focused on the target while delivering the required amount of forward allowance at the same time. After much thought, I have realized that one of the teaching tricks I have been using for decades might just be the answer.

As a professional instructor, I never teach lead. This is for several reasons. First, lead is an output, not a process. As shooters and instructors, we should always be focused on process. Second, lead is almost never the problem. As shooters and instructors, we should always be focused on the true root cause of a problem. Third, lead is where a shot string goes in relation to a target. As shooters and instructors, we should always be focused on why the shot string went where it did. Always why — never where. And fourth, I have observed all too often that as soon as a student wants to start talking lead, they start exhibiting one, or several, of the above-described errors.

So, how do I teach forward allowance? I simply ask my students to let the target push their barrels. It's that easy. I have always assumed that this is successful because it is a very simple way to get a shooter both in rhythm with a target and get their barrels moving along the correct line. Think about it. If the target is moving slowly, it pushes the barrels slowly. If the target is moving fast, it pushes the barrels fast. If the target is flying level, it pushes the barrels level. If the target is climbing, it pushes the barrels up. Et cetera, et cetera. By simply letting the

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target push the barrels, the shooter will always be relatively on line and in rhythm with the target.

By using this one simple phrase, I can get most novice and intermediate shooters to break almost every target required to win their class, and very quickly. With only six words and a few minutes of practical application, I can bump up most shooters a class. Not bad. Who said that being an instructor was difficult? What I did not recognize until recently was the true genius behind this phrase.



You see, when you ask someone to let the target push the barrels, they immediately start asking target-based questions. Where is the target? Which direction is the target moving? How fast is the target moving? Is the target approaching my selected break point? Target, target, target. Every thought the shooter has is about the target. As soon as a shooter's mind focuses on the target, their eyes are soon to follow. And when a shooter's eyes focus on the target, the chances of them hitting the target increases significantly. We know we will be most successful as shooters and instructors if we are utilizing a target-based approach to shooting targets. Rather than thinking about lead, just concentrate on the target.

When letting the target push the barrels, the barrels will always be on the forward side of the bird. Since this is where they must be for every target anyway, that is a good thing. This approach will result in beautifully executed maintained-lead shots, which is the easiest and most consistent shooting technique for most targets. However, this approach does not limit us to shooting every target with a maintained lead. A shooter always has the option of slightly accelerating or decelerating his muzzles just before releasing the shot. This will produce either a pull-away or a decreasing-lead type shot as required by the target. The bottom line is the barrels will always be in close rhythm with the target.

There is one very important thing I need to expound upon when using this approach to target shooting. That is, if the target is always pushing the barrels, then the shooter's insertion point must always be in front of the target. Since that is where the barrels need to be in order to break every target anyway, I cannot imagine why a shooter would ever want to intentionally insert his barrels behind a target. One can insert just off the leading edge of the target or several feet in front of it as required by the target and the selected shooting technique.

Yeah, I know. If a shooter always inserts his barrels in front of the target, then he does not have the option of shooting a target with a swing through technique. That is a good thing. By definition, if a shooter swings "through" a target, then he will spoil the line every time. And we all know a spoiled line is one of the most common causes of misses.

At this point, I know you are thinking that this approach to shooting targets does not answer the question "How much lead?" And now is when I tell you that shooting a shotgun is just like using a light saber. You must learn to "use the force." Do not try to calculate or measure leads. Just see the target, shoot the target. If you truly let the target push the barrels, you will be amazed at how effectively the subconscious mind and your hand/eye coordination will work together to put your barrels into the exact spot they need to be when you release the shot. Let your eyes move your barrels.

So, the next time you go out shooting, give this approach a try. I think it will significantly simplify your approach to targets. No more thinking about leads or sight pictures. No more risk of your eyes drifting off of the leading edge of the target. No more shooting with the conscious mind. Never again think about lead. Just focus on the leading edge of the target and let the target push your barrels.

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