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Payne Whitney breeds sharp shooters

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Elementary school teacher Christine Chen knew that she and her husband, a Yale graduate student, would keep shotguns in the house once they moved out of University housing. She wanted to know how they worked.

Yanping Li GRD '08 spent one month training for the military in China. But she fired only five shots there, and she wanted more practice.

New Haven resident Stewart Hutchings grew up shooting rabbits in a small village in Surry, England. He had not handled a gun in 25 years, and he wondered whether he'd lost the knack.

They and seven others -- graduate students and professionals who live in the New Haven area -- took an introductory "Skeet & Trap Shooting" class offered by Payne Whitney Gymnasium on two Saturdays in February. The class taught shooting technique, gun parts and types, gun safety and a brief history of the shooting sports. Each student shot a total of 37 shells at flying clay targets at Yale's Outdoor Education Center in East Lyme, Conn. during the two Saturday sessions.

"[Shooting] is a very safe, fun, enjoyable, unique sport that doesn't deserve the bad rap that it gets," instructor Tom Migdalski said.

Migdalski, director of outdoor recreation and club sports at Yale, also coaches the skeet and trap shooting club team and the fishing club, and he instructs a fly tying physical education course offered through Payne Whitney. Although shooting and fishing may seem out of place among Yale's more traditional physical education classes -- such as yoga, kickboxing and dance -- Migdalski has helped carve a niche for these outdoor sports at Yale.

"He has tremendous knowledge and expertise in certain areas that are very unique, and those are trap and skeet shooting [and] fly tying," said Larry Matthews, the associate director for sports and recreation. "What we've been able to do is tap into him as a resource and make some of these activities more available on a beginner level, or a how-to basis."

At the first Saturday session of the skeet and trap shooting class, Hutchings, who runs Bubble 'n' Squeak Laundromat in New Haven, was nervous he would not make a single shot. He planted his feet shoulder-width apart, slid a shell into the chamber and brought the seven-and-a-half pound gun up to his chest. He rested his cheek against the stock and looked down the barrel.

"Pull," he said. Daniel Martinez '05, captain of Yale's skeet and trap shooting team, pressed a button on a small yellow box. An orange clay disk flew out of a machine -- the "house" -- at 40 miles per hour and soared across the field. Hutchings fired a shot, standing firm against the recoil, and orange bits dispersed against the sky.

Hutchings made 11 out of 12 shots that Saturday.

"I joined ... just to go back in time a little bit and see if I can still hit anything," he said. "The funny thing was, it came right back."

Skeet and trap are among the few sports at which men and women can compete equally, Migdalski said. Skill depends not on strength and muscle, he said, but on hand-eye coordination, reflex and vision.

Chen had virtually no previous experience, but she hit the vast majority of targets at both Saturday sessions.

"I could turn you into a champion. You're like a natural," Migdalski told her, before turning to the rest of the group. "She's calm, confident, shouldering easily."

Tay Moss DIV '03, a chaplain at Yale-New Haven Hospital and an experienced shooter, agreed that the sport can be more mental than physical.

"It's totally Zen," said Moss, who took the class. "You have to just relax and be instinctive. If you try to think about it, you'll lose."

Skeet and trap are similar sports in that they both involve shooting at flying clay targets with shotguns, as opposed to rifles or pistols. But in trap, the target moves away from the shooter, while in skeet, the target moves horizontally across the field in front of the shooter. Trap originated in Europe in the 18th century, while skeet was invented in America in the 1920s.

Some 31 colleges and universities in the United States now have skeet and trap shooting teams, according to the National Rifle Association's Web site. Most of these schools are located in the South and Southwest; only two, Yale and West Point Academy, are in the Northeast.

Migdalski gave three explanations for this low number. Finding an experienced coach, he said, is difficult. Shooting sports are expensive and serve a small number of people -- each "squad" has five members, and teams often raise eyebrows on campus.

"It's just plain-old politically incorrect," Migdalski said. "People who don't understand the shooting sports say, 'Guns on campus! You can't do that.'"

Martinez said his peers often question his interest in the sport.

"There's a stigma that's associated with firearms," he said. "People freak out. I say stuff like, 'Don't knock it until you rock it.'"

The skeet and trap shooting club team has 16 members and practices Fridays at the Outdoor Education

Center. The team competes against West Point in the fall and participates in the intercollegiate clay target championships in the spring.

Though the skeet and trap sports use clay targets, they are a natural way to practice hunting birds, Migdalski said. His physical education class neither encourages nor discourages students to hunt. Still, he makes hunting references to drive home his instruction.

"You got to move to the target," he told students in the class. "What if that was a wild bird flying away. You're not gonna say, 'Oh it's not moving in a straight line!'"

And, "What if it was your dinner flying out there? Like, a pheasant!"

By 4:30 p.m. on the second Saturday session, some members of the class had improved markedly. Greta Gao '01 had made "huge strides," Migdalski said, Chen was still doing "excellent" and Moss was hitting two out of every three targets. Migdalski looked for recruits to play on his club team, as he does every year.

But in the end, the class, now in its 12th year, is aimed to merely teach the basics, while giving students a good time. There was a limit, Martinez realized, to how much he could hone students' technique in just two sessions.

"Sometimes you just miss, bud," he said to Jian Xu GRD '08.