



# TIME FOR CHANGE?



Mike Brunton talks with John Bidwell on the future of FITASC in Great Britain



Great Britain has long boasted some of the finest FITASC Sporting shooters in the world. Yet there are many that believe that FITASC on these shores is in the doldrums — with declining selection shoot entries, not enough new shooters prepared to commit to the discipline, no GB team funding and a poor senior team performance at the recent World FITASC Championship. So, what is the future for FITASC, GB team selection and funding for next season? Is it time for radical change? I discussed these matters with John Bidwell, well known for his support of the discipline and a previous multiple World Champion.

**MB** The performance of our FITASC shooters, year after year, at European and World Championships, is fantastic — but our GB team selection leaves a lot to be desired, particularly this year. Looking

back on our selection shoots, with declining entries, there seems to be a general apathy toward the discipline — how do you read the current situation?

**JB** FITASC in this country has long been viewed as elitist sporting — and today it's still considered by many to be too expensive (£85-£100 for 150 targets), time consuming (two days for 150 targets) and a difficult discipline that attracts the support of just a few hundred regular competitors.

But over the last few years, numerous grounds have made a concerted effort to attract more shooters into the discipline. The concept of Winter Series FITASC shoots has been a great success up and down the country: they are invariably full and often have a waiting list — no wonder the number of one day 100 target events continues to grow. It's also interesting to see some ground owners modifying the traditional shooting sequence — introducing the facility to shoot layouts back to back or speeding up the system by moving to 20 target layouts. Anything that can be done at a domestic level to speed up the discipline, improve the

entertainment factor, reduce the price and attract new competitors to the discipline is to be encouraged.

**MB** Perhaps we should learn from the American experience and put on 50 or 100 bird FITASC side events at our major UK championships instead of, or in addition to, Sportrap that seems to be going nowhere as a premiere discipline.

**JB** I agree — if a thousand shooters are going to attend a major sporting event, many will take the option to add a FITASC side event to their shooting programme. I seem to remember that at your Sporting Classic at Highclere last year you offered four days of FITASC that attracted over 440 entries. Many were first timers or those that had only shot the discipline once or twice before — they shot it because it was available. Perhaps the powers that be should consider a FITASC side event to sit alongside the English, British and World Sporting. A more entertaining weekend would surely see entries for both events benefit and the subsequent improved profile of FITASC domestically would be welcome.



**MB** So why the current apathy for this discipline?

**JB** A few years ago I genuinely believed that the discipline was starting to gather momentum. But then the CPSA introduced FITASC into their shooting programme with selection shoots that culminated in a Home International. In effect, this split an already small discipline into two camps with two team selection processes, resulting in poor attendance at BICTSF (and CPSA) selection shoots.

In years gone by, GB selection shoots attracted a full entry — often with a waiting list. The switch from old system to new saw those same selection shoots blossom into events that regularly attracted the maximum 196 entries. But today, selection shoots (GB or domestic) rarely attract such numbers — often to the financial disadvantage of the ground owners hosting the event. With neither the BICTSF GB selection shoots or the CPSA England team selection shoots attracting

good entries, it's easy to assume that FITASC is in the doldrums. In reality, the apathy is more evident at selection shoots in general, not at grass roots and local club level where there is still a good following — even if it's only for practice. This would indicate to me that it's our selection process that needs attention, not the discipline.

**MB** The easiest way forward must be to combine the CPSA domestic selection and the GB selection events at the same venue on the same date. It would certainly offer cost benefits, improve the entries and add to the atmosphere.

**JB** I've already had a discussion with the CPSA (Phil Boakes) and the FITASC Subcommittee on that very point — and their reaction was quite positive.

A bigger event would be a lot more attractive to ground owners and could result in new ground owners coming forward to tender for the event. It would be easier to attract sponsorship for fewer



events and could even result in a cheaper entry fee. It would also be easier for the CPSA and the FITASC sub committee in terms of only having to organise half as many events. All that the competitor would have to do is specify on their entry form whether they were entering CPSA or GB FITASC selection, or both. Why not? The more the merrier!

**MB** If the CPSA and BICTSF can not agree to combine their selection shoots, how does the FITASC Sub-Committee improve the standing and support for their existing selection shoots?

**JB** In truth, the selection process affects no more than 20 people, so the majority of the competitors are there for their love of the discipline, good targets and the entertainment — often wanting to shoot in part or full squads of friends. For many competitors, even the prize fund isn't important — but the razzmatazz is! Selection shoots have lost their sense of importance and standing — and that's a problem of marketing.

Your recent Krieghoff Classic FITASC was a good example. It wasn't registered and it wasn't a selection shoot — but it still attracted a full house of 240 competitors including those from USA, Cyprus, Russia, Estonia, Norway, France, Ireland, Holland and Belgium — not to mention most of the top names from the UK. It was an 'event'; people wanted to be there. The advertising was strong, sponsorship was attractive and it was 'Classic' branded. Over the years you've built a substantial database to promote such events and I know you rely heavily on personalised direct mail — the FITASC sub committee should be doing the same. It's not difficult, but it does take commitment and has a cost — neither of which is evident for GB or domestic selection shoots.

**MB** Advertising and marketing can cure most ills — but perhaps the real problem is the GB selection process itself. These shoots do not always attract the top shots, they rely on a points system over an extended period that does very little for the 'coming in to form' shooter and

without full funding for the team can result in a selected shooter not being able to afford (or have the time off work) to accept the selection. What's the alternative?

**JB** The current selection process has been in place for many years, the shooters understand it and it has served us well. I'd be tempted to leave it in place but modify it to best advantage. Clearly there would need to be much discussion before the existing system could be changed, but that process of discussion could be turned to advantage — with the FITASC sub committee being seen to be proactive.

**MB** Give them a starting point John — what would you do?

**JB** The start point has to be the goal of winning Gold — Senior, Ladies, Juniors, Veterans and Super Veterans. To achieve this, it is a given that GB must field its strongest teams.

I'd start by appointing a team captain by right — the very best we have. For this discussion let's nominate George Digweed. That appointment would be made annually in the winter preceding the European and World Championships with the captain reporting directly to a selection committee. During the winter and early spring the appointed committee would be furnished with registered FITASC scores from around the country — affording them the opportunity to see who's doing what. Registered target results would help them in the assessment of those that are in form.

The traditional series of GB selection shoots would take place as previously, but as suggested, these should be alongside the CPSA English team selection shoots. The more prestigious the event, the more competitive it would be. The team captain and selection committee would be present at each shoot — not just competing, but scrutinising potential team members.

The traditional points system would continue at each selection shoot but, and

it's a big but, should only be used to establish the top 10 seniors and top 6 in each category — not to establish the team. In April or May, these top shooters (and numerous wild card shooters) would then be invited to a Performance Weekend. A chance to practice, bond socially and finish with a one day 100 target championship shoot. It would then be up to the captain and selection committee to choose the team from the top performers. I'd even go so far as to say that if they believe any team (S, L, J, V or SV) is not capable of winning Gold, no selection is made in that category.

**MB** That all sounds rather radical to me. Do you think the shooters would accept such change?

**JB** As I said, it's only a starting point, but discussion must be stimulated — and I hope these suggestions get the ball rolling.



The existing system isn't working and yet, at any major championship, individual GB shooters fill most of the top 10 spots, so why has GB not got a more consistent team performance?

If you asked most FITASC shooters who the current ultimate senior team should be to guarantee a Gold medal the first three names out of the hat would probably be Digweed, Faulds and Husthwaite. We all know they are currently at the top of their game and yet they were not in this year's team. It's no good suggesting that Digweed or Faulds were not selected because they didn't do the selection shoots. The best are the best, and the best produce Gold medals! And to guarantee the involvement of our top shots



we need to modify the selection process, produce the best team and recognise the valuable part that a GB team gold medal plays in promoting GB shooting.

**MB** Isn't there a danger that the GB team becomes a closed shop, turns off any aspiring shooters and depletes the numbers attending selection shoots?

**JB** I think that view is short sighted. Among the seniors I concede that it would be difficult to secure a team place right now, particularly with the known form of the top three, but those currently on the top of their game are not going to be there forever — and can be beaten. Over the 28 years I've shot for the GB team I've seen the senior team selection change many times — new blood always comes along and there's always plenty of scope for team selection in the Ladies, Juniors, Veterans and Super Veterans.

In the final analysis, the concept of entering teams into a Championship is to win Gold. The alternative is to stick with the current selection process that will probably produce indifferent results in the future, just as it did this year.

Remember also, a GB team that tops the world is more attractive to sponsors and perhaps, for once, true funding of such teams could become a reality.

**MB** So, where to now?

**JB** Continued good support for FITASC throughout our premiere grounds and clubs is essential, complimented by the occasional 'big event' — such as your Classic. Only then can we expect to see more shooters enjoying the discipline. At the same time, the FITASC sub committee must look at re-generating interest in selection shoots, particularly from the top shots. We must also restore the prestige of

being selected to be in a GB team capable of taking top honours at the European and Worlds.

Finally, let me say that I'm passionate about FITASC. I'm prepared to support any move that results in encouraging more people into the discipline and that sees GB shooters becoming recognised as the best in the world. Like me, there are plenty of people out there that are prepared to support teams with fundraising and sponsorship, but not until we are assured that we are supporting the best GB team possible that can achieve the ultimate result — Gold!

I'd welcome feedback from this interview — those FITASC shooters out there that want to express their view on the future of FITASC and the GB team selection process can email me ([info@highlodge.co.uk](mailto:info@highlodge.co.uk)). I'd be interested to hear any constructive views — let the discussion begin.