

The Scientific Shotgunner

Two tools can tell you a lot more about your favorite scattergun.

In recent years, I haven't done nearly as much shotgunning as I'd like, which is unfortunate because I used to be pretty darned good with a scattergun. But I've seen my skills erode considerably due to a lack of practice, and as I get older I realized that regular practice is ever more important.

Shotgunning has often been called an art, while rifle shooting is more of a science. Certainly, shotgunning is more fluid and more demanding of eye/hand coordination than most rifle shooting. The shotgun is pointed rather than aimed, and, this being the case, the shotgun simply must point where you're looking—but there's a catch: It's not the same for everybody.

As an old trapshooter, I do best with a shotgun that shoots at least slightly high, meaning I consciously point the gun underneath the target, letting the rise of the pat-

ternal chokes for steel shot and "extra full" chokes for turkey. Not all chokes are created equal; there can be quite a lot of difference between one manufacturer's modified and another's.

And, inexplicably, some shotguns are almost as finicky as rifles, patterning some loads and shot sizes decidedly better than others. Ultimately, the only way to learn how a shotgun really shoots is by going to the pattern board. This will tell you what kind of pattern your shotgun produces, what loads it produces the best patterns with, and, if you use a specific aiming point, it will also tell you where the pattern is centered.

Many years ago, I had a nice European side-by-side 28 gauge. I got it in the early fall, and I shot a whole bunch of quail with it, including a number of snappy doubles (if I do say so myself), before I took it to the skeet range. For some reason I couldn't buy the second bird on any pair of doubles. I figured the choke was a bit tight and I was having a bad day, but just for grins I took it to the pattern board.

I wish I never had. The gun was poorly regulated, with the left barrel patterning way wide and low. The mystery is how I ever hit a bird with that barrel.

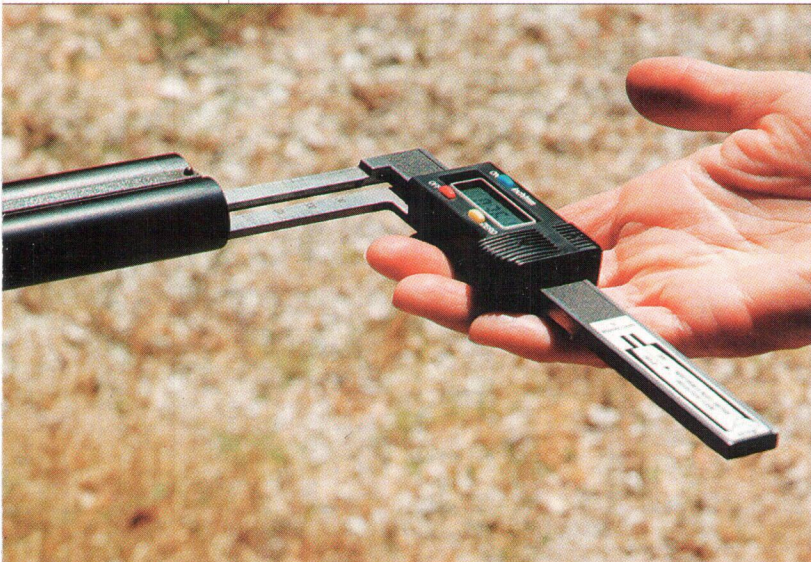
Ultimately the pattern board is the only solution to figure out what your gun is doing in your hands, but recently I've found a couple of tools that every serious shotgunner needs access to. Both are from the Robert Louis Company (www.shotguncombo.com) and are the brainchildren of Bob Foege, who is not an engineer but a dead-serious shotgunner who believes in the science of it.

First is his Shotgun Combo Gauge, a simple, clever device for measuring length of pull, drop, angle of pitch and any other critical stock dimensions you might think of. Mine has a magnetized extension, so for drop and pitch all you have to do is center it on the rib and let the magnet hold it in place while you take the measurements.

Why should you care? If you have a shotgun that feels particularly good and you shoot it well, it's useful to know its critical dimensions. These dimensions can then be checked when shopping for a gun.

There's also the reverse situation. I've fallen madly in love with a number of shotguns that I just plain couldn't shoot. If you know what works for you it's pretty easy to learn why a certain gun doesn't work.

A lot more complex—and just possibly even more



The Boremaster is a device that gives you digital readings of choke, chamber length, forcing cone and other measurements.

tern do the rest. Others shoot best with a shotgun that shoots flat; they must "cover" most targets in order to center them. A hundred years ago, the style was lots of drop in the stock, making a gun shoot very low.

Whichever way you go, it's critical that the gun fit properly, but do you know what the proper fit is for you? What's your correct length of pull, height at comb and heel, pitch? Do you like a high-shooting gun, or do you shoot your best "dead on?" If you're serious about shotgunning, you should know these things so you know what to look for when shopping for a new gun.

Then there's the issue of choke, which is genuine science. Screw-in chokes are the norm today, and there is a bewildering array of options, including spe-



BOOM.

ArmaLite's® Heavyweight: .50 Caliber and 33.2 Pounds!

The AR-50 is produced to provide an economical and accurate rifle for the challenges of long range shooting. Outstanding accuracy is provided by the V-block mounting of the receiver to the stock. It's like having a machine rest that is shaped like a stock.

This innovative, single shot, bolt action rifle features a unique octagonal receiver bedded into an aluminum stock, an M16 style pistol grip and removable buttstock for ease of transportation. With the most efficient muzzle brake on the market, the AR-50's massive and distinctive brake provides .243 like recoil.

Oh, and please excuse the noise.



ArmaLite, Inc.® • P.O. Box 299 • Geneseo, IL 61254 • Ph. 309.944.6939 • Email: info@ArmaLite.com • www.ArmaLite.com

**Red,
White and
Liquid Blue**

This color will not fail!

For simple steel touch-up or complete re-blue of your firearms, you can count on a consistent, smooth and flawless finish with Tetra® Gun Liquid Blue. Easy-to-use and non-streaky, Tetra® Gun Liquid Blue's high-tech Stage 3 formula delivers deep, rich color every time.

Proudly Made in the **USA**

FTI, Inc. • Florham Park, NJ 07932 • (973) 443-0004 • www.tetraguncare.com

useful—is Foege's new Boremaster. This is sort of a reverse caliper with spring- and sensor-loaded legs, battery operated with a digital readout. This little tool can tell you a whole lot about a gun you're considering or one you own. Make sure the gun is clear, zero out the display and insert the legs into the barrel—muzzle or chamber, depending on what you're measuring.

It will give you chamber length and diameter, forcing-cone length, bore diameter, choke diameter and length of choke. Used with a standard caliper for outside dimensions (and simple math), it will give you the thickness of your barrel wall, often critical on older guns and fine guns.

I have one really good "family gun," my uncle's old Holland & Holland Royal, initially delivered in August 1914. I shoot it occasionally and shoot it reasonably well, but other than admiring it, shooting it and cleaning it, I haven't studied it much. I studied it carefully with the Boremaster.

When he passed the gun along to me, my uncle described the chokes of its 28-inch barrels as "tight and tighter." In my shooting with the gun, it seemed to pattern pretty darned tight, but the Boremaster gave me a big surprise. The right, more open choke has just .014 inch constriction; the left, tighter barrel is .028 inch. In American terms the open barrel is sort of between improved cylinder and modified, what the sporting clays folks now call "light modified." The tight barrel isn't even close to a true full choke, maybe improved modified.

In English terms it's what I should have guessed it to be all along: one-quarter choke in the right barrel, three-quarter choke in the left barrel. I don't know or care if this means anything to its value, but I'm glad to know.

I put the Combo Gauge on the rib and measured the stock—no surprises there. But with that long straight-edge running down the centerline, I had to recognize that, for left-handed me, it has a whole lot more cast for a right-handed shooter than I've ever been willing to admit. A guy who really knows what he's doing could perhaps bend a bit of the cast out of it, but do you think that would be smart to attempt on 93-year-old walnut? I don't. I think I'd best learn to live with it. ■

For more of Craig Boddington's "Gun Notes" columns, go to www.GUNSANDAMMO.MAG.COM and click on "Gun Columns." There you'll find past articles going back several years.