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## Hitting a target takes more than aim

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RUSH — Standing on the cement pad designating station No. 7, I take aim at a fluorescent orange disc whirling through the air against a blue sky on one of the skeet fields at Rochester-Brooks Gun Club.

Bam! Clay turns into dust.

"That's four in row," instructor George Lehr bellows. "Now let's go for five. This is for the world championship."

With my heart pounding, I shift my weight to my left foot and lean the barrel of the 12-gauge Remington 1100 borrowed from Lehr into the money shot from the low house.

"Pull!" That makes five in a row, baby, prompting an exchange of high fives with Lehr as we celebrate my "world championship."

Skeet is an exhilarating shotgun sport requiring keen eyes, concentration and stamina to compete at the highest levels, skills George Lehr has possessed in abundance for nearly 50 years in the game.

The 66-year-old Farmington resident has a rsum long enough to fill this entire newspaper page, so let's keep it simple: He's a member of the National Skeet Shooting Hall of Fame, the owner of two world titles (real not imagined) and 50 New York championships. He has broken 1,600 straight targets with a 12-gauge and was the first man to hit a perfect 400 out of 400 with a .410 at the state shoot, a feat he duplicated at the U.S. Open.

In other words, getting a skeet lesson from Lehr is like getting a driving lesson from Mario Andretti.

"You know who Tiger Woods is?" Rochester-Brooks manager Jim Waterman says. "You know he (used to go) to a guy named (Butch) Harmon? Well, that's our Harmon."

There's a Mrs. Harmon, 'er Lehr, too.

Andrea Graham Lehr has won more than 40 ladies state championships and three world titles. Together, the Lehrs are Rochester's First Couple of Skeet and the folks behind luring another impressive double-header to Rochester-Brooks: the state championship that concludes Monday followed by a fifth U.S. Open that runs Thursday through Sunday.

"In the skeet world, it's the Lehrs who keep the sport alive here," Waterman says.

After retiring from Xerox as a machinist, George dedicated a year of his life to Rochester-Brooks, turning the historic club — one of the largest in the northeast — that had fallen upon hard times back into a profitable operation with growing membership.

He made capital improvements, mowed the lawn, plowed the snow, cooked and never took a fee, leaving the club in the black when he turned the keys over to Waterman three years ago.

"It was a nice facility that just needed a little boost," Lehr says modestly.

When I meet the Lehrs, Andrea is dropping off computer equipment to run the electronic scoring and George is giving the skeet houses a fresh coat of paint.

Andrea has been the shoot manager for three U.S. Opens and so many state events she has lost count.

"She doesn't get the credit she should for keeping skeet alive in New York," George says of his wife, a member of the state hall of fame.

"Just write s-t-u-p-i-d across my forehead," she jokes about the work it takes.

It's clear that it's a labor of love. More than 300 of the country's top shots will be in town for the Open.

Count George Lehr among them.

In his prime, he missed just 3.3 times per 1,000 clays with a 12-gauge, and he holds the second-longest streak in history with a .410 at 728.

"That's the one that causes mental problems," he says of the tiny shell holding just a half-ounce of lead. "Guys wake up in the middle of the night screaming."

In 2005, people stood and screamed "Way to go, George" at the worlds in San Antonio when Lehr won the 28-gauge title in a shootoff against competitors young enough to be his grandchildren. It was a triumph over Father Time and an eye illness that threatened to derail his career.

On the range, the engaging Lehr is known to freely share his knowledge. His philosophy: if he makes someone else a better shooter, it challenges him to be better. That's the definition of sportsmanship.

"You have to understand that someone, somewhere is going to be better than you," he says. "I've beaten every generation so far. I'd like to beat this generation but I'm coaching these kids."

He's as gifted a teacher as a shooter.

During our session, he is patient and positive, miss after frustrating miss, until things fall into place for me. Skeet is shot from eight stations with clay birds flying from low and high houses, providing a variety of challenging shots. It's a close simulation of bird hunting, topped only by sporting clays.

"Shooting is all between the ears once you have the proper technique," says Lehr, who races homing pigeons when he's not breaking clay pigeons.

His teaching system is similar to golf's where a correct stance, grip, barrel swing and follow-through are utilized. Successful repetitions at each station programs the brain to repeat the feat, Lehr says.

"You want to give the computer upstairs a constant sight picture on breaking targets," he says.

And practice makes perfect.

"I've had guys after two or three boxes hit only four or five targets," Lehr says. "Then something clicks."

Lehr's constant encouragement helps.

"There's an old saying in skeet: 'Every streak starts with a miss,'" George says.

I'm on the verge of a lot of streaks.

Lehr keeps me loose telling humorous anecdotes (most you can't print). A student of the game, he launches into a tangent about the science behind a spinning disc. The more revolutions, the easier it is to break due to centrifugal force. A single BB can do the trick.

"So I usually shoot quicker to the house," he explains.

As a couple, the Lehrs have eyed targets around the country together. Because it's a skill and not a strength sport, women regularly top the men in competition.

Andrea joined George, world champ Craig Parsons, Ben Wong and Robbie Verbridge on a 5-person team that registered the only perfect 250 in the Finger Lakes Skeet League's 70 years.

"A lot of couples shoot together because you can compete on an equal level," she says.

And it's just plain fun turning a clay disc into dust.

With his eye-hand coordination and knack for repetitive training, George Lehr wonders what would've happened had he picked up golf clubs in the early 1960s instead of a shotgun.

"I'd be a millionaire today," he says with a laugh.

Instead, he's rich in so many other ways.

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