

~ A B O N U S S E C T I O N F O R O U R G E O R G I A R E A D E R S ~

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Columbus

THE SCRAMBLED
DOG

HOT SHOTS

Annie Oakley Shooters meet monthly, don safety glasses, and blast clay targets. —page 3



Darby Fennell (center), a medical saleswoman and shooting instructor, demonstrates proper form for the Annie Oakley Shooters, an all-women club based in the Atlanta area.



Having a Blast

Pull! These Georgia women are right on target. The Annie Oakley Shooters set their sights on sporting clays, fun, and a worthy cause. By **Joe Rada**, photography **Mary Margaret Chambliss**

Shots echo through the woods in Newnan. Dozens every minute crackle like a loudly sparking campfire on a chilly February morning. A shout of “Pull!” precedes each blast. A muffled shower of shattered clay bits hitting the leafy winter ground follows most.

It’s the monthly meeting of the Annie Oakley Shooters, an all-women shooting club. Of about 150 members in the greater Atlanta area, 40 are on hand. Grouped in fours and toting shotguns and shells, they ride in golf carts along a forest trail to a series of shooting stations.

As one foursome reaches its first stop, Betsy Morehouse, a club cofounder, makes a suggestion. “Let’s not keep score,” she says. You wouldn’t hear that said on a golf course, but for the Annies, as they call themselves, foregoing scorecards isn’t unusual. Competitive when they need to be, these marks-

women prefer to support each other’s best effort regardless of skill level.

They simply want to have fun as they blast away. They also raise tens of thousands of dollars for charity through tournaments, so in a way they hit a bull’s-eye no matter where their shots go.

Lock and Load The Annies take their name from the legendary Annie Oakley, a flamboyant sharpshooter who toured with “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West” show in the late 1800s. Her spunky attitude, as much as her marksmanship, embodies the spirit to which they aspire.

“The Annies grew out of an annual sporting clays shoot launched in 1999 to raise money for Atlanta children’s charities,” says cofounder Mary Huntz, a meeting planner. “We called it Annie Oakley Day. Only a handful of the women who signed up had



TOP: "A few years ago, none of us ever thought we'd be doing this, but now we absolutely love our shooting club," Jane Brown says. RIGHT: "Dressing the part is fun too," says Jane, styling alongside (from left) Darby Fennell, Mary Huntz, and Beverly Gregory.



LEFT: With smoke drifting from the barrel of her gun, Annie's cofounder Mary Huntz, a meeting planner, heads toward the next station. BELOW: Strutting their best boots and woolens, the Annies gather indoors for lunch after a shoot.



Mission Accomplished

The goal of the Annie Oakley Shooters is to enhance awareness and enjoyment of clay shooting for women by offering fellowship, instruction, and opportunities to pursue the sport. For information about joining the group, supporting its efforts, or participating in tournaments, e-mail Mary Huntz at annieoakleys@bellsouth.net.

ever held a gun before, but they enjoyed learning something new. In 2004, six of us put together a separate Annie Oakley Tournament to raise money for The Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit organization that conserves land for parks, community gardens, historic sites, and more. That's when the Annie Oakley Shooters really got rolling.

"Now we meet on Annie Mondays—the second Monday of each month—at one of several shooting ranges in the area," Mary continues. "We shoot for a couple of hours, have lunch, and talk about upcoming events. We build friendships, network with women from many different professions and walks of life, and improve our shooting skills. And our annual tournament has donated more than \$200,000 so far to The Trust for Public Land."

Takes All Kinds "We have doctors, lawyers, bankers, interior designers, salespeople, stay-at-home moms, and more," says cofounder Jane Brown, a real estate attorney. "It ranges from young singles

juggling new careers to retirees staying active. Some are peashooters just learning to hold a gun and others are sharpshooters who win contests. A lot of us rush off after a shoot to get back to jobs or pick up kids from school. What we all share is a love of the outdoors and an interest in shooting."

Some tried golf to network for personal or business reasons but realized a physical disadvantage playing against men. "Shooting clays is a great equalizer, so that's not a problem," Jane says. "A lot of men we know—husbands, brothers, sons, friends, business associates—hunt or shoot together. We wanted to create that connection too. Our answer is the Annies.

"We're a very loosely organized group," she continues. "No dues, officers, or executive meetings. No Web site or checking account. Mary sets our calendar, coordinates our Annie Mondays, and e-mails everyone about what's coming up. We follow hunting safety rules, of course, but we want this to be fun, and having a whole bunch of rules isn't much fun."

Earplugs In Today's outing explores Blalock Lakes, an outdoorsy residential development in Newnan that established a sporting-clays course, horse stables, and trails even before erecting houses. Shooting clays, it turns out, involves some pretty nice places.

The Annies arrive in a flurry, bundled against the chill (some wearing high leather boots and vintage-style woolen knickers, vests, and caps), and listen to a safety talk. They stuff boxes of shells into jacket pockets and shoulder Berettas, Brownings, Winchesters, and other brands of over/under shotguns. Then they board golf carts, fan out to 12 stations scattered in the woods, put in earplugs, and squeeze off about 100 rounds of ammo each in about two hours.

Terra-cotta clays fly out of mechanical launching devices on command, shots ring out, and broken shards pepper the ground. Biodegradable, they're left to decompose.

"A friend took me shooting once, and I was

hooked," says Margaret Bosbyshell, an interior designer and an Annie's cofounder. "Everyone's so supportive. If you make your shot, people cheer for you. If you don't, they still encourage you. Beginners pick up good pointers every time they come out."

"Mostly we shoot at Burge Plantation, which my husband and I own, but we try other places too," says Betsy Morehouse. "It's nice to experience a variety of challenges, and each range is a little different. I think eventually we'll try them all, just for fun."

Annie Mondays "I block off Annie Mondays on my calendar so I won't miss one," says Nancy Thomas, a communication-skills coach. "Rain or shine, hot or cold, even holidays, we shoot. I can't always stay for lunch, but I still like being outdoors with the Annies." She lifts her gun, lines up the sights, prepares for the next flying clay, and adds: "And I like hitting a few targets too." ●