

What Shotgun Should I Buy?

By Clif Altom

Purchasing a shotgun for a young shooter can feel overwhelming. Many parents who have raised a champion shooter often think back and say, "If I had known how much I'd end up spending on ammo and targets, I would've invested in a top-tier shotgun from the start." On the other hand, some parents reflect on all the equipment they've bought—be it golf clubs, soccer balls, skates, baseball gloves, or even shotguns—and wish they could get some of that money back for college expenses.

Most kids who start shooting clays genuinely enjoy the sport, but with so many clubs, sports, and activities available, it's tough for them to be fully active and competitive in everything they want to try.

Until you're certain your child is committed to the sport for the long term, there's no need to spend a fortune on a shotgun. Shotguns generally fall into a few price categories: inexpensive (\$400-\$900), mid-range (\$900-\$1900), committed (\$1900-\$3000), and serious (\$3000 and up). Regardless of the price range, they all serve the purpose of breaking clays.

Understanding Shotgun Price Ranges

When considering a shotgun purchase, it's crucial to evaluate your budget and long-term goals:

Price Range	Description	Examples
Inexpensive	\$400 - \$900	Silver Eagle, Mossberg, Remington 11-87
Mid-range	\$900 - \$1900	Remington 1100, Beretta a391 or a400, Winchester 101, Browning Citori
Committed	\$1900 - \$3000	Browning GTI (CX, XS, or XT) or 725, Beretta 680-690 series, Benelli/Beretta semi-autos
Serious	\$3000 and up	Perazzi, Kreighoff, Caesar Guerini, Beretta DT-11, Blaser F3, Zoli

While high-end guns can sometimes be found used at lower prices, it's essential to be cautious, especially when purchasing online or at gun shows. Stores like Cabela's might have higher prices, but they offer reliable customer service if issues arise.

Determine your budget first, and then start focusing on specific features: action type, gauge, barrel length, rib, beads, stock, and so on.

When it comes to competitive clay target shooting, the main options to consider are semi-automatic or over/under shotguns. Other types of shotguns aren't as well-suited for this sport. In some shotgun games, like sporting clays, an over/under shotgun may offer a slight advantage due to its extra barrel and choke options. However, semi-automatics generally produce less felt recoil, which can be beneficial for new shooters.

Managing Recoil: Key Considerations

Recoil can significantly impact a shooter's comfort and accuracy, particularly for youth shooters or those new to the sport. Managing recoil effectively is crucial for performance and long-term enjoyment.

There are three main ways of managing recoil: light target ammo, a heavier gun, and proper gun fit.

Light Target Ammo	Using light target loads, which contain less powder and produce a softer kick, is ideal for beginners. This type of ammo reduces the impact on the shoulder, allowing for more extended practice sessions without discomfort.
Heavier Gun	A heavier shotgun helps absorb more recoil than a lighter one. The weight acts as a counterbalance to the recoil force, dispersing the impact over a larger mass. However, the gun must still be light enough for the shooter to handle comfortably and swing smoothly.
Proper Gun Fit	Gun fit is perhaps the most crucial factor in managing recoil. A well-fitted shotgun will distribute recoil energy more evenly and prevent concentrated impact on specific areas. Proper fit involves aligning the stock length, comb height, and weight distribution with the shooter's physique, enabling consistent gun mounting and reducing the risk of injury or discomfort.

There are other factors, such as length of pull and stance, that affect recoil management. If the three main points can't be addressed, it's best not to purchase the gun. However, don't despair—many guns have adjustable stocks. Wooden stocks can easily be made adjustable, and composite stocks have shims that can be used for minor adjustments.

Why Smaller Gauges Aren't Always the Answer

While smaller gauges like .410 or 28 gauge might seem to offer reduced recoil, they often handicap the shooter due to fewer pellets in each shot, making target hits more challenging, especially for beginners. Moreover, the perceived recoil of a smaller gauge isn't necessarily less. For example, a 20-gauge shell fired from a lighter 20-gauge shotgun can produce similar recoil to a light target 12-gauge shell fired from a heavier 12-gauge shotgun. Thus, the benefit of reduced recoil with smaller gauges is often offset by their lighter weight, which doesn't absorb as much recoil.

Choosing the Right Balance


When selecting a shotgun, consider what the shooter can handle in terms of weight and control. Ideally, choose a gun that is on the heavier side of what they can manage comfortably, allowing for practice sessions involving shooting 100 rounds in a row without undue strain. It's essential to set realistic expectations: a beginner's first few days may involve sore muscles as they adapt to using muscles in their arms and back that aren't regularly exercised. With time and practice, the right combination of ammo, gun weight, and fit will make shooting a much more enjoyable and less physically demanding activity.

Importance of Gun Fit and Consistency

When shooting a shotgun, we point rather than aim. The shooter's dominant eye serves as the rear sight of the shotgun. Proper gun fit ensures that the shooter can repeatedly and consistently mount the gun with the correct cheek weld, aligning the dominant eye straight down the rib. This consistency is key to hitting targets reliably. As a parent, consider these three points before purchasing a shotgun for your child:

1. The butt of the stock should fit comfortably in the shoulder pocket, with the cheek resting firmly on the comb.
2. Both eyes should be level, with the dominant eye looking straight down the rib.
3. The dominant eye should be above the receiver with the bead(s) visible (although the bead should not be the focus once the shooter calls pull).

Final Tips

 **Take Your Time:** Don't feel pressured to bring a shotgun on the first day. Many shooters are willing to let beginners try their guns, offering valuable insights into gun fit and features. This gives new shooters and parents a chance to understand the importance of gun fit and become familiar with features like adjustable combs, high ribs, and chokes. It also allows them to determine how much the shooter enjoys the sport before making a significant investment.

You can ask any competitive shooter parent and one thing's for certain: The cost of a well fitted, quality shotgun is one of the least expensive and most important aspects of competitive shooting. Choose wisely to provide a positive and rewarding experience for your young shooter. 