

St. Petersburg club teaches kids Olympic sport of shooting

By Terry Tomalin, Times Outdoors-Fitness Editor

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From left, Sevin Layer, David Telford and Gabe Shandles practice trap and skeet at the Skyway Gun Club in St. Petersburg.



[TERRY TOMALIN | Times]

ST. PETERSBURG — Sevin Layer isn't your average teenage athlete. He doesn't swing a bat or throw a football. The 14-year-old Palm Harbor resident's sporting equipment of choice is a 12-gauge shotgun. "This is just a lot of fun," said the junior member of the Skyway Trap and Skeet Club. "I can't think about anything else."

The freshman at Palm Harbor University High said he has no desire to hunt animals. He kills only clay pigeons. "He has really taken to it well," Bonnie Chamberlain, Layer's coach, said. "He has only been shooting for 18 months, and he has already earned medals at the Junior Olympics."

Layer and another top-ranked shooter, 10-year-old Gabe Shandles of Odessa, are among the dozens of local teens and tweens who are getting a jump on the Olympic sport. "We have a regular program every Saturday morning from 10 to 12," Chamberlain said. "No experience is necessary."

Shooting was part of the first modern Olympics in 1896, though women didn't get a chance to compete until 1984. The International Shooting Sport Federation holds its world championships every four years, alternating with the Olympics. The shooting sports are broken down into three categories: rifle, pistol and shotgun, the discipline taught at the Skyway Gun Club.

Aspiring shotgunningers can train for the trap, skeet and double trap events. During competitions, shooters go from one station to the next, stopping at each to yell "pull," the signal for the clay targets to be launched.

In skeet, the shooting stations are set up in a semicircle with shooters advancing to each station. Chamberlain and her partner, Marvin Spinks, focus on safety and technique while requiring athletes to maintain and manage their equipment.

"We focus on discipline and responsibility," Chamberlain said. "We don't care if they leave here and never touch another shotgun. The experience will make them more self-sufficient and ready for the university or the business world."

Shooting sports help develop hand-eye coordination, which can give athletes an advantage in other sports, especially baseball. "It is really up to the youngster," Chamberlain said. "They can put as little or as much time into it as they want. If they want to do it for fun, that is fine. But if they want to take it to the next level and compete, we can help them with that, too."

In U.S. competition, the trap house is 2.5 feet above ground level and contains one machine that throws targets 10 feet high and can travel approximately 50 yards. There are five shooting posts located 16-27 yards behind the machine, positioned in a semicircle. The first shooter, or squad leader, always calls for the first target. The other shooters then take turns calling and shooting targets until each has shot five targets. The 4-inch clay targets are released from a high house and a low house in a skeet completion. Competitors rotate through eight shooting stations. Each round has 25 targets.

Chamberlain believes one positive America's video game culture might have on the country's youth is making them better trap and skeet athletes. "But that doesn't mean they should sit inside and watch TV," she said. "They need to get outdoors and use those skills on the range." The Skyway Gun Club's youth program has joined with the Major League Baseball Players Alumni Association for a Shoot With the Legends fundraising event on Saturday. The USA Shooting and U.S. Clay Target Association-sanctioned program, dubbed the Gulf Coast Hot Shots, has already produced a number of local, state and national champions.

Future plans include building an Olympic-style bunker for trap training, a dedicated Olympic skeet field and an indoor physical, mental and vision training center that will include an electronic training simulator with video analysis.

To learn more, visit the Skyway Trap & Skeet Club at 3200 74th Ave. N, St. Petersburg or email Chamberlain at bonnie@chamberlainshootingschool.com.