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It's about sport, not guns - and it's not macho

A shooter, like other sportspeople, enjoys the competition, the camaraderie and the challenge, writes Neil Jenkins.

If someone had a collection of knives but could not say why, you might be confused and concerned. But if he was an amateur chef who used the knives for cooking, your concern would vanish. You are likely to support what he does, and might even be curious to see if you could do it yourself.

Two things are happening here. First, the focus is shifting from the object to the reason for its use. The instruments become a background issue. Second, your fear about what the person "could" do with them seems ridiculous.

It's the same with shooting. When the Brazilian shooting team was in Melbourne for the World Masters Games, do you know what we discussed? Forty-foot anacondas. Not guns. I spoke to wheelchair competitors about their overseas travels and coming events, and to an American about his stopover in Sydney. I have two gold medals from the Games as well as two personal bests. The firearm itself is just how I got there and hardly ever comes up in conversation.

When I turn up at my club or prize meetings, most of the conversation is about the usual things that you discuss at a sporting club - auditing, coming competitions, the need to replace an office computer, the need to cut the grass. That's all. A shooting club is exactly like any other sporting club, except you will see a rifle range where an oval or tennis court might be.

The process of shooting itself involves stance, sight picture, trigger release, follow through and so on. Again, the gun is the last thing on your mind, though important. It's like a cricketer thinking about whether he can get five runs off the last over to win - he's not thinking about the bat, but the bowler, field placings and so on. The bat will be put away in the locker while he has a shower, then a drink. If it were not for the people in the sport, I would not be a shooter. It would be like being the only member of the cricket club.

So why did David Campbell (this page on Tuesday) focus so heavily on "the gun" when he said shooters "don't understand" the fear of others. He wrote of his time in the cadets, making holes in paper with bullets. Maybe it's because it was in a military context. Plinking holes in targets for the sake of it, as he suggested, must be incredibly boring.

In my case, my personal best score, and whether I can beat Brenda (who regularly beats me by a point or two) again, is what I am hoping to achieve. Simply shooting without any purpose would be understandably boring.

When I first walked into a rifle club, I saw a number of open gun cases and felt apprehensive. I'd never seen anything like that before. However, after a couple of minutes I realised that, aside from some basic safety procedures, these items were just the means to conversation about the weather and so on. For me, the rest is history.

When Michael Diamond and Russell Mark won gold medals at Atlanta in 1996 it turned the gun debate that we had then on its head. Neither spoke a word about guns, but about their sport, and I am convinced this has had a lasting effect on the public perception of shooting as a sport.

In 1998, when Susan McCready won gold at the Commonwealth Games, a Melbourne radio host commented on her choice of sport. In fact, shooting has given her opportunities that she may not have had in other sports. It's the same with Kim Frazer, Ben Burge, Tim Lowndes, Sam Wieland and others, who will always recount their memories of overseas travel and competition, not "the gun".

The mistake many shooters make when people argue about "the gun" is to debate "the gun". Even saying "I go target shooting" is not enough to explain what the attraction to target shooting is. People often assume it is to "blast things apart". Some sort of macho thing. It's like a chef describing what he does as "I chop vegetables".

What they should say is "I go target shooting because I like the people, I win prizes and I get to travel. I enjoy the club dinners and being part of winning pennant teams" and so on. Nothing to do with being macho.

Explain it, and people become comfortable, realising this is just another sport with the same sort of social events. They may even come along to the club to try their hand. There is no reason to think that a shooter is psychologically any different to anyone else. The more involved people are in a pastime, the safer they are likely to be.

"Gun owners" were the first two words Campbell used in his article. I am not a "football owner", but a footballer. I enjoy my club and the club dinners. I am not a "fishing rod owner", but an angler who enjoys the club and the weekend trips away. I am not a gun owner or part of "the gun lobby". I'm a shooter who enjoys what he does at the Melbourne International Shooting Club every Wednesday night.

Perhaps then the solution to overcoming Campbell's concern about "the gun lobby" - whoever that is - is for shooting organisations to show who they are and what they do. Getting locked in a debate about "the gun" is a distraction from the real reason they exist.

As in any sport, promoting what you do in a simple and open way is the best thing shooters can do for themselves. How well people understand shooting and shooters will depend on whether it is promoted as a "gun thing" or a sport.

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