



SHOOTING WELL

ONE SIZE ~~FITS~~ DOESN'T FIT ALL

..... by PHIL BOURJAILY, IOWA CITY, IOWA

My friend John went duck hunting exactly once and hated it. Every time he pulled the trigger of his borrowed shotgun, he punched himself in the nose. John stands 6 foot 7 and the pump he was shooting had a stock suited to someone shorter. John bled, the ducks didn't, and he never went duck hunting again.

Hunters come in all shapes and sizes and not everyone can make do with an off-the-rack gun. A gun that doesn't fit can hurt. It can also make you miss. Gunmakers face the problem of producing guns that will sort of fit everybody. Most use a stock design intended for an average adult male of about 5 foot 10. For years, the only concession manufacturers made to smaller shooters was to offer short-stocked, short-barreled 20 gauge youth models.

Fortunately, there are more options available to us today. We're more conscious of gun fit and many 12 gauge semi-automatics – the guns most popular with waterfowlers – now come with shim kits that let you tinker with fit. Some also offer stock spacers or optional pads for tweaking length of pull, which is the distance from the middle of the trigger to the end of the gun's buttstock. There's a better choice of short-stocked 12 gauges now, too. With a little looking, you can find a waterfowl gun to fit you.

When you're shopping for a gun, you can get a rough idea of whether it fits by doing a quick check of length and drop, which is how much lower the stock is compared with the rib on the barrel.

The old test for length is to hold your trigger arm out, bend it at the elbow at a 90 degree angle, then set the buttstock in the crook of your arm to see if the trigger reaches your finger, which is fairly worthless although it does sort of tell you how long your forearm is.

It's much better to check length of pull by mounting the gun and seeing if you have two finger-widths of clearance between your thumb and your nose. That's enough gap to keep you from punching yourself, and not so much the gun should be awkward to handle.

To test drop, mount the gun with your eyes closed. Open them. You should see just the bead and maybe a tiny bit of rib. Most people cheek a gun much tighter in the store than they do in the field, so if you see some rib in the store you'll see lots of rib in the field and probably shoot high. If the gun has a middle bead, you should see it slightly stacked underneath the top bead.

Pay attention to a gun's grip when you're shopping. They are not easy to change, so be sure you buy one that lets you reach the trigger and the safety. That's a real problem for some on guns like Berettas, Benelli Novas and Super Novas and Winchester SXPs, as well as the old Winchester Model 12 and Super X1 that have the safety ahead of the trigger guard.



>> Women not only tend to be shorter than men, but are more likely to be cross-dominant, which for many means they should shoot left-handed. PHOTO BY HOLLY A. HEYSER

>> *Story continues on page 20*

If you have small hands, beware, too, of triggers set in such a way that to reach them you need to rest your middle finger right behind the trigger guard. You can get a nasty rap on the finger from waterfowl-load recoil that way. A few “ladies and youth” models do feature a tighter curve to the grip that puts smaller hands in easier reach of the trigger.

If you are “other-sized” and average stocks don’t fit you, here are some options:

WOMEN’S GUNS

The average woman in the U.S. stands 5 foot 4. Women have smaller hands than men, longer necks and many shoot more comfortably with a stock that is angled out slightly at the toe (bottom) of the stock. The only true women’s stocked guns on the market are the Syren line from Caesar Guerini/Fabarm, which includes a 3-inch semiauto waterfowl gun.

It’s interesting to note that Fabarm sells a target version of the same gun for men (identical, but without the Syren rose on the stock). Buyers include not only short men, but some very large men, either weight-lifters or simply men with a fireplug build, that have large enough chests that they are more comfortable shooting a shorter, toed out stock. Benelli offers its M2 semiauto in 12 gauge with a shorter length of pull, and Browning makes a Micro Midas line of pump, semiauto and break-action hunting and target guns in 12 and 20 gauge with shorter stocks.

Some very petite women ultimately find that a light, short stocked, short-barreled 20 gauge youth model – like the Remington 870 pump or 11-87 semi-auto; the Mossberg Bantam; the Benelli Nova Compact pump or Montefeltro Compact semi-auto (to name a few) – is all the duck gun they can handle and all the gun they need.

ADJUSTABLE GUNS

Many guns, mostly semi-autos, now come with shims that allow you to alter drop and cast – the stock’s bend to the left or right – without a gunsmith. The list includes Browning’s Maxus; all Franchis and Benellis except the Nova pump but including the new 828U O/U; all Beretta semi-autos. Remington Versa Max and V3 semi-autos offer the widest range of drop and cast adjustment of any semi-autos. In addition, CZ 712 semi-auto is available with a factory-installed ATI Akita stock adjustable for length and drop.

LEFT-HANDED GUNS

Benelli offers the M2, SBELI and Montefeltro semi-autos in true left-hand models. Mossberg has a new LH Model 500 pump; Browning’s BPS has a top safety and bottom eject, making it functionally ambidextrous. Beretta now offers its A400 Action semi-auto in a true left-hand model as well.

Safeties on most, but not all, guns can be switched from

UM, WHAT’S A LOP?

Before you start trying to fit your own gun, you should understand stock dimensions and how they affect a gun’s fit.

LENGTH OF PULL: LOP is the distance between the front of the trigger and the middle of the buttpad. The right length stock for you is comfortable to mount and leaves about two finger-widths between your thumb and your nose.

Ideal LOP is determined by the combination of your girth at your shoulders and the length of your arms – it can be affected by weight gain or weight loss.

DROP: The distance from the top of the comb to a line extending back from the rib, “drop” determines the elevation of your head and eye in relation to the barrel. Drop is usually measured at the heel (the top of the butt) and at the comb (the very front of the comb). Too little drop, and you’ll shoot high; too much, and the gun shoots low.

Ideal drop is determined by the length of your neck, the height of your cheekbones and the distance between your cheekbones and your eyes.

CAST: Cast is a lateral bend in the stock that puts the rib in line with your eye. Guns for right handers have cast off (the stock bends to the right). Guns for lefties have cast on. Most American factory stocks have no cast.

The ideal amount of cast is determined by the shape of your face and the lateral distance from your cheekbone to the center of your eye.

TOE: The toe is the bottom of the buttstock, and “toe out” refers to it being angled outward to better fit the shoulder pocket and, for some women, to prevent the toe from digging painfully into the top of the breast. A few men, particularly body builders and the overweight, can benefit from some toe-out, too.

PITCH: Pitch is the angle of the butt in relation to the rib. If that angle is 90 degrees, a gun has no pitch. If the toe of the stock angles away from the shooter, the stock has pitch; if the toe angles back toward your shoulder, the gun has negative pitch. The right pitch for you is the amount that puts most of the buttpad in contact with your shoulder to spread recoil forces. Most guns come with about 4 degrees pitch, but some women and heavy-chested men will be more comfortable with added pitch.

SHOOT A SHEET

A more accurate test of your gun’s fit is to hang up a sheet and shoot it. Make an aiming mark on the sheet and stand 16 yards away. Put a tight choke in your gun. Mounting your gun smoothly but without aiming, shoot the mark. Repeat four or five times. Don’t correct your shot placement. A hole will appear at the center of your pattern. Every two inches off the aiming mark equals an eighth of an inch adjustment to drop or cast you’ll need to make the gun shoot where you’re looking.

>> *Story continues on page 22*

right to left-hand operation easily, but don't assume. Ask if a safety can be switched and what it will cost. Switching the safety on the original Beretta Xtrema required buying a whole new trigger group for \$150 or so. You will need an aftermarket left-handed safety to switch a Remington 870 and a gunsmith's help to switch some other guns. Benelli will change the safety on a Super Nova pump for you for free if you ship it back to them. Any gun that comes with a shim kit can be cast for left-handers as easily as for right handers simply by flipping the shim over.

THE ONE SIZE-FITS-ALL GUN

Part of the popularity of the Remington 870 and 1100/11-87 is a stock design that fits a surprising number of people. Their stocks have enough drop that anyone can get their face down on the stock, and the thin comb allows most people to center their eye over the rib without the need for cast.

NO-GUNSMITHING SOLUTIONS

You can lengthen a stock permanently by adding a thicker pre-fit recoil pad like a Limbsaver. A slip-on pad can add up to an inch of length for early season hunts in t-shirts, and then you can pull it off for later in the year when you're bundled up and need a shorter stock.

ATI's Akita Adjustable stock fits Mossberg, Remington, CZ and Winchester SXP and Hatsan Escort 12 and 20 gauges and offers adjustable length of pull and a soft comb that can be raised and it installs fairly easily.

You can add height to a comb with products like the Beartooth Stock and Comb Raising Kit or the Wrapid Comb. However those kits, like permanent adjustable combs, are good for adding height to the comb, but not so good for lowering it, which is more often than not what waterfowlers need.

A sharp toe on hard rubber buttpad is easy enough to grind down to stop it from digging into your chest.

GUNSMITHING SOLUTIONS

If DIY fixes can't solve your problem, consult a gunsmith. Spend enough money and you can have any gun made to fit you. A gunsmith can bend, saw, sand down or build up a wooden stock to change drop, cast, length of pull and pitch, although any alteration that requires refinishing can cost a few hundred dollars or more.

Some problems can be solved less expensively with a new pad or spacers. Toe out can be added to a gun with an adjustable pad plate – Graco makes a good one – and any stock can be lengthened endlessly with spacers behind the pad, although lengthening can alter drop somewhat by changing the point at which your face meets the comb. Synthetic stocks can



>> Gunmaker Dale Tate, based at the Camanche Hills Hunting Preserve in Lone, sands down a shortened stock for a woman getting her gun fitted. PHOTO BY HOLLY A. HEYSER

be cut to a certain extent, and can be altered for pitch but if they don't come with shims, altering the fit further is difficult.

Finally, if self-fitting doesn't work for you, make an appointment with a professional fitter. A session with a try gun will cost you a few hundred dollars, which is perhaps worse than a sharp stick in the eye, but much better than a thumb knuckle to the nose every time you shoot at a duck. 🦆

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