



Dr. Steve Holtzclaw's career as an emergency room physician helped him save a man's life at the Olympic trials. He is currently chairman of emergency medicine at Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland.

A Shot at the Olympics

Written By: Debbie Bangledorf

Steve Holtzclaw thought he had it all. Johns Hopkins-trained physician. Family man. Commercial pilot. And, now, trap shooter with a good chance of making the 2004 Summer Olympics team.

Earning an opportunity to compete would be an honor, but Steve learned a valuable lesson on his way to the trials many years ago. Saving a man's life on the shooting range is much more virtuous than winning an Olympic gold medal.

During the 1992 Olympic trials, Steve competed in the trap shooting competition in Los Angeles, California. A win meant that he would rank in the top 10 as he headed toward the finals. At age 45 with a youthful smile and boundless energy, Steve would practice every weekend in preparation for this important event, even through his medical residency at Johns Hopkins. Securing a top spot would be the ultimate payoff for his 30 years in competitions. He did all of this on his own, without professional coaching or financial backing.

On a hot summer day that July, Steve's luck took a sharp turn. It was a curve that not only challenged his skill, but his patience and stamina. As the trial began, Steve proceeded to the trenches with his group of four. Each man walked into a shooting station. Out of five stations, Steve was at the first one, so he entered last. As fate would have it, this position proved to be vital moments later.



With his good-luck vest, glasses, and customized shotgun, Steve is ready to head outdoors for trap shooting practice.

As he prepared to greet the clay saucer in the air, Steve heard loud chatter from a crowd in a nearby field. They were all trying to help a man who was lying on the ground. "The official was ready to yell 'pull,' which would send my target airborne," Steve said. "But all I could see and think about was that man lying motionless." Steve shouted "stop" to the official and laid his shotgun on the ground. He removed his glasses and ran over to the field. He saw an old man, who was as white as a ghost and sweating profusely. "I told him that I was a doctor. He told me his name was Albert," said Steve. "I took his pulse, which was weak. And, his blood pressure was low, which meant he was probably bleeding internally."

Steve continued his medical assessment and told Albert that he needed to go to the hospital. Albert refused. "I'm 82 years old, and if this is

my time to go, I'm ready," he said in a faint, yet stubborn voice. With all of his medical training, Steve couldn't let Albert just lay there and die, so he started negotiating with his patient. "Would you go to the hospital if I took you there myself?" asked Steve. "Alright," said Albert. "As long as you stay with me."

Volunteers helped Steve put the old man into a rented blue Chevy Astro. With his headlights flashing, he drove Albert to a hospital. The emergency medicine physician on duty confirmed Steve's diagnosis that the old man had internal bleeding. When the hospital registrar asked about Albert's next of kin, Steve responded. "He's here alone. I guess I'm his family right now."

Steve stayed with Albert until he was taken for emergency surgery. Since the old man needed dozens of transfusions that would deplete the hospital's supply,

Steve took an hour and donated blood. He visited with Albert briefly after surgery and left the hospital to return to the trials.

Sibling Rivalry Pays Off

Twelve-year-old Steve Holtzclaw landed on the shooting range with his older brother, Scott. Since both of their parents worked, 16-year-old Scott babysat his younger brother every day after school. Most days, Scott was annoyed that his little brother had to tag along. At his father's suggestion, Scott started teaching Steve how to handle a rifle. "Soon after I started shooting, I would score better than Scott and win nickel bets," said Steve. "He always beats me at other sports, but I found one where I win every time." Not only was Steve earning some pocket change, he was developing strong hand-eye coordination that would prove invaluable later in life.

Steve went to a New Jersey high school in the late 1970s, where there was a rifle range in the basement for the shooting team. He practiced every day after school, under the direction of his physical education teacher. Steve did so well in rifle shooting that, during his senior year, he was asked to compete in the State Championships. He accepted the invitation and won, beating out 30 other competitors.

After graduation, Steve went to Mercer Community College where he refined his sport – still without a coach. His determination paid off when he won the Junior College National Championships three times. In 1984, Steve was invited to the Olympic rifle shooting trials in Los Angeles. About 120 men were in the competition, but only the top three scorers would make the team. "Although I shot well, my scores fell in the middle of the pack," he said. "These trials are a good experience, though, because we're able to shoot in the Olympic stadium using the actual equipment and under the same conditions as it would be at the official Olympic Games."

A Turning Point

Steve challenged himself by changing his sport from rifle to trap shooting. Instead of carrying heavy bullets in his pocket and aiming at a fixed target, he would be carrying lighter pellets and aiming at a saucer-shaped clay target being propelled from an underground bunker. Speeds for these targets can reach 60 to 70 miles an hour.

His instincts paid off. In his senior year at Rutgers College, Steve competed in the Collegiate National Championships. He earned first place, beating out 100

competitors. This win earned him a spot on the U.S. national team. While at college, Steve decided he wanted to become a doctor and specialize in emergency medicine. He was accepted into medical school at the University of Maryland in Baltimore. While in medical school, Steve was supposed to take time off and travel with the U.S. team. For the first time, his career path conflicted with his love of the sport. "I was a medical student, working and studying about 80 hours a week," he said. "I really wanted to go with the

team, but I couldn't leave school. I was really disappointed, however, I knew that shooting was a hobby and what I'm doing now will lead to a career."

Returning to the Trials

By the time Steve returned to the trap shooting trials in Los Angeles, he had missed two rounds. The officials saw Steve caring for Albert and knew about his heroic deed. "The officials said I could file a protest, as long as it was approved by the Olympic Committee," said Steve. The Committee approved



Step By Step

"In a typical trap shooting competition, we move through long, concrete trenches called bunkers, which are usually divided into five adjoining stations. One of us stands in each station. When the officials yell 'pull,' a four-inch clay disk is launched from one of the 15 underground machines. Each machine is set at a different angle, so we see disks launched from 45 degrees left to 45 degrees

right. They're randomly propelled at speeds of 65 miles an hour and at a distance of more than 70 meters. Hand-eye coordination is crucial in this sport.

If I'm at the first station, here's how it goes: I have my glasses on so I can only see what's ahead. I mount the 12-gauge shotgun on my shoulder and wait to hear 'pull.' In a matter of a second, I see an orange flash coming in front of me.

More than 500 shotgun pellets are stored in each ammunition casing.

I lock my eye on it. When it changes from a streak to a blur, I pull the trigger. Hopefully, I hit the clay target.

Ninety percent of the time you know if you've hit the disk. If you shoot off a piece of the target, you earn one point. It doesn't matter whether you chip the target or break it into a smokepile – you only get a point.

I shoot and then wait for each of the other men in my group to have their turn. When the last one finishes, we rotate to the next station. This movement continues until each of us has shot 25 times. Then, we rest while other groups compete. When it's our turn again, we shoot three more rounds with a break in between. The first two days we shoot 200 targets; the last day we shoot 50. The three-day total is 250 targets.

Judges combine this score with the one from last November. The top two contenders will go to the Summer Olympic Games in Athens, Greece in 2004." ■

Getting In Gear



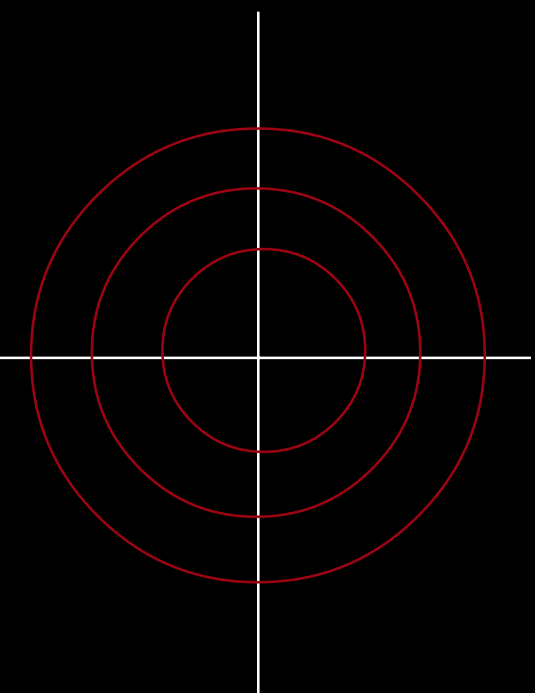
Steve prepares to shoot during trap shooting practice.



What attire and equipment does an Olympic trap shooting hopeful need to succeed? Visual acuity plays an important role in trap shooting competitions, so players wear glasses that are comparable to blinders that horses wear at the racetrack. Steve Holtzclaw says that they protect against the wind and help competitors avoid distraction. “When you see something out of the corner of your eye, you tend to pull the trigger because you believe they’re tossing out a clay target,” he says. “I have the attention span of a gnat, so these glasses really help me focus.”

Steve says his lucky, yet tattered, blue nylon vest is invaluable for a number of reasons. First, the lightweight vest doesn’t hold water during inclement weather. And, it has lots of pockets for supplies. “This vest gets me focused on my game. The pockets hold plenty of ammunition, extra triggers and firing pins,” he says. “In trap shooting, triggers and firing pins snap. When that happens, you begin to sweat. You have to stop, unload the broken firing pins, reload new triggers and pins and continue to fire. The judges only give you three minutes, and that time just zips by.”

And, finally, the gun gives competitors an edge. Steve’s gun is more than just wood and metal. His customized shotgun is sleek and smooth – not like a gun used for crime. It uses a cup with tiny pellets no larger than a pinhead, which is very different from a rifle’s large, cumbersome bullets. Steve purchased his Italian Perazzi MX8 in 1994 for about \$8,000. Creating the right size and weight of a shotgun is crucial. “It’s like buying a suit,” he says. “If a barrel’s too heavy, you’ll move too slow, and if it’s too light, the gun moves too much.” Comfort also plays a major role. “The gun needs to fit on your shoulder without rubbing your face,” he says. “You can get a pretty mean rash if the gun isn’t secure on your shoulder.” ■



the request, and Steve was able to make up the rounds. The hot, steamy temperatures from earlier in the summer day were gone; however, the weather had turned windy. “By the time I was ready to shoot, I lost my edge,” said Steve. “Even though I tried

using my usual strategy – talking to myself – I was anxious and tired.” His self-coaching failed, and Steve ranked about 30th in a group of 60. “I have no regrets about leaving. I really believe that saving Albert’s life wasn’t the reason I lost in the trials.”

which is where I’ll never be due to my career and family.”

Even though he didn’t make the Olympic team, Steve says he has no regrets. With a wife and two children, plus being chairman of emergency medicine at Good Samaritan Hospital in Baltimore, he says his life is complete. “My family is my top priority right now, in addition to my medical career,” he says. “The next competition I hope to be in will be with my son, Daniel. He’s five now, but wait until he’s 10 or 11 – I’ll unpack my gun and show him how to handle a gun, just like my brother did with me. Maybe he’ll be a future Olympic trap shooter!” ■

Olympics vs. Family

Last fall, Steve traveled to Colorado Springs for the first part of the 2004 Olympic trials. He shot well, earning a place in the finals. This past March, Steve went to Columbus, Georgia, with hopes of becoming one of the two contenders who will head to the Summer Olympics in Athens. Out of 60 men, Steve came in 29th place. “The judges review the scores from last fall and combine them with these new scores,” said Steve. “The two guys that won [Brett Erickson and Lance Bade] practice every day and are professionals,



He displays his vest and official number during the fall trials.

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