



Revisiting the
Pioneers of
Sporting Clays
in America



An Interview with
JAY HERBERT

Story by
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The founding of sporting clays in America has interested writers and readers for years. What emerges is a picture of several independent, geographically disparate initiatives that began in 1980 and then coalesced by 1985 into what became, at one time, the fastest-growing sport in America. What most of the earliest champions of the sport had in common was that they were influenced by shooters from England, where the clay target sport that most mimicked actual wingshooting conditions had a widely respected following dating back to 1925.

The people and organizations that had the most influence on the earliest history of the sport in the US were the subject of Dick Dietz's 1999 *Sporting Clays* article, "The Origin of American Sporting Clays," and an account by then *Clay Shooting USA* editor Dana Farrell titled "The History of Sporting Clays." Between the two references, we learn the names of the pioneers responsible for the emergence of sporting clays in the US, and they include "the godfather" of the sport Bob Brister; Remington's Dick Dietz, Gerald Quinn, and Dick Baldwin; and the Connecticut-based National Shooting Sports Foundation's Bob Delfay, Doug Painter, and 'Rock' Roling. Chuck Dryke of Sunnyside Shooting Grounds also got early credit, as well as Houstonian Jim Moore, who co-founded the first governing entity of the sport, the US Sporting Clays Association.

The goal of this story is to piece together some of the other movers and shakers of the American sporting clays movement. Within five years of the first event in the US that went by the name of sporting clays, the rest of the story unfolds with Jay Herbert in Houston, Leigh Perkins and Bryan Bilinski of the Orvis Company, *Gun Dog Magazine* shooting editor Gene Hill, Tom Ruger of Sturm Ruger Inc., and US Sporting Clays Association co-founder Bob Davis. No one would argue that others

could be added to Dick Dietz's, Dana Farrell's, or this name-dropping compilation.

Introduction of Sporting Clays to America

Sporting clays competition in England was popularized in 1925, but it would be another half century or more for the game to cross the Atlantic, at least formally. There is little dispute that sporting clay target presentations have been thrown in the US for a long time. An article titled "Sporting Clays – the True History of the Game," for example, documented many of the game's staple targets, such as tower shots, over-water-targets, and multiple angle shots, that have been featured at US gun clubs for more than 100 years. Some of the station names, such as "duck skeet," "quail walk," "trap hunting," and "grouse shoot" that date back to the early 1900s are instantly recognizable to modern sporting clays aficionados. It's just that no one, it seems, thought to call the game *sporting clays*.

Outdoor writer and shotgunning authority Bob Brister was introduced to the sport in the mid-1970s when he toured England's best-known shooting courses with British course designer Chris Cradock. In 1980, Brister penned his influential *Field & Stream Magazine* article, "At Last a Clay Target Game for Hunters," which was likely the first to introduce the sport to an American audience. Brister, an enthusiastic advocate of bringing the contest across the Atlantic, named about half a dozen clubs that already featured sporting targets, and three would have important roles during the next few years: Sunnyside Shooting Grounds, Remington Farms, and the Orvis Shooting School in Manchester, Vermont. Brister believed the sport needed "a regional or a national sporting clays shoot," adding, "I have presented the idea of a sponsorship of a US National Sporting Clays Championship to several major firms in the US gun and ammunition industry." It would be five more years before that idea became reality.

Brister contacted Remington's advertising and publicity staff in Bridgeport, Connecticut, when he learned the company's visionaries were "intrigued by the potential" of British sporting clays as a way to increase shotgun and ammunition sales. Brister agreed to provide them with more information on the sport during his next trip to England, and he put them in contact with British course setter Chris Cradock.

The Remington and Brister collaboration produced the first shoot in America formally titled "sporting clays." Called the First Annual Sporting Clays Shoot, it was organized by Remington's Gerald Quinn at the Remington Gun Club in Lordship Connecticut on September 27, 1980. The 30-target affair was attended by some 90 shooters. Although the Lordship range hosted sporting

clay fundraisers for several years after 1980, Remington never sponsored a second annual contest. If they had, this would be a shorter story. Quinn says the reason was that the company was broadening its reach through partnerships with the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), and the group decided to focus their combined efforts at Remington Farms in Rock Hall, Maryland.

Sporting clays might have gotten its official footing the next year, 1981, on the other side of the country, when Chuck Dryke of Sunnyside Shooting Grounds in Sequim, Washington, held a shoot that featured competitive sporting clays targets. But Dryke didn't title his competition as a sporting clays tournament, instead naming it the North American Field Shooting Championship. Dryke was an early convert of unconventional targets, constructing a high tower to add to his mix of skeet and trap targets as early as 1974, then three years later offering a "duck tower" and "coot shoot" game.

The next move on the sporting clays chessboard was again Remington's. As part of their three-year sporting clay business plan, the gun company brought Chris Cradock to Remington Farms in 1981 to design its first sporting clay course. But they didn't call it sporting clays, either. At one of their meetings, the NRA's Harlon Carter suggested they call it "hunter's clays" for better name recognition. Remington hosted outdoor writers

from across the US to try hunter's clays at Remington Farms on its new, five-station course consisting of "grouse flush," "jump shoot," "springing teal," "quail rise," and "pheasant tower." Afterward, a flurry of syndicated articles appeared in magazines and newspapers heralding the new sport that, most wrote, simulated actual field shooting situations.

That year, Bob Brister and the NSSF's Rocky Rohlffing wrote a 16-page booklet called *Hunter's Clays* that described the sport and how to set up an English-style clays course. The brochure was eventually distributed to nearly 200,000 interested shooters and club managers. Together, the Remington Farms press event and the *Hunter's Clays* publication created an immediate spike in the number of clubs that introduced sporting clays to their members, although the use of the title "hunter's clays" in shooting jargon only lasted about a year.

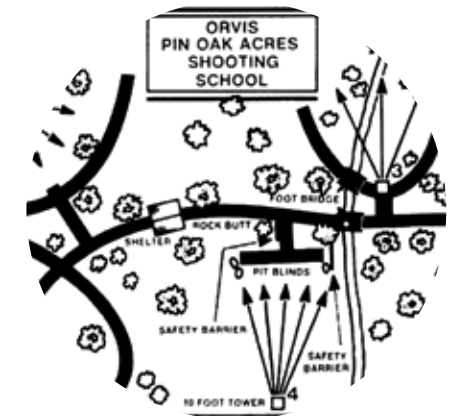
Despite the progress, there were clouds on the horizon. Remington Farms, the logical place to introduce the sport through schools and competition, was reluctant to open its doors to the public. Then the DuPont Company bought Remington, and in 1984, moved administrative offices to Delaware. Its main sporting clay backers either retired or took other jobs with the company. By that point, Quinn, who was the principal author of Remington's three-year sporting clays business plan, had accomplished every piece of the ambi-



Sporting Clays got its formal footing in England in 1925. In this first tournament, sportsmen were treated to "driven grouse," "driven partridges," and the intimidating-sounding "rocketing pheasants." Modified from *The Daily Telegraph*, April 24, 1925.



Flyer for the first shoot in America formally titled "sporting clays." Organized by Remington's Gerald Quinn, it was called the "first annual," but a second contest was never held. Courtesy of Gerald Quinn.



The original course layout of the Orvis Houston-Pin Oaks Acres Shooting School. Courtesy of Jay Herbert.

tious plan except one—in its last year, 1982, the goal was to sponsor regional championships and a national championship. Because neither the NRA nor the NSSF had the manpower to tackle the time-consuming job as a governing organization for national competition, the last part of the plan went unrealized.

For a time, it looked as if Orvis might fill the void. Houston Orvis store manager Bryan Bilinski and an instructor from their Vermont headquarters were putting the finishing touches on the new Houston-Pin Oaks Acres Shooting School, one they were laying out as a true, English-style sporting clays course. In 1983, Orvis Company president Leigh Perkins sponsored a clay competition to promote its new venue before the grand opening. Called the 1983 Orvis Cup Classic and held at the Greater Houston Gun Club Orvis, Orvis added a dove tower to the club's skeet and trap offerings. That year, Perkins hired Jay Herbert as the school's shooting instructor.

Sporting clay targets by 1984 were being lobbed at skeet and trap clubs across the country, and although a growing number of clubs were designing sporting clay courses, the game was still short of Brister's ambition to develop a sanctioned, national championship. The next year, his vision became a reality. In the April 1985 issue of *Field & Stream*, Brister wrote that Orvis was planning to hold the first "national" tournament, variously

called "the first US Sporting Clays Championship" and "the first US Open Sporting Clays Championship," at its Houston facility.

There are different published versions of who hosted the first national sporting clays tournament in North America. It certainly should have been Orvis—and in some accounts, it was—but Orvis, according to Jay Herbert, was out of the picture by the time the event was held. Like Remington before it, Orvis' reign was, undeservedly, too short. Eighteen months after the winding Houston-Pin Oaks Acres course was laid out and the first clays turned to dust, the company lost its lease. Jay Herbert was in the right place at the right time when the lawyer representing the landowners offered the property to him instead. Now he was challenged with hosting a national tournament at his renamed Highland Bend Shooting School, and with little time and no sponsors.

Of that first National Sporting Clays Championship venue, Jay says:

Bob and I were talking one night about promoting the national championship. We agreed that Bob would put up the publicity and I'd put up the shooting grounds. We needed sponsors, but everybody turned us down, telling me, 'we know it's big in England, but the American shooter will never embrace it.' There was

only one person in the shooting industry that had any interest whatsoever in backing it and that was a guy named Tom Ruger, who was the son of Bill Ruger of Ruger firearms. And Tom, bless his heart, gave me five specially engraved guns and \$2,500 to publicize it.

Jay was fretting. Brister and Gene Hill, shooting editor of *Gun Dog Magazine*, had publicized the shoot, but there were only three entries ten days before the event. Jay, Brister, and Hill scoured their Rolodexes, personally visiting or telephoning their list of contacts. Their pitch? "We're having a sporting clays national championship here on May 26, and we'd really like you to come. Never mind what sporting clays is—you'll really enjoy it." And they did. In Jay's words, "in that first National Championship contest we wound up with 78 shooters from 23 states."

The 1985 Nationals was a two-day event on Memorial Day weekend with 100 targets on Saturday and 50 on Sunday. Since no sporting clays competitive structure was in place, Jay remembers: "I picked three stations, and let everybody shoot them, and from that, I put them in classes. We had AA, A, B, C, D, and a Ladies and a Junior." Today, in a shooting sport with a dizzying number of competitive class categories, it's refreshing to look back at the winner of that first contest, Andy

Banks, who was a duck hunter from southeast Texas and shot his Browning A-5 fowling piece.

The excitement of that first tournament didn't end when the smoke cleared. Brister didn't hide his enthusiasm that "the public finally had a chance" to try the sport and added, "Hopefully this event will get enough media coverage to encourage other [venues] to offer public competition." It did. Within 12 months of the 1985 Highland Bend National Sporting Clays Championship, there were 25 sporting clay courses and 13 tournaments registered with the nascent USSCA. From there, there was no looking back.

1985 had been a pivotal year. Houston dentist Jim Moore and Houston oil and gas deal promoter Bob Davis took an active role in forming the US Sporting Clays Association (USSCA), and the first meeting of the organization was held in October. Hal DuPont sponsored his "Invitational Sporting Clays Introduction Shoot" at Jay's Highland Bend Shooting School the same year. The importance of that event is that it introduced some celebrated names from the skeet and trap world to the new game, including Hall of Famer Rudy Etchen, NSSA president Mike Hampton, and *Gun Dog Magazine's* Nick Sisley, among others. Hal DuPont would later be credited with founding the National Sporting Clays Association (NCSA) in 1989.



Banner for the Highland Bend US National Sporting Clays Championship. Courtesy of Jay Herbert.



Jay Herbert during the Highland Bend US National Sporting Clays Championship. Courtesy of Jay Herbert.



Jay Herbert (l) and US Sporting Clays Association co-founder Bob Davis (r)



Outdoor writers Bob Brister (r) and Gene Hill (l) at the Highland Bend US National Sporting Clays Championship. Courtesy of Jay Herbert.



Jay Herbert (c) in 2023 fitting clients with his 1946 Churchill "Try Gun," serial number 10 of just 12 in existence. An elegant gold inlay "XXV" on the tapered rib was for the barrel length, always 25 inches for Mr. Churchill, because that length perfectly erased the problem of left-eye dominance when Churchill wrapped his thumb over the left barrel.



Jay Herbert in 2023 at Greater Houston Sports Club doing what he still loves best—teaching students young and old. Courtesy of Brad Boone.

When Jay looks back at that championship shoot, he credits the mighty pen wielded by Bob Brister as both a *Houston Chronicle* outdoors writer and *Field & Stream* editor for his fountain of articles promoting the sport and Jay's Highland Bend. He also credits Gene Hill who, he says, also published stories about the sport and the next several annual Highland Bend tournaments. Jay also acknowledges Tom Ruger. Of Ruger, he says: "You can't give Tom enough credit. Without his initial sponsorship, I don't know if the first tournament would have ever flown."

Jay adds that Bob Davis, when he was US Sporting Clays Association (USSCA) president, "asked me to give him space to promote the USSCA organization before my second tournament and he signed up I don't know how many people." The volunteers of the USSCA formed the first governing body of the sport in the US, and after Jay organized the first four annual Highland Bend National Champion shoots, he turned the reins over to Davis and the USSCA. By then, the original 78 shooters that attended the first tournament had grown to 300, and "the shoot never had trouble getting sponsors after that first one."

Another name that should be on Jay's list, but isn't, is Jay Herbert. It was Jay whose Highland Bend National Sporting Clays Championship was the spark that started a competitive bonfire. He even holds the copyright on the names "US National Sporting Clays Championship" and "North American Sporting Clays Championship." He's never made a dollar on the titles. Jay says a lawyer advised him to register the name "sporting clays" instead, but: "I wasn't too smart. My answer was, 'Well, they're nice but the sport isn't going to really get that big.' So, I went ahead with the other ones!"

Jay Herbert's Life and Legacy

Jay Herbert was born in 1938 on Biscayne Point, one of a cluster of small, unpopulated islands north of Miami, then a sleepy town crisscrossed by sand and limestone shell roads. By the time he was ten, he wandered the tropical landscape with a shotgun harassing wildlife, from quail to sea turtles. He got his early shooting instruction by riding his bicycle to the nearby Miami Police Department shooting range, where the lawmen, he recalls, "took a liking to the kid, and mentored me in pistols, rifles, and shotguns."

During high school, Jay was a proficient enough shooter to enter and win some skeet competitions, then joined the Marines. Recognizing that skeet prize money wasn't going to pay his bills, he took a sales job in 1963 with a corporation based in Dallas. He kept up with shooting as a coach during his off-time and invested in Wild Wing Shooting Preserve, southeast of

Dallas. Jay readily confesses that he was poorly suited for the corporate world, and for the first time since he was a youngster delivering the *Miami Herald* newspaper, by early 1983 he was unemployed. Then Jay's high school friend Larry Solomon, the fly-fishing legend, called him. "Jay, I have the perfect job for you," he said. "Orvis is looking for a director of its new Houston shooting school."

Leigh Perkins opened the Orvis Shooting School in 1974 on the Battenkill River in Manchester, Vermont, its centerpiece a restored 1820 farmhouse with a huge wrap-around front porch dotted with wooden rocking chairs, its interior walls papered with trout fly patterns and shelves lined with wooden duck decoys. The Orvis Shooting School was designed for upland instruction with its targets set mostly for skeet or trap. But what set it apart was that its trainers taught the "English method" of shooting that consisted of a low gun, eyes on the target, and a trigger pull the moment the gun stock came to the shoulder and cheek. It was a shooting style ideally suited to sporting clays. Perkins was planning to open the Orvis Houston-Pin Oaks Acres Shooting School near Houston, and Perkins thought the Floridian and transplanted Texan, one of only a handful of US instructors familiar with the English shooting method, was the ideal coaching candidate.

Jay had embraced English-style field shooting early, primarily because he wanted to be a better wing shot. But no one in the US at the time was teaching it. Instead, Jay amassed a library on the subject to try and master the method. He remembers that "most of the things that were helpful to me were not published in this country," and recalls, as well, that he started his book journey with an 1826 edition of Lt. Col. P. Hawker's *Instructions to Young Sportsmen in all that Relates to Guns & Shooting*. Jay's reading convinced him that "the only way you can shoot birds better is to be able to mount the gun consistently, and the importance of a properly fitted shotgun."

The book-learned English-style shooter was reasonably expert by the time he was teaching at Wild Wing Shooting Preserve near Dallas. "I started with private, individual instruction," he says, "and was building a reputation. No one was teaching what I call field shooting; they were all skeet or trap." But for over a decade, students at times were hard to come by. "It was like pulling teeth," Jay grins. "Everything competitive in the US was either skeet or trap, and you started with a gun already mounted. You didn't need to perfect a gun mount, and gun fitting was completely foreign."

Jay was keenly interested in the Orvis opportunity but explained to Perkins that he first wanted to go to England to learn "their way of running a shooting school, then I'll return to work with you." Jay spent

three months at Holland & Holland in London, in his words "the best shooting school in the world." The easy-going Southerner mixed well with the more formal, tweed-wearing Brits, but when pressed, he relates a warm story from his experience abroad.

It was different. The British are very set in their ways, especially when it comes to something like the shooting sports. I remember when one of the shooting school directors invited me to join him for a gun fitting, and I noticed that he had both over-and-under and side-by-side try guns. I asked him, "Why do you have both? They should give the same results." He replied, "No, they most certainly will not." So, to make my point, I fitted both guns to the same dimensions, and both times they had the same point of impact. "See, it doesn't really make any difference." And in his proper English accent, he responded, "Even so, it just isn't done!"

Jay spent a few months at the Orvis headquarters in Vermont before a short stint at Orvis' Mays Pond Plantation in Florida. In late 1983 he joined the Houston-Pin Oaks Acres Shooting School, located west of Houston in Fulshear, as its instructor. After Houston-Pin Oaks Acres became the Highland Bend Shooting School in 1985, Jay was tireless in his promotion of the sport and his shooting school.

I did everything I could to build that business. When I was in England, the shooting clubs sponsored what they called Company Day, and I thought it would work here. Every Monday, I'd put on a suit and tie and walk around Houston. I'd pick a new building every week, and just knock on doors. Finally, I got a company president who had been to Europe, and he knew the value of building and maintaining business contacts over a shotgun. From that single Highland Bend Company Day event, I built it to 71 in about four years.

During the early years, Jay also helped design sporting courses for individuals and clubs around the US. He went on to design Houston's American Shooting Centers as president of the shooting complex for three years, then started the private Westside Sporting Grounds. Jay, however, never remained long at any venue. "I think people who know me understand that management is not my strong suit," he says, only half-joking. Truth is, he hated the bureaucracy of the corporate job he quit in 1983 and disliked it just as much in the shooting world.

What Jay Herbert loved, however, was teaching. "I get a great deal of satisfaction out of seeing people improve and learn," he said. "If I'm teaching somebody

and they're not getting it, I know it isn't their fault. It's mine. So I try another way of doing it and eventually, no matter how tough they are, I find a way to reach them." Jay was fortunate that he had mastered a style of shooting ideally suited for sporting clay instruction at a time when the sport "was getting bigger and bigger. What I was teaching was a departure from skeet and trap, and that was what most American shooting instructors were good at. And Gene Hill and Bob Brister, and an increasing number of outdoor writers, were explaining in print why it was important to learn the field shooting technique and to have a fitted gun."

During the last decades of the 20th century, the number of sporting clay articles that came out was staggering. But there were two that made a huge impact on both the sport and the transplanted Floridian: the 1987 *Fortune Guide to Executive Leisure*, and the 1988 *Forbes* article titled "Golf with a Shotgun." Jay remembers how, "after those articles came out, I started getting phone calls from business people who said, 'I read an article about sporting clays, and I'd like you to give me a lesson.' And it kept mushrooming."

Jay has taught shooters on five continents. The list includes chairmen of major corporations, a US president or two, Hollywood directors and movie stars, sports stars, kings of European countries, and Middle Eastern oil ministers, among uncountable others. As a competitive shooting coach, his students have won six national and two world sporting clay championships, three junior Olympic medals, a five-time Olympian and gold medalist in 2008 in Beijing, and the only non-English shooter to win their class at the British Open. Of that track record, he is genuine when he says: "I can't tell you how many people I taught over my career, but it was really a fun time."

Since 2015, the number of people in America who take to a sporting clay field each year has been about five million. Few have ever heard of the pioneers who borrowed the smoothbore game from the English and popularized it in the US. But every so often, a writer looks back and reintroduces some of those names. Fortunately, this writer was able to sit with an energetic 86-year-old named Jay Herbert, whose memory matches his wit, and add another small piece to the story of sporting clays in America. The last thing Jay shared with me before we finished our history lesson was Bob Brister's words to him when he signed a copy of his renowned tome *Shotgunning: The Art and the Science*. Part of the inscription reads: "To Jay, one of the best things that's ever happened to the promotion of shooting."

The author is indebted to Gerald Quinn, Dana Farrell, and, of course, Jay Herbert, for this story. 🌞