

Lessons Learned of Hunter Education
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The Department of Natural Resources of my native Wisconsin sends all certified hunter education instructors a compiled list of statistics from the previous season's hunt. Being one of the top ten states for deer hunter participation, this makes an interesting and accurate case study. Let's go over the lessons learned from the compiled numbers and see what we can discover about trends in field shooting and safety skills of hunters.

First, the good news. Organized events, even those as rudimentary as basic hunter education, are marvelously effective at improving safety skills. In 1907, decades before hunter education was established, there were 97 reported firearm mishaps statewide of which 41 resulted in death. Total deer harvested was about 6,000.

In 2002, over five decades after the first hunter education program was established, the number of incidents was less than half that (47 total) despite a much larger hunting population taking the field: 618,945 licenses sold with 277,959 deer harvested.

According to the National Safety Council there is currently an average of seven firearm-related incidents for every 100,000 hunters in the United States. Wisconsin's 2002 rate works out to 7 : 92,184; close to the established national average.

This is yet more proof how safe shooting and hunting can be IF participants bother attending even the simplest, organized, skill-building event. Wisconsin's hunter education course is a scant 10 hours with a large number of topics in the curriculum and there is no shooting proficiency test or standard. Twelve-year olds find the coursework simple. Worst of all, no follow-on events are offered or even suggested. Yet, the difference between the most vestigial training and none is astonishing.

Hunter education instructors and administrators deserve a pat on the back. Not too hard, though, as there are still a number of embarrassing problems to iron out.

In other articles and reports I've pointed out that about a third of all hunting "accidents" are self-inflicted and half are perpetrated by a hunting party member (someone the offending hunter *knew* was there.) That means there is no acceptable excuse for at least 80 percent of the mishaps.

The 2002 statistics prove this yet again. 14 of the 47 incidents (29.78%) were self inflicted and 24 of the incidents (51.06%) involved a hunter shooting a member of his own party. These incidents can be traced to abject incompetence due to unfamiliarity.

Actual hunting experience, without continuing range experience and training, is of little help. Tim Lawhern, Wisconsin's Hunter Education Administrator, has noted in print that hunters with a number of years of hunting experience are often some of the worst offenders, not the new, inexperienced kids. The numbers bear this observation out. Nearly half of the perpetrators (22 out of 47, 46.8%) were over the age of 35 and had hunted without mishaps for years. How can this be?

A new hunter takes basic hunter education and learns rudimentary skills. The tentative newbie is cautious with the lessons fresh in his mind. Unfortunately, after this one required event most hunters do nothing to further their field shooting and handling skills beyond this kindergarten level. As the years pass with incident-free hunts, and nothing done to relearn and reinforce lessons learned, complacency sets in.

We see this with alarming frequency when adult hunters attend a field day with their kids - at least when we can get them to actually toe the line and shoot in front of the class. I've learned that the "experienced" hunter often has to be watched even closer than the kids at first.

The new student's safety procedures are just beginning to approach the Consciously Competent level. He may have to think about it first, but he knows what to do. The hunter who has neglected to reinforce these lessons too often reverts back to the Unconsciously Incompetent level, and doesn't realize how much of the little skill obtained years back at the mandatory hunter education class has been forgotten.

The most basic safety protocol violations, improper muzzle control and failing to keep fingers clear of the trigger,

have to be watched for and corrected for a few rounds before the hunter begins to remember them again. Without a semi-regular refresher, such as a class, match, or other event, too many hunters learn the hard, painful way and end up as statistics in reports like this.

I'm continually amazed and disappointed at the number of really dumb and preventable gun mishaps. Some typical examples:

- "Victim reholstered pistol after a shot with finger on trigger, shot self in thigh."
- "Victim had safety off and finger on trigger, shot self in foot."
- "Victim sat down against tree and gun discharged."

The numbers confirm the need for skill-refreshing events. Nearly two-thirds of the self-inflicted incidents (9 out of 14, 64.2 percent) involved hunter education graduates shooting themselves, and a exactly three quarters of the perpetrators who shot their hunting partner (18 out of 24, 75 percent) were graduates as well.

This is NOT a condemnation of the hunter education curriculum or instructors, rather, it is further evidence of the need to provide and promote adequate follow-on activities and sufficient participation by the majority of hunters and gun owners. As noted above, the most basic training experience makes a huge difference. It's the follow-up, getting rank-and-file gun owners and hunters to bother to show up to shoots once in a while, where we drop the ball.

In summary:

- Organized, skill building events work! The huge drop in negligence due to Hunter Education proves it.
- Follow on experience is essential or the lessons will be lost. A mandatory, one time event is not enough.
- Raw number of years spent hunting is a poor indicator of skill. Hunters sometimes wait a year (or more!) between hunts. Refreshing skills in between through organized shooting events is vital.