

Central Maine Newspapers article

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Richmond instructor imparts more than shooting lessons

As a child growing up in Scarborough, Brad Varney would shoot his BB gun at hornet's nests in the eaves of old buildings. He'd rile them up, and then spend hours picking out individuals and trying to hit them as they buzzed about the nest.

"I never did get one, but I sure learned how to shoot at moving targets," he said.

Varney progressed quickly as a shooter: first with ducks and geese in Scarborough Marsh, a short walk from his boyhood home, then on to grouse, pheasant and woodcock.

Now 63 years old, he owns and runs Varney's Clay Sports in Richmond. His state-of-the-art shooting facility offers skeet, modern skeet, and sporting clays, and has become one of the most popular shooting destinations in central Maine.

But Varney didn't come to skeet shooting first. He had nine brothers and sisters, and grew up in a small home with an outhouse, a roof that leaked, and a well that often went dry. His father worked hard to support his family, he said, digging clams to make ends meet.

Game that Varney shot in the field became food for the table.

"When you buy shells five at a time, you learn to make every one count," he said.

He remembers as a boy, asking an older brother about the shots they would sometimes hear across the marsh on Sundays – a day traditionally closed to hunting in Maine.

"That's the rich people shooting skeet," his brother had told him.

Varney had never heard of skeet – a shooting game in which clay targets are thrown from set stations – so he assumed "skeet" was a species of game bird.

He wondered what these so called "skeet birds" looked like, and why he'd never seen them on his side of the marsh.

Over the next 30 years, Varney, while digging clams year round in Scarborough and Freeport, would learn nearly everything there was to know about skeet.

He would win more trophies from the sport than could fit on his shelves and window sills.

But today, it's books, not prizes that line his shelves.

He has books on sports psychology; on optomology; on physics; on educational theory. Varney has a new passion: one which he approaches with the same zeal and spirit as everything else he's done in his life. He's become a teacher.

Teach a man to shoot...

On Wednesday afternoon, Varney had offered a private lesson to John Hartill, 14, of Brunswick. Hartill came with his grandfather, Leo Thiboutot. Hartill said he'd done some shooting – but mostly at ducks with his grandfather from a sculling float on Merrymeeting Bay.

“No problem. Here's how it works: You take responsibility for all the hits, I take responsibility for all the misses,” Varney told Hartill as they got started.

“That sounds good,” replied the boy.

Varney has a way with words – besides speaking them nearly non-stop, he chooses them carefully. He has a story, a metaphor, or a joke to tell that illustrates every point he makes.

After an eye dominance check (“the only test you can't fail”) and a demonstration on shooting safety (“the most important lesson you'll learn about shooting”), Varney took Hartill outside, to the skeet range.

Hartill didn't need much work. He hit his first target, then his second, third, and fourth.

“I love working with kids. You can mold them, like putty,” he said. “Their heads aren't filled with garbage. ‘Did I pay the insurance bill?’ ‘Did I turn off the gas?’ They're not thinking those things.”

As he worked with Hartill, he made the shots progressively more difficult. Then Hartill missed one.

“See, he's not watching the target, he's looking at the shotgun sight – he's aiming,” said Varney.

“When you play baseball, you keep your eye on the ball, right? Well, shooting is no different,” he said.

He wrapped the bead, or sight, on Hartill's shotgun with a turn of black electrical tape.

"You aim a rifle to hit," he said. "You aim a shotgun to miss."

Hartill nodded he understood.

His next shot intercepted the target in mid-air. It exploded into tiny orange pieces.

A direct hit.

The teacher was getting excited. Through his tinted safety glasses, you could see the twinkle in his eye.

The Path to Teaching

Varney didn't come directly to teaching, or to skeet shooting. He started by helping out at clays courses – working the throwing machines and giving occasional pointers to shooters. He watched course operators, saw how they set up stations and traps.

He learned some basic lessons about teaching, and clay target games.

It wasn't long before he realized that the instructing was as rewarding as the competition. Sometimes even more so.

Plus, it offered more opportunities to learn. By that time, Varney was deep into competitive shooting.

"How could I, on a clam digger's salary, compete against people with unlimited resources?" he'd asked himself. "I had to learn the mental game."

He began to study method, and psychology.

"It might have been harder to master, but it sure was cheaper," he said.

Varney sees shooting as equal parts physics, optometry, and psychology – and of course, a little bit of luck.

But he's careful not to overdo it with students. He keeps it fun – always positive.

“You’ll need to watch out for overkill in the learning experience,” he said. “You could read the dictionary every night, but do you think you’re going to learn every word? No way! You need to study just two or three words at a time.”

Instead of trying to explain to a student the dynamics of lead – the distance a shooter must point his gun ahead of a target to compensate for its flight path and speed – Varney has a simple slogan to remember: “Tail, body, head: Bird is dead.”

“Could you imagine three guys in a duck blind trying to explain the proper lead on a teal to a shooter?” he asked.

Back to Roots

Varney has always considered himself a hunter first.

When he instructed Hartill, he related every shot to some species of game. When a target came low out of the machine, he said, “that one was like a snipe, a little marsh bird like a woodcock. Have you ever seen one? They fly low to the ground.”

A high target?

“That was like a pheasant. If you flushed him, he’d fly right over the trees. They’re a bird of the open country,” he said.

At the end of the lesson, Hartill had hit most of his targets. His grandfather was excited.

“I’ll be bringing him back,” said Thiboutot.

Not every student is so easy, but that’s part of the challenge for Varney.

“I learn something new every time I go out there. It’s not one size fits all – I wish it was,” he said.

Liz Brooks, a second grade teacher from western Maine, took her first formal lesson from Varney. She’d been taking pointers from friends, but she said that Brad, unlike most people, was “able to put himself in the learner’s position – explain things in my terms so I could understand it.”

“You always get the feeling that he wants shooters to have the best time they can have,” she said.