

Target shooting's wild rise as a Minnesota school sport

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Number of participants continues to soar for high school trapshooting.

This spring 8,600 Minnesota students are drawing shotguns to their shoulders, squeezing triggers and busting clay targets that scream across the sky at nearly 42 miles per hour.

Collectively, these athletes will pull triggers some 6 million times.

Virtually nonexistent a decade ago, clay target shooting has become Minnesota's fastest-growing high school sport. Minnesota State High School League statistics rank participation in clay target shooting above boys' golf, tennis, swimming and diving, and Nordic ski racing. It has more participants than boys' ice hockey, which in 2013-14 tallied 5,718 participants.



Wayzata High School junior Kerri Mueller

“We’ve got a long way to go to catch football, which is number one with 25,000 participants,” said John Nelson, vice president of the Minnesota State High School Clay Target League (MSHSCTL). “But football has been around forever. We’re just in our seventh year.”

How did this happen?

How did schools, teenagers, volunteer coaches and shooting ranges come together to create such a fast-growing high school sport?

It’s an unusual story.

And like many unusual stories it begins with an unusual man. In this case, Jim Sable, 76, of [Plymouth](#). Sable founded the league shortly after retiring from the advertising business in 2000.

Recalled Sable: “I was at the Plymouth Gun Club when a semitrailer pulled in. The driver got out, said he needed help, and asked me to round up some young guys to help him unload pallets of targets. I looked around. I was 62. I was one of the young guys.”

That moment — when Sable saw a doomed future for community trap clubs because of their aging demographic — inspired him to introduce youth to the sport of trapshooting. In what Sable calls “divine providence,” his crusade began while seated in church. That is where Sable read a church bulletin plea by the Orono School District for volunteer adult mentors. Sable followed up. He offered to be a mentor in trapshooting. To his surprise the offer was accepted: A 14-year-old female student wanted to try target shooting.

Growing by leaps

An exponential growth process began from that single student in 2001. One trapshooter became five when the girl, her brother and friends formed a team. Five became 10 when Sable coaxed [Wayzata](#) High School to form a team to compete against Orono. Ten became 20. By 2010, some 340 students were shooting trap. Then the numbers were 700 in 2011, 1,500 in 2012, and 3,400 in 2013. Last year, 6,100 students shot trap. This year 83 new teams joined the league, adding yet another 2,500 participants. Twenty-five teams will compete in new skeet shooting opportunities this year. Skeet involves clay targets launched from two locations rather than one.

Sable credited David Stead, executive director of the Minnesota State High School League, with much of the league’s success. “David knew what we needed, which was how to create a league, interact with schools, develop relationships with athletic and activities directors, and create fair and consistent policies and procedures. His guidance was invaluable.”

As the clay league grew, Sable and his wife, Sharon, needed help. They turned to Nelson, former creative director of Sable’s advertising agency. He signed on to help with marketing, website development and more. Since 2008, Nelson and the Sables have incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation that has added staff, overseen a virtual league that has grown to 31 conferences based on each school’s trap team size, and revived many Minnesota gun clubs.

Part of the genius of the league is that trap teams don't travel from city to city, but rather shoot at their local range and then post scores on the league's website. Many coaches are not school staff but instead unpaid community volunteers. Local trap clubs and coaches work together to schedule shooting hours that accommodate both schools and club members. No accidents or injuries have been reported since the league began in 2001.

"In the beginning, a lot of people said this would never work," said Sable. "But we kept listening and adapting. Over time the people who really deserve the credit — the kids, the 2,400 volunteer coaches, the 150 trap ranges, the activities directors and school boards — all came forward."

Among the believers is Sally Stevens of Buffalo, Minn. Stevens is a coach for the Buffalo High School clay target team. A former teacher, she was "anti-gun and anti-hunting" until her children took up trapshooting.

"I got involved. I realized it was safe," she said. "I also saw that it was a great sport for students who don't have the size, strength or athletic ability to compete in traditional mainstream sports."

Stevens said the Buffalo school district rebuffed student requests to approve a clay target team for several years before ultimately approving one in 2014. When they did, the Buffalo team went on to win the state high school league championship. She said team members feel "very empowered" because "no one rides the bench, everyone gets to shoot every week and everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the team's score."

Mike Hammer, head coach of the Brainerd High School team, said it was difficult to get a Brainerd area team going, too. "Early on it was hard to get the right people on board because of perceptions," he said. "But gradually that changed. The Lakeshore Conservation Club, where we compete, is now a great ally. So is the high school Sports Boosters Club."

Collin French, 17, a junior, is on the Brainerd High School trap team. At 5-feet-4, French is short in stature but stands tall when it comes to consistently breaking targets. "My average is about 21," he said, out of 25 targets. "I earned a letter last year. It's been fun ... it's a great sport for me."

This year's MSHSCTL season will close June 11-16 with a state championship event at Alexandria. Sable estimated 5,000 athletes and 15,000 spectators will attend, making this the largest shooting sport event in the world. Top teams from this event will advance to the Minnesota State High School League trapshooting state tournament June 20 at the [Minneapolis Gun Club](#).

Again, how did this sport grow so quickly?

Sable suggested it's because he and others listened. "Former Gov. Elmer L. Anderson once told me that, 'If someone is willing to tell you what they want, you should be smart enough to listen to them.'" In this case, he said, students said they wanted their photos in the yearbook and the ability to earn a letter.

“Those became our second priorities,” he said, “right behind safety, fun and marksmanship, in that order.”

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