

# High school clay target league experiences massive growth

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## 7,000 shooters expected for state tournament



Members of the Apple Valley High School clay target team discuss strategy Monday at **Minneapolis Gun Club**. Photo by Mike Shaughnessy

Minnesota’s largest spring high school state tournament won’t happen on a track or ball field.

It will take place on a shooting range in Alexandria, where more than 7,000 students are expected to compete in the Minnesota High School Clay Target League’s state meet next month.

Yes, you read that correctly. Seven thousand.

Any member of any of Minnesota’s more than 300 high school clay target teams is eligible to shoot in the state championships June 14-21. That leads to high participation, and participation has been the aim of the state clay target league all along. It has struck a chord with high school students who are drawn to the challenge but need scheduling flexibility.

“If you look at a sport like football, it’s a huge commitment,” said Apple Valley High School junior Kory Miller, currently tied for first in the state in overall season average with 24.63 (out of 25 targets). “For trap, you’re required to go out one day a week to shoot, but if you’re in any other sport you have to be there five days.”

Miller also is a member of Apple Valley’s tennis team. “We don’t have many matches on Mondays, so it’s easy for me to go out to the range after tennis practice,” he said.

More than 30 new co-ed teams sprang up in Minnesota this year, bringing participation up to more than 10,000 students, according to the state clay target league. Twelve states have clay target leagues this year, up from three in 2015. There's now an umbrella organization – the USA High School Clay Target League, based in Minnesota – to oversee the sport's expansion.

“We think we'll be in more than 20 states next year,” said Mark Zauhar, a Lakeville resident who serves on the board of directors for the Minnesota league and is on an advisory committee for the national organization. “The first year we started out with 139 kids (in Minnesota). Now, there's a college program in Kansas that started with 400 kids.”

Some of Minnesota's strongest clay target programs are at high schools in the southern suburbs. Apple Valley this week wrapped up its fourth consecutive conference championship. Lakeville South is defending state champion in the trap and skeet divisions. Burnsville, Eagan, Eastview, Farmington, Lakeville North and Rosemount also have teams.

Schools are not asked to provide funding for clay target teams, but the league requires school districts to approve participation before a team is allowed to join.



An Apple Valley shooter fires at a clay target in the upper left corner of the photo. Photo by Mike Shaughnessy

The top teams and individuals from the June 14-21 state competition in Alexandria qualify for the Minnesota State High School League co-sponsored tournament June 25 at the Minneapolis Gun Club in Prior Lake. The MSHSL was the first state high school athletic association to sponsor a clay target tournament.

The state clay target league groups teams into conferences based on number of participants. On Monday, shooters from Apple Valley and Lakeville South were competing at Minneapolis Gun Club, but not against each other. Apple Valley head coach John Miller (Kory's father) said the team has 48 shooters this year, which results in plenty of personalized instruction available from a dozen coaches.

Lakeville South, by contrast, caps its participation at about 100. Lakeville South is in Class 8A for teams with the largest participation, while Apple Valley is in

Class 4A.

The coaches are volunteers, and many do it simply to promote the sport and help other shooters learn. “Many of the coaches on our staff do not have kids in the program, or even kids who go to Apple Valley High School,” John Miller said.

Although shooters such as Kory Miller only have to compete one day a week, he's no part-timer. He was introduced to the sport by his father at a young age. The teams that have had consistent success work at it, John Miller said.

Before Apple Valley even started competing this spring, its shooters had classroom training and several practice shoots, said John Miller. A number of shooters at Apple Valley and elsewhere are members of the Amateur Trapshooting Association and also compete in its events.

As the sport has grown, so has the shooters' proficiency. This spring a shooter has to average at least 23.13 per round of 25 just to make it into the list of top 100 shooters statewide.

Most of those shooters are boys, but that's because "there are many more boys than girls participating right now," John Miller said. "There's no reason a girl couldn't be the top shooter in the state."

A few years ago the top-100 cutoff was "probably 20 or 21," said Bob Amey, an Apple Valley assistant coach. "There might have been 10 with a 23.13 average."

Another change: These days many more shooters have equipment specifically suited to the purpose. Some have trapshooting gear that costs thousands of dollars. In the sport's infancy there were high school students shooting targets with hunting rifles, but that's rare now. "It would be like playing tennis with a badminton racquet," Amey said with a grin.

In a sport evolving as quickly as high school clay target, you can't afford any competitive disadvantage.

## **Season update**

Lakeville South finished second to Alexandria in Class 8A, Conference 2 in competition held over four weeks. Alexandria and Lakeville South both scored more than 109,000 points over the four weeks, but Alexandria's margin of victory was 102 points. Farmington and Lakeville North finished fifth and sixth in Class 8A, Conference 2.

Three South Suburban Conference schools – Prior Lake, Eastview and Burnsville – finished first through third in Class 8A, Conference 1. Eagan was third in Class 7A, Conference 2 and Rosemount was third in Class 6A, Conference 3.

Apple Valley won Class 4A, Conference 3 by more than 6,000 points and had the highest team score in each of the four competition weeks.

Kory Miller of Apple Valley (24.63), Ryan Baer of Apple Valley (23.88), Logan LeClair of Eastview (23.88), Dane Nelson of Burnsville (23.75) and Jack Wiggert of Farmington (23.75) were among the top 25 boys in seasonal averages. On the girls side, Eastview's Madison Guentzel ranked second with a 24 average. Also among the top 25 girls are Amanda Studer of Apple Valley (22.13), Maggie Halstead of Apple Valley (21.88) and Catherine Knutson of Burnsville (21.75).