



Hey Mister...Will You Take Me Shooting?

By Daniel Schindler

Our begging and promises were not persuasive enough for a very long time. My hero, Uncle Sol, a world traveler and hunter, finally talked my father into letting me have a BB gun. It didn't get on the 11 o'clock news, but it was a big deal to me.

Ball cap snug, rifle slung over my shoulder, and pockets bulging with BB boxes, I raced out the door. We lived on the perimeter of an Air Force base, and I was loose amongst the grasshoppers, starlings, and the long-discarded tin can, a bounty of targets for an 11-year-old.

Coming to an enormous woodpile, I spied a small bird on the highest branch. With ninja stealth and grim persistence, I proceeded to miss my perch-hopping target a dozen times before it tired of my annoying and repetitive *ffffttttt*. It flew away to a safer spot, in my mind at least, though it had probably been safe enough. Hungry and thirsty, satisfied that I had confirmed my astounding shooting skills with the wood folk, I trekked homeward.

Coming around the corner of our house, I noticed not one but two MP vehicles parked in our driveway. Cool. What had I missed? What was missing was me. Hours earlier, my errant shots over the woodpile had tinkled the windows on a trailer

home in the woods I could not see from my side of the woodpile. The elderly resident called the police. The search for me had been going on for a while. My new gun was confiscated and my shooting career put on hold indefinitely despite my obviously valid protests. What do parents know, anyway?

My pleas to go shooting again went unheard for another two long years before my father relented. Because I vicariously lived, slept, and breathed shooting and the outdoors, that was an eternity. And that is why I am pleased when parents bring their youngsters in for training and especially those—like I'd been—who can't be happy unless spending some of their time afield with a gun. I can't explain it, but I understand it. Deeply.

When that shooting introduction time comes for young Jim, John, or Lisa, we as adults owe them the very best shooting experience we can provide. Unfortunately, all too often I see shooters being introduced to the shooting sports without eye and ear protection, guns that are too heavy, and insufficient attention given to recoil reduction. And we wonder why they won't come back to experience *that* again?

I keenly remember wanting to go shooting, and no one would take me. So I'll admit to telling parents that I'm

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proud of them for bringing their new shooters to the club—and my being a bit protective of women and youngsters having their first go at shotgunning. Subsequently, I pass this along to the instructors I certify, explaining how important that first experience is and specifically how we can ensure that all goes well.

So, can a life be changed by a few minutes with a competent instructor? You be the judge.

It was Saturday, July 31, 2010, at River Bend Sportsmen's Resort, my home club, where I was doing a Paragon instructor certification class. It was the second morning that the instructor candidates had shooters in front of them, and all were in good spirits as our two groups left for our assigned fields.

Quite by chance, I had the good fortune to witness a piece of extraordinary teaching from one of our candidates, Jeff Allen. I must say, I fear this will lose something in the telling but will do my best to do it justice and give an honest account, all with real names.

Young Nicholas is 10 years old, of slight build and stature. He was here today because he wanted to be confirmed before we agreed to register him for the event. First on my cart, his shooting vest could barely contain his impatience. Young Nicholas' spirits were high as we approached the first field. Watching him, he looked eager, as focused as a 10-year-old ball of energy could be. Sitting next to me on the cart, it wasn't hard to sense his excitement since I remembered that feeling well. It was up to us to make this a good show today.

Arriving at station four, our group dismounted. The target presentation was a soft, incoming teal with a deliberate bit of hang time—perfect for some of our new, inexperienced shooters, including Nicholas, who asked to be called Nick, so I will.

I asked George Ellis to work with Nick and that he go first so that Nick wouldn't have to follow a more-experienced shooter. The .410 checked, along with Nick's loads and eye and ear protection, George was handling the ammunition. George was attentive and got things started by showing Nick a bird. It was time to bring the gun into play when Nick quite unexpectedly balked. No doubt about it, we had a problem.

Here I ask you to understand that I believe no one should be pushed into shooting, and especially those who are adamant about not wanting to get behind the trigger. It can all be sorted out and discussed later, but for now, stepping back is just fine and perfectly acceptable.

In Nick's case, this was an abrupt turnaround from his morning-long anticipation. It was clear, Nick feared what he thought might happen if he actually had to hold and fire the gun. Nick wasn't unsure about this, he was sure. Yet if you watched closely, there was his persistent curiosity, his commendable refusal to walk away and call it a day. Nick made it clear, he wasn't leaving. But his fear was winning, and, for now, it appeared that no amount of George's praise and persuasion was going to change that. Stalemate.

Beginning shooters can benefit greatly from proper safety and shooting instruction, as well as positive encouragement and support.

It was then when Jeff tapped me on the shoulder and very respectfully asked if he could assist. Jeff works with youngsters in the scholastic shooting program he established in his area. Right away, I had a good feeling about this.

"George, would you mind letting Jeff have a few minutes with Nick?"

George smiled genuinely, nodded, and Jeff quickly stepped across to Nick's level. Experience to the front, Jeff knew how to engage a 10-year-old. On one knee, Jeff began by talking to Nick about everything that would interest a 10-year-old. Rapid fire, one question from Jeff followed another. With each passing second, Jeff was building a bond, coaxing and inviting Nick to trust him. Jeff was quickly becoming a "pal," magnetically drawing Nick closer.

Jeff asked Nick to watch him shoot a stationary clay, which I stood upright on the ground 10 yards out. Nick stood considerably back of Jeff, unsure of what would happen but leaning forward, not wanting to miss a thing. Jeff fired and all cheered. Visibly, Nick soaked up the excitement and moved in closer for another look. I replaced the target and the next. More cheers, and each time Nick drew closer. The critical moment had arrived. Jeff was animated, drawing Nick in, never once pushing, always asking, always reassuring.

Target replaced, Nick holding the gun, Jeff suggested a few dry fires. Each and every time Nick's cheek settled on the stock, did we detect a rising courage in Nick?

"How 'bout with a shell this time, Nick?"

"Will I be OK?"

"Oh, absolutely, I promise."

It was difficult to watch Nick's internal struggle—his so much wanting to do this but not so sure. Jeff was everlastingly patient, answering a barrage of questions, each and every one followed by encouragement. Our group was holding our breath watching this unfold. Little by ever so little, Nick's fear was waning. Trust me when I say this: Nick terribly wanted to shoot. Only fear stood in the way. Jeff, undaunted, just kept answering questions, strengthening the trust between them.

A shell went into the gun. Jeff stayed close now, almost wrapped around Nick, not intrusively, but comforting. All



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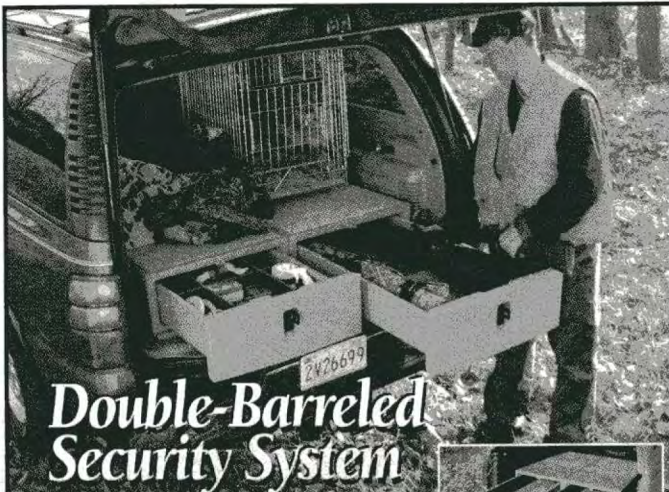
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eyes riveted on the pair; no one exhaled. The silence was crushing. After what seemed like 10 long minutes, the shot was fired and the target disappeared—not a piece remained. Not one. A thunderous roar rang out over River Bend.

For the first three seconds, Nick saw what happened and checked himself to see if he was all still there. Much to his delight, he was. Chest puffed out, and a smile that put a lump in a dozen throats, Nick turned around to high-five the entire group, which rushed forward. Jeff and Nick did this successfully twice more, and Jeff asked if he was ready to shoot the target in the air. Nick declined, so Jeff said, "Let's rest a moment."

Seeing an opportunity, I asked George to please bring Nick's dad Joe into the box with Joe's gun. In no time, Dad was breaking the incoming target, quite a show, which Nick was watching.

As Joe and George stepped out, they were greeted by Jeff and Nick going in. I try to be frugal when asking God for favors, but I marked this one "urgent." That done, I turned to watch. After much ado and preparation, again on one knee, Jeff slipped a shell into the chamber. Muzzle and stock placed into an advantageous position, I heard a small voice say, "Pull." I pressed the button and the bird was on its way. How it could fly at all considering the massive hope it was carrying was beyond me. The shot fired. So close, but not quite. Silent expletives deleted. Jeff kept the praise coming as any best friend would.

Another shell went home and the gun closed.

"Trapper ready?"

"Ready." Definitely ready.

A more determined voice said, "Pull." Up it came, and time just stopped. No doubt, our collective thoughts were please, please, please. I tell you no lie, just black smoke lingered where the target used to be. Another thunderous cheer and applause, and it was all Nick could do not to take a bow. The rain was coming fast, so we headed to the clubhouse a bit early for lunch. A dozen carts, including mine, sat under the front archway seeking refuge from the downpour.

I pulled my candidates aside and asked, "Who were the pupils on field four?"

The dining room still buzzed with shooters sharing their accomplishments as lunch was coming to an end. I noticed Nick working his way through the crowd to the front door. I really didn't think anything of it until a few minutes later, when I walked out front to see if the rain had subsided. There was Nick, sitting on the back of my cart, looking for company. He didn't know when we were leaving, but Nick was making sure no one was going anywhere without him.

Bob Lockett, assisting me with this class, came up the walk and asked me, "Do you know who that young boy is sitting on the back of your cart?"

I said, "Yes, it's Nicholas, why?"

Because, Bob said, he just asked me, "Hey Mister...will you take me shooting?"

