

## **Minnesota non-profit aiming for national dominance of high school trap shooting**

State group, helped by Cabela's grant, has helped sport spread to 11 states with more in its sights

By [Tony Kennedy](#) Star Tribune

April 12, 2016 — 9:52pm



Photos by DENNIS ANDERSON &#x2022; danderson@startribune.com A coach with the Howard Lake-Waverly-Winstead trapshooting team gave final instructions to his trap shooting team at last summer's state tournament in Alexandria., Minn.

The Minnesota nonprofit that turned trap shooting into the state's fastest-growing high school sport has organized 11 other states as far away as New York and Oregon as it attempts to blanket the country with school-approved target shooting.

"There's no reason why we can't have 50 state high school clay target leagues," said John Nelson, vice president of USA High School Clay Target League. "We'll be in half the country next year."

The coast-to-coast expansion — aided financially by a key outdoors grant from Cabela's — has focused national attention on the dramatic rise of youth shotgun training in Minnesota. This summer's state high school trap tournament in Alexandria will be highlighted as a model of the sport's early success.

Copresented by the Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL), the tourney will become the largest trap shooting event in the world, its organizers say. Over a period of eight days in mid-

June, more than 7,000 contestants from 319 coed teams across Minnesota will fire at more than one million flying clays. Lakeville South High School is the defending state champion.

"This thing has taken off so big," said Chuck Delaney, organizer of the annual Game Fair near Anoka and co-owner of the Alexandria Shooting Park, where the tournament will be staged.

As fast as the sport has grown in Minnesota since 2001, it has been growing at a faster pace in Wisconsin and North Dakota. Last year, Wisconsin's league had 480 students and 24 teams. This year, those numbers doubled. In North Dakota, participation is up sixfold to include 550 shooters on 24 teams.



The state's best high school trapshooters break 98, 99 and sometimes even 100 targets are broken out of 100 thrown. The sport requires physical and mental discipline.

Now with nine new states involved, the Minnesota-based clay target league this year has earned legitimate umbrella status. Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Wisconsin and Minnesota are all in the fold.

office space in Mendota Heights.

Starting in two weeks, the network will move its

Nelson said school approval is what sets the league apart. Certain states have their own youth trap shooting leagues and Texas is home to the national Scholastic Clay Target Program, but no other national group is school-related, Nelson said.

"That's crucial for us," he said.

Schools aren't asked to spend money on the sport, but Nelson said school boards or athletic departments must sanction the activity in order for a team to join the league. In three-fourths of the participating schools in Minnesota, trap team members can earn school sport letters.

In Minnesota, the State High School League awards trophies as a presenting partner at the state tournament. But otherwise, the clay target league is the organizing authority in all respects.

"The feedback is overwhelmingly positive from the schools," said Craig Perry, MSHSL associate director. "They are excited to have another entity run a great league."

Tom Binyon, the coach of Wichita State University's club shooting team, said he approached USA High School Clay Target League to organize high schools in Kansas based on the dynamic growth in Minnesota. As a college coach, he hopes the sport catches on for purposes of in-state recruiting.

"I just asked them, 'Is there any way we can replicate what you're doing?'" Binyon said. "They had all the organization in place. ... It was a no-brainer."

With Binyon's help, the Minnesota group launched a league in Kansas this year that already involves 19 high schools and 330 students. Across the spectrum of states, each participating student pays a \$30 fee to USA High School Clay Target League, a 501(c)(3).

Binyon said that's the only charge the group levies on teams in exchange for a management structure that includes turnkey website support, tournament arrangements, an all-electronic scoring system and more. Coaches volunteer their time and local gun clubs charge for the facilities. Depending on uniforms, travel and shooting range costs, each student pays \$230 or more for the nine-week experience.

"I can't imagine they are making that much money," Binyon said of the Minnesota parent organization.

According to federal nonprofit tax records, the umbrella group reported 2014 revenue of \$607,000 and expenses of \$452,000, including salaries of \$123,000. The group, which has since expanded its payroll to four full-time positions, depends on private donations and corporate sponsorships to stay afloat, Nelson said.

A crucial contribution came three years ago from Cabela's Outdoor Fund. Nelson said the grant of "hundreds of thousands of dollars" was recommended to the Outdoor Fund's board by Cabela's CEO Tommy Millner.

When the grant was made, the clay target league served 3,400 students. When the grant expires later this year, more than 13,000 shooters will be on board.

"We measure success by participation," Nelson said.

[tony.kennedy@startribune.com](mailto:tony.kennedy@startribune.com) 612-673-4213 [tonykennedy](#)