

Bring on the BIG BORES

Going light and small when introducing youngsters to shooting is not necessarily the best option. Lighter guns create more recoil and smaller bores make success more elusive, argues **Thorkild Ellerbaek**.

Photography: **Tweed Media**

It is considered normal to use lightweight guns when introducing youngsters to shooting. In my opinion it is the wrong path to choose. A customised 12-bore is a much better option.

If you, as an experienced shooter, have tried to shoot clays with a .410, you will have probably realised it is not a gun that allows you to perform at

your best. It goes without saying that with only 10-14 grams of shot in a small, light load, it has no great effect, even on a clay pigeon. I know that in the UK there is a trend towards smaller bores, but I also know that everyone accepts you need to be a very good shot to downsize when shooting game.

If you give a first-time shooter a nice little .410 there will be a long

wait before he or she hits the first clay. So we actually make it more difficult and disappointing for the novice. I shoot quite well with a 12-bore, and in my work as a shooting journalist in Denmark, I shoot a great variety of shotguns. I have tried a number of lovely .410 guns but in all honesty I have had difficulty hitting a satisfactory amount of clays.



I'm not embarrassed because I can logically explain it with the small power and loads. So why give my grandsons a .410 when introducing them to shooting? I admit there is virtually no recoil, but I think this is the only advantage. In reality a .410 will make the debut more difficult.

You may be thinking: "Yes, fair point, but what about a nice little 20-bore?" But this is perhaps not the best idea either, considering the recoil. Indeed, the recoil may be even worse than with a 12-bore. So what is the right choice?

Shorten your 12-bore

The right way to give young beginners a positive introduction to shooting is to use a customised 12-bore – and most of us will probably choose an over-under. It would not be responsible to let them have a go with an adult version because it will rarely fit a young person, so you have to fit a standard gun to the boy or girl.

It's fairly easy to find a cheap secondhand over-under – remember

it need not be the best in the shop. It does not cost much to have a gunsmith alter it for the young shooter. The stock should be 33cm to 34cm in length. You should also cut the barrel length down to 25 inches. The fact it ends with two open cylinder chokes is irrelevant in this situation.

On the contrary, opening the chokes will spread the pattern and provide greater chance of success. And that is what we want: to provide young beginners with an experience of success as quickly as possible. Once you have seen your children or grandchildren with blissful smiles on their faces after hitting their first clays, you know you are on the right track.

It is also old-fashioned to ask the poor kid to shoulder the gun with instructions to hit a stationary target 20 metres away. "It's easier to hit the first time..." Maybe, but in return they get very strong recoil, which is not realistic in relation to practical shooting with a shotgun.

We all know that when firing an ordinary 12-bore to the pattern plate

or other stationary targets, we feel recoil quite violently. It may actually be like a .30-06 calibre rifle. While shooting at moving targets we do not feel the same way.

So it is important that a youngster's first shot is in a realistic situation, firing at clays. They are unlikely to smash the clays immediately, but they will get a good experience of what shooting a shotgun is about, and they will feel less recoil or maybe none at all because of the excitement.

The old tradition

Some of you may be thinking: "What about the size of the 12-bore and who is this guy telling us we are all wrong?" And I do acknowledge it is a tradition to start youngsters with small bores.

I started many years ago with a 20-bore lightweight hammergun without being damaged by it, I confess. But knowing what we do now, we can choose a more sensible approach to shooting. We should consider the facts about recoil before we give a 12-year-old a shotgun. ▶



A customised 12-bore may well be the best option for introducing youngsters to shooting. You can buy a secondhand over-under and have it modified for a small cost.

The use of making mathematical/theoretical calculations on recoil is debatable. There are several methods and some will reject them all, saying it's not about calculation but about felt recoil. I agree to an extent, but I will not rule out the calculations, which actually show that when firing a shotgun we send a certain amount of pellets through a narrow tube at varying speeds and loads/power. And as we all know, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. That is recoil in a nutshell, and it can be calculated.

Let us take the calculated recoil seriously. It is mathematical, but it is fairly simple to figure out (you can find recoil calculators on the internet). We must know the powder charge, shotload, muzzle velocity and gun weight. I want to demonstrate that when it comes to recoil, a 20-bore in some cases can be harder on the shooter than a 12-bore. I also want to point out there are a number of options in the cartridge catalogue that can make shooting much more comfortable without losing the effect when learning on clays.

Subsonic shells

A normal 12-bore, 28-gram game cartridge has a calculated recoil value of 23.4 joules with a standard gun of approximately 3.5kg (seven and a half pounds). Most of us are familiar with this type of load and gun, and it is very close to the norm.

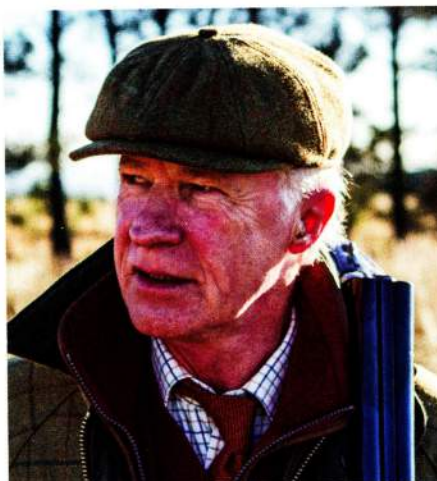
The same adult might traditionally set his son/daughter up with a small "fine little 20-bore" at just about 3kg (six and a half pounds). With a 28-gram game cartridge, this "starting gun" delivers a calculated recoil of 28.4 joules. So it will deliver more recoil. We can, of course, choose a slightly lesser cartridge and the calculated recoil settles near the standard 12-bore.

There are actually some interesting sporting cartridges for our purpose in 12-bore. The so-called Subsonics, as the name suggests, are cartridges with a significant reduction in muzzle velocity. It is down to a mere 250 meters per second, which is about half that of a normal sporting cartridge.

“In some cases a 20-bore will be harder on the shooter than a 12-bore.”

The low output speed is irrelevant when training young people, and actually also irrelevant to us. You have to be fairly good at the clays before it influences your hit rate. I have used these cartridges for a long time in my 120-year-old Westley Richards with open chokes when shooting clays. And I have no problems with pulverising the clays from the tower up to 40 metres. And I should mention that Subsonics in steel (the only choice in Denmark) can be used safely with old guns. The steel pellets are in plastic wads so the barrels won't suffer, and the low pressure and speed will not damage even Damascus barrels.

They are also quieter than normal sporting cartridges. This is a bonus if you want to shoot with the children behind the barn without upsetting the neighbours. But best of all in this context is the recoil. Or its absence. In a 12-bore Subsonic, 24 grams, gun weight at 3.3kg, we are down to a calculated recoil of nine joules – the same as a .410 gun with a 14g load.



The author is a Danish shooting journalist with years of experience as a shotgun tester.

In my own experience, my two grandchildren at 11 and 13 years (shooting a shotgun for the first time), shot 40-50 cartridges every day for two consecutive days without any complaint about recoil. We did use a specially fitted over-under with 34cm stock and 25 inch barrels, which weighed 3.3kg. With this 12-bore and these cartridges, I know they had good fun and a successful introduction, and they can't wait until next time.

What about the 20-bore?

I will not rule a 20-bore out completely as a good choice for young shooters, but it requires considerations on weight and cartridge. I remember testing a 20-bore that was presented as "the ideal gun for young or female hunters". The weight was 2.1kg and it could take 76mm hunting cartridges, which I tried. This was probably one of the most unpleasant guns I have shot with. The calculated recoil (and felt recoil) was the same as a .375 Holland & Holland rifle – and that is not a beginner's favourite. I wouldn't even shoot a round of 25 clays with that little monster.

I am sorry if I am disturbing an old tradition that has survived for generations. And I must also admit that many adults still have the perception that a 20-bore is a really nice gun to shoot with. My point is that this is something in the head, not the shoulders. Firing 100 shots of heavy game loads in a lightweight 20-bore is not my idea of a nice day out.

Lots of us started shooting with a "nice little 20-bore" and I think for many time has eliminated the memories of bruised shoulders, but for some it created an everlasting fear of recoil. The first shot with a shotgun should be an exciting and important step into a long life of pulling the trigger, and it should create a pleasant memory. We owe it to our youngsters to make it as smooth and as pleasurable as possible. The tools are right in front of us. 🦋

Do you agree or disagree? Let us know by email: will.hetherington@timeinc.com