Sisterhood of the Traveling Shotguns

A Group of Northside Women Meet Once a Month for Lunch, Conversation, and Some Good Old-Fashioned Shooting

[Written by Steve Eubanks]

It starts out like any other gathering of upscale Atlanta women. They arrive in SUVs, perfectly coiffed, fit and handsome, tasteful and appropriate, "pulled together" as the fashion conscious say, for a casual day out. As a group, they are eclectic and outgoing. There's an anesthesiologist, an attorney, a real estate broker, an investment banker, a classical musician devoted to volunteer work, a self-professed housewife, and a seminary student; they range in age from mid-thirties to "none of your business."

All are engaged in what would be considered typical coffee-klatch conversation — "How's baseball going?" "What grade is she in now?" "Don't you have one graduating from college?" "When are you going out West?" "Aren't you hosting the charity ball this year?"

Then, out of the blue, comes: "Pull!"

And: *BLAMMM!*

Followed by another equally cacophonous: *BLAMMM!*

Ears ring as white smoke drifts into the crisp sky, and the smell of sulfur and hot steel fills the air.

"Oh, great shot."

"That was a true, true pair."

"I like how that trap's set."

"You should try that one, Sue."

"Who's up?"

"Ready, gun."

And so it goes for the better part of two hours as the Annie Oakley Shooters, one of the nation's largest female shooting groups, do what they do the first Monday of every month: blast sporting clays out of the sky with the kind of dead-eye accuracy that would make their namesake proud.

Get Your Gun

Named for America's most famed woman shooter — she rode and performed with Wild Bill Hickok — "the Annies," as they've come to be known in the niche world of shotguns and sporting clays, aren't a "club" in the classic sense. There are no dues, no clubhouse, no mandatory meetings. Boiling them down to their simplest form, they are a database of 240 Atlanta women who love to shoot guns.

"We are unusual, because we have so many

women shooters," said Jane Brown, an attorney and real estate broker who lives in Buckhead and sells ranches in Jackson Hole, Wy. "The 'Dallas Divas' are a big group, which you would expect being in Texas, but I don't know of any other group that's nearly our size."

Not all of them show up the first Monday of every month, known as "Annie Mondays," but the crowds vary. An average shoot attracts about 40 Annies; tournaments boost the number much higher. According to Mary Huntz, who manages the database and is the unofficial administrator of the group: "There are no requirements or criteria, because once you get into memberships and dues and those kinds of things it enters another realm."

Lucy Millar, the most accomplished shooter in the group, said, "Instructors love women because we pay more attention. A lot of women say, 'I don't think I could shoot,' but it's just like playing tennis without the running. You're connecting with something that is moving. That's all it is. Once you understand that, then you can shoot."

The women are, in their own words, a "loose

Left to right: *Beverly Gregory, Jennifer Cosgray, Mary Huntz, Vicki Gillespie, Lucy Millar, Jane Brown*

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group that is tightly knit," a phrase as incongruous as the sight of these delightful women wielding double-barreled .12 gauges. "We were friends first, and then we became shooters," Brown said. "All of us have or do lead pretty high-powered lives, whether it's on a professional, volunteer or family basis and it's great to be a part of something that we're very dialed down about. It's tempting for all the type-A's to want to be in charge, but it's nice to have a place to be laid back."

"And we're very supportive of each other," Dr. Beverly Gregory, an Emory anesthesiologist, chimed in. "It's refreshing to be with a group that isn't waiting for you to screw up. When you're shooting you know that everyone in the group is pulling for you. You don't always get that with the guys."

The Birth of the Annies

Annie Oakley Shooters actually started as part of a men's fundraising event, and splintered off into their own niche because of the attitudinal differences men and women take to the sporting clay range. "We always tried to have a presence at Atlanta Charity Clays," Brown said, speaking of the fundraising tournament held at Burge Plantation, a hunting retreat in Mansfield, Ga. "But we were always the redheaded stepchild. So in 2004 we decided we wanted to put on a fundraising tournament ourselves. We met at the corner café and put a tournament together in about three months. That first year we had 72 shooters, and it's been a success every year since."

Even the name had a simple, organic beginning. "Sandy Morehouse [owner of Burge] came up with it," Huntz said. "When we were at Charity Clays he wrote about us as the Annie Oakleys. When we broke away and formed our own group, we stayed the Annie Oakley Shooters, but we just call ourselves the Annies."

And the women don't restrict their shooting to clays. Many hunt quail, dove and pheasant, traveling to Virginia and South Georgia, as well as South America and other exotic locales to shoot live birds, while others shoot in official sporting clay tournaments.

"People are surprised," said Jennifer Cosgray, an accomplished musician and great shot. "I was at a function having a conversation and this man asked me what I did. When I told him about my shooting he said, 'Of all the things you could have possibly said you did, that was the last thing I would have put on my list.' Then he asked if I shot a .28 gauge. I said no, that I shot a .12 gauge, and he couldn't believe it."

More and more people are beginning to believe it. Shooting ranges are becoming an increasingly popular alternative in the development world, an amenity that replaces the redundant golf, tennis, pools and playground model. Barnsley Gardens in Adairsville, for example, has sporting clays, as does Burge.

The newest player to the game is Cousins Properties and their hunt community just south of Newnan called Blalock Lakes. In addition to lakes, lots and a gated entry statement, Blalock has set aside almost 1,500 acres for hunting and shooting. The private club has a hunting lodge situated on the highest spot on the property with 60-mile views of the Pine Mountain range, and special sections for quail, turkey, dove and duck hunting, as well as a top-notch sporting clay course and a walking course where electronic eyes activate traps and send clay birds flying. It isn't exactly like a real quail hunt, but it as a close as you can get.

"We're not creating a hunting area for guys; we're creating a lifestyle alternative for families," said Blalock's project manager Dan Camp. "We know that for this to be a family place, mom and the kids have to feel more comfortable than dad. That's why we've gone the extra mile, with concrete paths and permanent

wooden stands on our clay course, and the details we put into the lodge, which are designed to make women and men feel good about it."

The Annies feel good about it this particular Monday. Brown, just back from Jackson Hole and doing her best to juggle family and professional life in Eastern and Pacific time zones, has stopped by Chick-fil-A and picked up a party platter of sandwiches, which the group devours on the back porch of the Blalock hunt club lodge.

"We try to get on the course between 8:30 and 9 a.m., and start shooting at 9:30. That way we are off the course at 11:30, and you can either grab your lunch and go if you're a mom who has kids to pick up, or you can sit and socialize for a few minutes."

At 12:30 the group breaks up until the following month when they will meet again, catch up on everything going on in their lives, and fill the skies with gunpowder and lead.

"We've been exposed through our shooting to the National Rifle Association, and there is a woman there whose job is to go around and promote women's shooting sports," Huntz said. "She has called and tried to offer her assistance, but everything she's offered, we're already doing. We shoot regularly: Annie Mondays. We always offer instruction. We shoot in tournaments, and a lot of us are members of the National Sporting Clays Association. She said, 'Wow, I can't think of anything you need.' And I said, 'No, I think we're good.'"

On that point, no one disagreed. **PN**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Interested in shooting with the Annie Oakley Shooters? Contact Mary Huntz at *mhuntz@bellsouth.net* or 404-875-6199 to join the email distribution list.

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