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Aiming for the top

By [Frances Sawyer](#)
Staff Reporter

A bunch of Ivy Leaguers from a small city in Connecticut do not often beat the military in shooting. Yet that has happened twice this year as the Yale Skeet and Trap team continues to storm through its fall season.

The club sport has been adding to its arsenal in the past three years as more and more Elis enter the school with previous shooting experience. New interest in the program combined with top-notch coaching by Tom Migdalski has resulted in one of the best teams since the 1970s, team members said.

“I think it’s partially luck,” co-captain Jason Gilliland ’10 said of the team’s recent successes. “We have had a large number of good shooters lately and also the program has become more visible.”

The team recently returned from Manassas, Va., where the Bulldogs took first place in the East Coast Regional Clay Target Championship on Nov. 13-14 by hitting 1,519 out of 1,650 targets in the A-squad division. West Point hit 1,489.

Along with top overall honors, the team also won several key individual awards. Gilliland was named tournament champion and assistant coach Rob Person GRD ’10 was the runner-up. (Although he is a coach, Person can also compete under club sports’ eligibility rules.)

Gilliland was the Trap Event Two winner, the Trap Event One runner-up, the Skeet Event runner-up, and the Wobble Trap Event runner-up. Person was the Trap Event One champion and runner up in the Second Trap Event. Ari Opsahl ’12 placed third in Trap Event One.

This fall’s success follows last year’s seventh place finish out of 38 teams at Nationals, which were held in San Antonio, Tex. While the A-squad’s performance determined the finish of the team, Yale had two additional squads in attendance. The B-squad received the “Most Improved” award in both skeet and trap — something that, combined with the A-squad’s win, is an indication of the entire team’s performance, co-captain Austen Kassinger ’10 said.

As the team looks toward next year’s Nationals in March (once again to be held in San Antonio), they are hopeful of their chances of improving on last years’ performance. Team members said they are aiming to finish in the top five, something that was possible last season based on their average scores, but simply did not happen when several key shooters did not perform as well as they were expecting, Kassinger said. “We’re competing against southern teams,” Gilliland said about going to Nationals. “Teams that have more time to shoot, and bigger schools with more time to practice.”

Texas A&M, University of Missouri, Kansas, and West Point are some of the stronger national squads. “But the elephant in the room is Lindenwood,” Rickey Johnson ’12 said. “They’re the only varsity team in the nation.”

Lindenwood University, a school in St. Charles, Mo., has over 90 members on their skeet and trap team. The program is the only one in the nation to offer scholarships to student shooters and boasts five coaches and three graduate assistants.

While Yale's program does not offer the same incentives to prospective recruits, it still manages to find top-notch shooters and is particularly good at training students who have had little or no prior shooting experience, team members said. While the team has relied heavily in the past on students discovering the sport for the first time, in the last two years more students with a competitive background have discovered the team.

"Spots on the team have gotten pretty limited and competitive," Gilliland said. "We've had at least a dozen people come out for the three to four spots open per year."

Johnson and Emily Sosangelis '13 are two such students who have competitive experience in high school that has given them — and the team — an edge. Johnson grew up close to the San Antonio Shooting Club, and Sosangelis began shooting shotguns at age 13 with her father.

For those who have shot competitively before, the collegiate experience introduces youth and team spirit into the typically individual sport dominated by older shooters. Both Sosangelis and Johnson said that the sense of community on the team has been one of the biggest and best changes from their prior shooting experiences.

"Everybody motivates you to do the best you can," Sosangelis said. "Back at home, usually a lot of us had the same experience, where we ended up shooting with older individuals — so shooting with college students is great."

After the break, the team will continue their Friday afternoon practices in preparation for Nationals. They will also compete in two or three other tournaments closer to home in hopes of getting the competitive experience to carry them into the national top five.

Correction: Dec. 8, 2009

An earlier version of this article misidentified the captain of the Skeet and Trap team. He is Jason Gilliland '10, not Tom Gilliland '09.