

High school trap shooting teams reawakening Minnesota's aging gun clubs

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Lakeville South High School Trap Shooting Team Head Coach Jason Kelvie helped Zac Olson, 7th grade, with a jammed round, during trap shooting practice at the Suburban Sportsman Club in Northfield.

NORTHFIELD – The shooting range was quiet Saturday morning as Jason Kelvie unlocked the gate, raised the faded red flag and began unloading his truck.

Then the teenagers pulled up.

The [Lakeville](#) South High School teammates bounded onto the Suburban Sportsman Club's field, its grass still soaked with dew, scarfing doughnuts, joking with coaches and filling their vests with ammunition.

“Are you ready?” Kelvie, the head coach, asked Stone Swanson, a junior.

“I was born ready,” Swanson replied with a raised eyebrow.

Trap shooting teams like this one, part of the Minnesota State High School Clay Target League, are reawakening aging gun clubs across the state. To make room for Minnesota's fastest-growing high school sport, clubs are expanding hours, building fields and installing new target throwers.

Still, with 6,100 students competing, many clubs are maxed out. Waiting lists are growing.

This year, teams turned away 1,800 kids because of limited shooting range time, said Jim Sable, the league's founder and executive director.

"To have kids want to participate in an extracurricular activity and then be told there isn't room for them ... it's practically a mortal sin," Sable said. "We ought to do everything we can to make room."

Lawmakers are trying: They recently approved more than \$2 million to build or upgrade shooting ranges. The grant program's setup has not yet been finalized, but it might fund safety fixes at clubs with public hours, among other things, said Chuck Niska, shooting range coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

Given the squeeze, some coaches wonder whether the league ought to shift from private clubs to public shooting ranges for youth.

"I don't know how long this is going to exist riding on the backs of private ranges," said Kelvie, whose Lakeville South team has 25 coaches and 10 safety officers for its 100 shooters. On the waiting list: 16 more.

Aiming for legitimacy

The problem of packed gun ranges seemed unimaginable just a decade ago, when clubs were losing leagues.

In northwest Minnesota, several shooting clubs had closed and "a couple more were struggling or on life support," said Al Steinhauer, 75, a longtime shooter at the Thief River Falls Trap Club.

"These clubs had become old boys' clubs. And the old boys pass away."

A surge in high school teams, which send in their scores weekly from their local ranges, has been "a godsend to our area," he said.

The league's growth came quickly. In 2008, there were 54 kids from just three schools. Today, there are 6,100 from 380.

Despite principals wary of the words "kids," "guns" and "school" in the same sentence, Minnesota has been a pioneer in establishing the sport, Sable said.

"Now we have 14 states that are saying, 'When can you bring the program to our schools?'"

In June, the league's top shooters will gather at the [Minneapolis](#) Gun Club in Prior Lake for a state tournament endorsed, for the first time, by the statewide High School Clay Target League.

That endorsement, won in 2012 on a 9-8 vote, "gives us credibility that we couldn't get any other way," Sable said.

David Stead, the league's longtime executive director, said he sometimes gets calls from schools asking whether trapshooting is one of the state league's regular season programs, such as hockey, basketball or lacrosse — the most recently added. It's not, Stead said. The league is a presenting partner of its state tournament, as it is for robotics.

But Stead praised the clay target league's work, including its safety record. That's something Sable, coaches and even students bring up often: "In all of these years, we've never had a single accident or a single issue of a kid bringing a gun or ammunition onto school property," Sable said.

The teams hold shoots late enough in the afternoon to allow kids to go home and grab their shotguns.

"I grew up in an era where you could duck hunt in the morning and drive to school with a gun in the back of your truck," said Ken Sonnenfeld, 50, head coach of the St. Francis team. But that time is long gone, he said.

Sue Krebs wasn't raised with guns. Neither was her husband. But since her three sons have joined the [Lakeville](#) South team, she's come to appreciate the coach's focus on safety and the teammates' respect for firearms.

"That's a relief as a parent," she said. "Knowing that your kids are going to dink around with guns, you want them to be safe."

One of her boys played football for a season or two. Another tried wrestling. But all three have stuck with trap shooting, she said.

"It's more of a lifelong passion," Krebs said. "Football is something you do for a few years — then you sit and watch other people do it."

Andy Krebs, 15, the middle son, likes how clay shooting is both an individual and team sport.

"When you're out there shooting, it is really just you and the clay," he said. "But there are also four other guys next to you."

Now a freshman, Andy marveled at how, in just a few seasons, he's gone from "never having done it to now being one of the best shooters on the team." It's fun to watch that growth in new shooters, he said.

For 22 of the 25 kids on the Cambridge-Isanti High School team, trap shooting is their only spring activity, said Dan Solbrack, a volunteer coach. “It’s getting some kids involved who normally aren’t involved in other school activities.”

The coed league is open to any kid with a firearms safety certification. No tryouts. Any shooter can compete in the league’s annual state championship in Alexandria, which this year will serve as a kind of sectionals before the new, more selective tournament.

“If you look at photos of last year’s championship, they’re nice kids, but they don’t look like they spend a lot of time in the weight room,” Sable joked. “They’re just nice looking, average kids.”

Expanding hours

A dozen schools practice at the [Minneapolis](#) Gun Club in Prior Lake, and two more are on a waiting list. For the first time, the club opened on Mondays. Next, if a conditional use permit is approved, it could expand its Friday, Saturday and Sunday hours, staying open until dusk rather than 4 p.m., said Jim Walkowiak, the club’s president.

The high schoolers have “lowered the average age by leaps and bounds,” Walkowiak said.

Older members “are elated to see that the youth are out here. And to see that the youth handle themselves with courtesy, respect and safety.”

Walkowiak expects that the Minneapolis Gun Club will apply for the state grants, funded by the state DNR’s Game and Fish Fund. The club, owned by shareholders, has expanded to 10 operating trap fields, Walkowiak said, “there again, because of the high school league.” There’s no new room for fields, he said, but the club could use more shelters and better parking.

At [Lakeville](#) South’s Saturday practice, Kyla Kitzman, 16, set her stance, bringing her shotgun high before readying it against her shoulder.

“Pull,” she requested.

The orange target flew, veering right. Kitzman fired. Missed. “Lost,” a teammate announced.

Behind her, Kelvie drew up from his squat, marking an “X” on his clipboard above the circle he had drawn to represent the clay pigeon. He shadowed Kitzman for each shot, moving with her to each station, marking each hit and miss.

“He told me to aim more under the bird,” Kitzman explained later. “I tend to be a little high.”

At her final station, Kitzman missed. But after some pointers from Kelvie and a long, low breath, she shot again. The clay burst in the air.