

## **Debut of Gippsland Sports Academy's Junior Development Squad for Clay Target Shooting**

It's not often you see 12 teenagers arrive early for anything, let alone an hour early. However, such was the enthusiasm for the commencement of Gippsland Sports Academy's first ever Clay Target Shooting Development Squad, that the team assembled at Frankston Australian Clay Target Club at 10am on Saturday morning an hour before coaching was due to commence.

The program model was the brainchild of Dave Jones, father of Lakes Entrance Women's Skeet Olympian Aislin Jones, and Vice President of Bairnsdale Field & Game. When approached by the late Tony Claridge of Gippsland Sports Academy, and East Gippsland Sports Foundation at a school shoot in mid 2015, and asked if it would be possible to set up a program for junior clay target shooters, it seemed like a pipe dream but one worth considering.

Several other regional sports academies have programs but having seen the road travelled by Aislin, Dave suggested a different plan was needed to create the next generation of Australian representatives in the sport. Country kids are challenged by distance and access to facilities, they have talent but not opportunity. This was a chance to change some of that.

An introduction to Jim Vivian from GSA, and a series of planning meetings followed. What had seemed a dream started to look like a real possibility. GSA run programs in swimming, volleyball, golf, tennis, & netball. Dave suggested to Jim that this program, like all of the other Academy programs should not be about making better club level performers, but trying to find Gippsland's future National Champions, and ideally Olympians. Jim agreed, and Dave suggested a different approach. In this case, to metaphorically speaking, bring in the big guns!

Through Aislin's relationship with Lauryn Mark, established as she started on the road to becoming a young Olympian, GSA were connected with two of Australia's leading shotgun coaches. Lauryn is a dual Commonwealth Games Gold Medalist, and placed 4<sup>th</sup> at the Athens Olympics. Her husband Russell is two-time World Champion and an Olympic Gold and Silver medallist. Both have coached at national and international level and are widely respected.

The Mark's saw the merit of what was being proposed – take the best juniors from Gippsland and give them the support to become the best they can be, hopefully finding some of Australia's next champions in the process. A competitive selection process was developed to select the best of Gippsland's junior male & female clay target shooters. The selections run in skeet and DTL were the first introduction to the disciplines for some of the contenders – proving something suspected but not certain. Country kids can shoot anything given the opportunity.

Over 2 months in late 2016 they attended 4 selection events, with the best three scores to count and a countback system similar to the ISSF system to separate any tied scores. At the last of the shoots in November, six juniors in DTL and six in Skeet were named as the inaugural squad.

Several of those that missed the cut for the 2017 squad went away with a new goal – make the 2018 squad.

That brings us back to the weekend. On a very warm autumn morning in Frankston, our young aspiring athletes arrived to meet their coaches for the first time.

Frankston might seem an unusual choice of location for the first weekend, but it provided access to facilities unavailable in Gippsland. It also enabled the assistance of Greg Chan from Beretta Australia, also former coach of the Australian Olympic Team. Greg is one of Australia's leading specialists in the area of fitting shotguns. Shotgun fit is a poorly understood aspect of the sport by many shooters. Greg's ability to measure and advise on gun fit to both squad members and interested parents was invaluable. Those with adjustable stocks had a head start with adjustments able to be made immediately. Fortunately, that was most of the squad.

Several trips to the pattern board, and measurements taken to the millimetre or degree, and shooters returned to the range for the remainder of the weekend with their coaches. Parents either involved themselves or watched eagerly.

Any down time was spent watching with great interest as two Gippsland Olympians got in a last minute training session. Aislin Jones and Keith Ferguson were joined by James Bolding on the ISSF skeet ground in front of the club room for a final session before flying to the ISSF World Cup in Acapulco on Sunday morning. It was impressive to watch.

Shooting DTL for the first day with Russell were Aaron Barling (Bairnsdale), Emily Marshall (Sale), Dakota Suckling and Cooper Goodwin (Wonthaggi), Troy Grimes (Traralgon) and Cody Robertson (Orbost). Coaching started after a warm up round for Russell to get a look at his new athletes, before moving into education on foot position, stance, and hold points and even placement on the pad to minimise angles and increase probability of success.

Lauryn's charges also started with a warm up round for observation, and then moved into the technical aspects of skeet. Weight distribution, body rotation, use of arms and eyes and hold points to gain maximum advantage. In Lauryn's squad were Jack Stockdale (Korumburra), Ben Burchell and Conner Crane (Bairnsdale), Aaron McKenzie (Cowes), Jordyn Perkins (Orbost) and Mark Du Rose (Rosedale.)

Hardest of all lessons is always to start to undo learned behaviours which though may have in the past been successful, will limit the ability to develop. Shooting with one eye, generating gun movement with the arms not the body and many other "bad habits" were addressed by the coaches on both ranges.

At the conclusion of day one on Saturday, the anticipation of the morning had turned to excitement at the prospect of 5 more sessions this year, and returning for Sunday. Parents and athletes alike, impressed by the coaches, their approach and the way they communicated were looking forward to day two but were in for a treat first.

Greg Chan invited the squad back to Beretta Australia's facility in Dandenong South for a tour of the warehouse, indoor range and the display room. Speaking to parents the next day, they spoke highly of the visit, the endless questions Greg answered and many had eyed off the display cabinets in awe at the engraving and the range.

Day two saw the athletes and coaches settle into a solid day of coaching and shooting. Russell & Lauryn mixed rounds with drills and games, as they improved skills but also started to work on the mental aspect of the game. There's nothing like peer pressure to

simulate competition pressure in teenagers, and the ability to shoot well under pressure is a major part of competition.

As a bit of a taste of opportunities that may follow for some of the athletes both Russell & Lauryn gave their squad an experience at the ISSF end of the spectrum. Russell's squad moved onto the trench layout in front of the club room for a round of ISSF Trap, while Lauryn's squad moved to ground 1 for a round and a few extra targets.

The weekend concluded with a debrief and some homework from the coaches, a brief lecture on persisting with changes rather than returning to comfortable bad habits, and instruction to shoot as much competition between now and the next clinic.

The coming few months will be interesting and rewarding for GSA, coaches and athlete's alike. We will watch with interest.

Significant thank you's must be mentioned before concluding. Firstly to Frankston Australian Clay Target Club for allowing two grounds to be used on a weekend by the GSA program. Also to those such as Trent Tobias and Alex Thorp from Korumburra Gun Club who attended and assisted purely due to Korumburra's involvement and enthusiasm. Also to both Korumburra Gun Club and Bairnsdale Clay Target Club for their involvement in last year's selection days, and as the remaining coaching venues for 2017 sessions.

Alpine Country Morwell have provided the ammunition for the first several clinics and were quick to get on board last year. It is support like this that keeps the cost down for parents, and it is very much appreciated. Thanks also to Greg Chan from Beretta Australia who gave up his time in support of juniors and infused some of his knowledge and passion for shotgun sports into the group.

Lastly but certainly not least, Russell & Lauryn Mark from Go Shooting are providing a level of coaching in a junior program that we at GSA are unaware of being available at any other Regional Sports Academy. We set out to create the best program in the country. With their help we think we are well on the way.

Finally our condolences to the family of Tony Claridge, a true champion of programs to support and fund junior athletes in Gippsland. His recently found passion for shotgun sports was discovered what he felt was too late for participation, but his interest in school events and attendance at the Talent Identification Days was a source of great pleasure for him. His legacy will live on in the creation of this program having been the catalyst at the beginning. Unfortunately he passed away from serious illness just weeks before the first weekend.

For information on the program, visit [www.sportgippsland.org.au](http://www.sportgippsland.org.au)