Why lady Guns will never be quite like the men

By Professor P O Behan

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Why lady Guns will never be quite like the men

It is all in the mind, says Professor P O Behan, a senior neurologist whose study on the nature of male and female shooters breaks new ground. How the rules of gun-fitting are not the same for both: and why a lady may shoot better with one eye closed.
There is a distinct difference between men and women in the way they use their eyes when shooting. Such differences are unlikely to be explained by socialisation or nurture, but are part of a general phenomenon whereby certain abilities are performed with greater skill by one gender than the other. This observation came about in the following manner, as told to me by Mr Fred Buller, formerly managing director of the Buckinghamshire gunmakers, Frederick Beesley.

Some 40 years ago Jack Kidwill, a man of independent means and a noted game shot (he and Percy Stanbury were the best Fred Buller ever saw perform), was a customer of Frederick Beesley Gunmakers. Although little could be taught him about shooting, the details of gun fitting were discussed with Kidwill, who at the time was more interested in coaching his petite wife Marjory—who had taken up clay shooting in her 40s—than he was in his own performances, and indeed this paid off handsomely when she became Britain’s lady clay shooting champion and later European lady champion.

Kidwill lived for shooting, and eventually took up a full-time job as a shooting coach and gun-fitter at the West London Shooting Grounds at Greenford. In due course his outstanding ability was recognised, and he became Purdey’s chief gun-fitter, which he remained for the rest of his years.

Although he fitted all comers, Kidwill had a special interest in fitting lady shooters, and he had become aware of different factors to be considered for them. His discovery was that the ‘rules’ of gun fitting, so far as a person’s ability to shoot with two eyes open is concerned, did not work for many lady shooters, although no statistical records were kept. In other words, it was often the case that a right-handed woman with a right ‘master eye’ still had to close her left eye rather than shoot with the advantage of having both eyes open, as most men in a similar position can do.

The word ‘shooting’ here implies shooting with a shotgun (with all other kinds the word is qualified, eg rifle shooting). In shooting it has long been recognised that the gun must fit the owner if he is to exploit his talent fully. A properly fitted gun is one that allows the owner, caught on the wrong foot while walking through a field of roots, just as a pheasant rises, to take the next natural step as he mounts his gun. This is in contrast to having to make an accommodation for an ill-fitting gun—one that lacks the appropriate amount of cast, for instance—by placing the foot obliquely, thereby jeopardising balance in order to be on target.

It is obvious that variations in human physique must be taken into account by the gun-fitter. The most obvious adaptations are, first, differences in stock length to accommodate variations in arm length; secondly, differences in bend in the stock to accommodate variations in neck length and shoulder scope; and thirdly, differences in the amount of cast (cast-off for right-handers, cast-on for left-handers) in the stock to accommodate variations of shoulder width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width. Before the gun-fitter can get to grips with the above, however, he must test the width.

Elegance and expertise. Ladies’ day at Mr William Tyrwhitt-Drake’s Bereleigh Estate in Hampshire. The gun has a good style as it mirrors the gun to her left shoulder, she bears no weight on the left foot.

Debate started 40 years ago with Jack Kidwill and his wife, Marjory
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hormones with the brain. In other words, whatever the genetic makeup of the embryo, the foetus will develop as a male only if testosterone is present. At six weeks after conception (and at adolescence) there will be enormous surges of testosterone. If testosterone is absent, the brain develops along female lines. If the brain is that of the female pattern, little change will take place, but if it is a male brain then certain anatomical changes will begin to develop. Testosterone alters the way in which the brain is finally constructed.

We now come to the concept of cerebral dominance—the superior capacity of each hemisphere of the brain to acquire particular skills. Dominance differs between men and women: for example, most men who are right-handed have dominance for speech, language and motor function in the left hemisphere, while the right hemisphere controls visual and spatial ability and deals with abstract forms, shapes and patterns. When right-sided brain damage occurs in men and women, it is striking that men are severely incapacitated for spatial IQ tests, while women with the lesion in the same part of the brain are hardly affected.

Men with a left-sided stroke, or damage to the left hemisphere, lose a great deal more of their language ability than women with damage to the same anatomical site. This indicates that, in women, language and spatial skills are more diffusely distributed through the brain, whereas in males they are more focally located. Men’s brains are said to be more specialised. In men, the left side of the brain deals almost exclusively with verbal function and the right side, in visual function. Women use both hemispheres for all functions. In neuropsychological tests using three-dimensional shapes, boys perform better when the data is exclusively presented to the left eye (which feeds directly into the right hemisphere) while for girls, either eye can assess the problem equally. It is a common observation that women have the ability to take in a great deal at a single glance.

Eye dominance, however, is by no means an all-or-nothing affair, and is less easily measured than hand dominance for skilled movements. There are now standardised tests for assessing eye dominance but these have not yet been used to discover the shooting abilities of men and women.

Shooting ability is clearly influenced by eye dominance. The fact is that individuals who are right-handed, but with left eye dominance, or left-handed with right eye dominance will not learn marksmanship skills as readily as individuals who have matched eye and hand dominance. Formal studies have indeed shown that right-handers with right eye dominance are better marksmen than are right-handers with left eye dominance.

Examples of this are seen in other sports—for example in cricket, where batsmen with matched eye-hand dominance are more successful than others. The pattern, therefore, of eye-hand dominance seems to be related to athletic proficiency in general. Further, there is evidence in men that some may be very good at shooting static targets but poor at dealing with moving ones. This knowledge comes from fighter pilot training during the war. Many pilots (perfectly capable as fliers) turned out to be poor at shooting enemy aircraft. It became normal to identify and transfer such pilots from Spitfires and Hurricanes to Typhoons and Tempests, which were developed for attacking ground targets. Shooting at static targets against a rich background, such pilots shot well. Were they mostly weakly lateralised left-handers with mixed dominance, one wonders!

There are well-recognised differences between men and women for certain tasks and abilities. Neuropsychologists have shown that there is a definite superiority of females in carrying out simple tasks such as the speed of colour naming, and tests which call for rapid perception of details and frequent shifts of attention. Studies of students at high school show that females have a clerical

To the men, a challenge: let my ladies take you on

True, the female of the species is different, says Rod Brammer, leading shooting coach. But if she is well trained, she can be without equal. One thing in her favour: she does not have the male ego

FEISTY, fabulous flyers. Singly: easy and biddable. In numbers: unmanageable and inclined to riot. That about describes the young ladies at our shooting school who came to be known as Brammer’s Bitch Pack—the name they applied to themselves.

Sometimes we go for weeks without starting a new lady shooter in the school, then, for whatever reason, they come in covesys. The Bitch Pack arrived singly, then coveday. ‘Your amazing collection of redheads,’ my wife called them, with just a touch of ice in her voice.

There is no reason at all why lady shooters cannot shoot up to, and above, the skill of the men if the approach to coaching them is correct. To those chaps reading this and scoffing at the idea, give me a call. I will match you against one of my lady Guns, and she will destroy you. Anthony Norton took up the challenge, and he is an extraordinarily good shot. He took his drubbing with gentlemanly grace, and paid over his money to the chosen charity.

A lady who is new to shooting needs, above all else, reassurance. We then choose one of our own guns, which we judge will fit her best, and let her feel the weight. Initially she may be concerned about this, because we always give ladies the heaviest gun we judge they can manage. This is to take away the recoil. A heavy gun with light shot load gives less recoil.

The next step is to test for ocular dominance: the master eye. Most right-handed ladies have ocular dominance in their left eye. We moved our shooting school from Hampshire to Devon 17 years ago. In that time we have found not 20 ladies, out of hundreds taught, who did not have ocular dominance in the eye opposite to the shoulder from which they shot. For my ease, let me talk about right-handers; the opposite of what I say applies to left-handed ladies.

Taking a right-shouldered lady and finding almost inevitably that she is left-eyed, the one thing one never ever should do is to try and make her shoot from her left shoulder. This is often advocated by people who should know better, and is arrant nonsense. Such advice from a shooting coach would make me wary of his ability. At best I would think him too lazy to do his job properly. Having a master eye problem is nothing much to deal with; there are many ways to obviate it. Having a left master eye does not mean the left eye is necessarily stronger in optician’s terms; it means that part of the brain that controls the left eye wants the eye to do more work.

As to the actual gun on which we start a lady, it would be an over-and-under 20-bore or 28-bore with a light shot load. It is possible to graduate up some of the more statuesque of their number to 12-bore, but it must be done gently; never overface them.

When those ladies who are able to do so move up to a 12, we get them shooting initially with a sub-sonic load. This has an enormous added benefit, in that to hit targets with a sub-sonic load you have to...
superiority and young girls have a greater ability than young boys in tasks using fine manual dexterity. Most people accept with a chuckle that females are superior to males from childhood onwards in verbal functions, as they are in reading.

On the other hand, males usually do better than females due to their superiority in spatial skills, particularly after puberty. By spatial ability is meant the capacity to see and picture objects regarding their size, shape, relative position and relationship to each other. It seems to be related to the male hormone, testosterone, since adult male patients who had suffered delayed puberty because of low levels of male hormones perform less well on spatial tasks than do healthy male volunteers with normal sex hormone levels. A reasonable generalisation, therefore, is that females perform better than males in verbal tasks, while males are superior at visuo-spatial tasks, where they can differentiate simultaneously between many different forms.

It can be seen therefore that there are sex differences in neurological function, which represents the outcome of interaction between several different factors, the most important being sex hormones. These help to explain the differences between women and men in shooting ability. Observations at Sandhurst Military College showed that males had a marginally greater ability at shooting than females, but there have not been formal studies. Several attempts over the years have been made to explain these differences. Some cite socio-cultural factors—that in the course of upbringing boys receive more exposure to visuo-spatial skills than girls. Others cite evolutionary pressures—women stay at home while men go out hunting, shoot with arrows, throw spears, and so forth. In other words, the activities of men have given them an evolutionary edge on the fine or visuo-spatial tasks. But the first tenets of socio-cultural skills can be dismissed, since they would not explain the differences in animals, only in humans, and it would be impossible to determine, in the Darwinian sense, whether they are evolutionary in origin.

The fact is that the foetal prototype brain is female, and in the early stages the nervous system is undifferentiated. Foetal testicular hormones in males act on the brain and as a result cause changes in function. The observed differences in shooting ability between men and women is yet another of these hormonally induced differences in brain function.

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