

## Fit for a Fitting

Once upon a time American shooters looked upon gunfit as some arcane mumbo-jumbo of interest to no one but the British. Nowadays fit has become al-

with your head full of expectations that may or may not be realistic. The better you do your job, the better the fitter can do his.

The fitter can't do it for you, and if you can't do it for yourself, you can't realistically expect a good fit.

Think of your cheekbone ledge as your anchor point. The fitter can fine-tune your foot position and posture, but if you can't consistently bring the gun to your anchor point—if your gun mount is all over the place—he has no basis from which to create a fitted gun.

So the first step in preparing for a fit might begin months in advance. You may need to take some good instruction, and you certainly will need to practice your technique till it becomes second nature.

Talk to your fitter ahead of time. Tell him what your skill level is and be honest about it. Tell him whether you want to be fitted for a side-by-side or an over/under, as for several reasons your proper dimensions will be slightly different from one to the other.

Ask him how much time you should allot for a good fitting. If he tells you it won't take more than 15 minutes to a half-

hour, find somebody else. A thorough job of fitting can take as much as three hours. If you want to be fitted for both an over/under and a side-by-side, allow even more time.

You can do yourself and your fitter a favor by going through a little tune-up drill in preparation. Facing a mirror, hold your gun in a good ready position—the very end of the butt tucked under your armpit, barrels about level, shoulders relaxed and upper arms at about 45 degrees out from your sides. Focus on your eye in the mirror—the eye that corresponds to the shoulder you shoot from—and practice mounting the gun by pushing forward with your leading hand, as if trying to stab the muzzle straight into the reflection of your eye. (It's wise to stand

So what is your job? And how can you prepare to perform it to your best ability?

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*The most important thing you can contribute to a proper fitting is a sound shooting technique that you can perform consistently.*

most a cottage industry, with legions of writers on one hand explaining why it's so important and a host of would-be fitters on the other eager to do their thing.

I've already aired my thinking on what a proper fitting is and what it isn't (see "Having a Fit," Jan/Feb 2000). What I haven't addressed is the role the shooter plays.

Being fitted for a gun is not like being fitted for a suit—not a matter of standing passively while a tailor drapes and measures your body. I've heard fitting compared to sighting in a rifle, which is basically true in principle but grossly misleading when it comes to the actual process.

Fact is, gunfitting is a process in which both fitter and fitted play active roles and bear certain responsibilities. If you're determined to be the best shot you can be, you need to be fitted—but, by the same token, if you want the best fitting, you need to do your part. Just showing up at the appointed place and time isn't enough, particularly if you show up completely unprepared and

I said the analogy with being fitted for a suit doesn't apply, but imagine for a moment what the result would be if you assumed a different posture every time the tailor took a measurement. He can make a suit that will look right in different postures only if you give him a consistent model to work from.

Consistency is even more important to a gunfitter, particularly when it comes to mounting the gun.

My favorite description of a fitted gun is one that points where your eyes are looking when all you do is raise it to your cheek without moving your head. Making it point where you look is the fitter's job; raising it to your cheek, to the same place time after time after time without moving your head, is your job.

far enough back that you don't stab the muzzle into the mirror.)

Some important points here. First, don't adjust yourself to the gun; just work on making that smooth, pushing motion with your leading hand while bringing the stock to your cheekbone ledge. Most shooters who've never been fitted have spent a lifetime adapting themselves to their guns. The point of having a fitting is to have the gun adapted to you, so don't short-circuit the process by looking at the gun and adjusting to it.

This forward push is the move your fitter should ask you to make when you shoot at a mark on his pattern plate. He won't want you to swing the gun to the mark, because that will create a false picture of where the gun shoots in relation to where you look. It's the reaching, spearing movement, initiated by the leading hand as you bring the stock to your anchor point, that tells the real tale.

As another good exercise to accomplish the same thing, lay a cup or glass on its side at about eye level and practice pushing the muzzle straight into the open end as you mount the gun.

Do these exercises for about 10 minutes twice a day for a few days before your fitting and the whole process will go a lot smoother.

Another important point: Once you've made a gun mount to the mirror, look at the reflection of the muzzles. If those of a side-by-side aren't perfectly horizontal or if those of an over/under aren't dead-on vertical, you're canting the gun, and that will make a difference in where it shoots. If canting derives from a stock that fits you poorly, your fitter will make adjustments to get rid of the problem. If canting is a flaw in your technique, he'll work with you to weed it out. (The most persistent canters often respond to nothing less than a length of 2x4 applied smartly to the back of the head, but it does work.)

Unlike Arlo Guthrie's advice about

preparing for an army physical, it is not a good idea to get snot-flying drunk the night before your fitting. Get a good night's sleep instead and have a light breakfast. If your fitting is scheduled for early afternoon, don't eat a huge lunch; having too much food on board will make you sluggish and less able to handle your gun with skill and precision.

Wear what you wear for most of your shooting—a target vest, a hunting vest, whatever. Don't be surprised if your fitter digs out some safety pins, duct tape or whatever it takes to make your vest fit so that you don't snag the gun butt every time you try to make a good mount. You'd be surprised at how many poorly designed, blousy vests there are on the market.

If you want the same gun to serve both in the uplands and for wildfowling, be aware that the amount of clothing you pile on during cold weather will make a gun fitted for autumn shooting seem too long in the stock. Best way to deal with this is to have two buttpads fitted—one that gives you the right length with shirt and vest, and a thinner one for when you're bundled up later on.

Wear comfortable shoes, preferably with some lift in the heels. Proper gunning posture has your weight slightly forward, onto the balls of your feet, something like a boxer's stance, and heeled shoes will help you achieve that.

If it's a bright day, wear a cap to shade your eyes—or better yet, a broad-brimmed hat that also will shield your ears and the back of your neck from the sun.

Thin, close-fitting leather shooting gloves are a big help. You're going to fire quite a few shots in the course of a proper fitting, and the gloves are good protection against hot barrels and chafing from the checkering on your stock.

Ear protection and good shooting glasses are necessary, and a responsible fitter will not allow you to fire a shot without them. If you like muff-type hearing protectors, be aware that the muffs you wear

for pistol or rifle shooting may not work well with a shotgun. Nothing is more distracting than knocking the stock against a muff while you're trying to make a good mount. If you don't have custom-molded earplugs, use foam plugs.

A proper fitting will have you standing exactly 16 yards from the pattern plate, and even lead pellets can bounce straight back at you, so shooting glasses are a must. And don't even think about firing a load of steel shot at a steel plate; the pellets can come back at you going damn near as fast as they went forward.

Fitting can be a tiring job, both for you and the fitter. Don't hesitate to ask for a break to sit down for a few minutes or have something cold to drink on a warm day. And be considerate enough to offer the fitter a break now and then, too, even if you're pumped up and raring to go.

It's OK to bring along one or two of your own guns for impact testing after the fitter has determined your proper dimensions on his try-gun. Just don't drag out a whole armload of guns and ask the fitter to supervise while you test every one of them. Chances are your fitter will be gracious enough to accommodate such nonsense, even though he shouldn't. It's a waste of his time and yours. He's already determined what dimensions you need, and there's nothing useful to be gained in learning that one gun may be only a few fractions off while another needs radical alteration. Dealing with that sort of thing is a stockmaker's job, not a fitter's.

It ought to go without saying, but all too often doesn't, that you should be prepared to do what the fitter asks you to do. You're not there to prove what a whiz-bang shot you are, nor that you know the fitter's job better than he does. Try to handle the gun the way you're asked to, be patient and enjoy the benefit of the fitter's experience. You both have the same objective in mind—which is to take you one more step toward being the best shot you can be.

