

A man, Chris Maest, is standing in a gun shop, holding a large shotgun. He is wearing a dark blue polo shirt with "Chris" and "Clay Target Sports" embroidered on it. Behind him are wooden shelves filled with various shotguns and a mounted deer head.

NICK SISLEY TALKS WITH CHRIS MAEST OF CLAY TARGET SPORTS

Chris Maest has turned 50 years old and recalls how, at the tender age of 10, he started trailing after his father on small game hunts. "This went on for a couple of years," says Chris, "until one Christmas morning I was given my first gun – a Harrington and Richardson thumb-back hammer single shot 12 gauge. I had more success with that one-shot H&R than I did with my next shotgun – either a side-by-side or a semi-auto, I can't remember which!"

Within a short time his shotgunning prowess significantly improved. Right out of High School he entered the Colorado School of Trades where he studied gunsmithing. He graduated in 1980, had jobs with two different gun shops, and then, as Chris says, "Krieghoff discovered me."

He spent 10 years as Service Manager at Krieghoff International and was the first American gunsmith Dieter Krieghoff ever hired – previous gunsmiths had come from the factory in Germany. After completing service training at the factory in Ulm, Germany, Chris received a Krieghoff diploma. He ended up traveling to Ulm a total of three times for

ONE ON ONE

additional training. But primarily in those years – through 1994 – he worked for Dieter in Ottsville (PA) – home of Krieghoff International.

He went on his own in 1995 – creating Clay Target Sports – so this is his 16th year of being a Krieghoff dealer, as well as being involved for 30 years in the business. This year the company took on the Blaser shotgun line. As the name – Clay Target Sports – implies, they sell more competitive shotguns than hunting guns. In 2006 they sold the Krieghoff Gun of the Year – a Hubertus – an unbelievably engraved and adorned single-shot rifle.

Service and Support

As much as gun sales are important to this company, service is equally as important. Many customers say the best part of dealing with this shop is the service up front and the after-sales support. “I’ve found that superior service is what customers want,” is the way this New Jersey shop owner put it to me. “We do most all the service in-house – the majority of which is gun fitting and the alterations that come with it. We also do annual services, factory release triggers, barrel and wood fitting, trigger work, stock

alterations and refinishing, adjustable combs, stock bending, recoil pad changing and even complete restocking.”

Clay Target Sports specializes in high-grade wood, but Chris told me that fine walnut is getting more and more difficult to find – as well as becoming more and more expensive. Still, he has a good supply and is always looking for more. Wherever he can find good wood he buys it – whether the walnut is from California, England, Turkey or elsewhere.

“One of the services we offer that sets us apart from some other gun dealers is we have the experience to properly fit the gun to the shooter,” says Chris. He offers a free gun fitting with every new gun purchased – and alterations of the stock are included in the new gun sale. Further, upgraded wood is also included with new K-80 and K-20 sales. Why? “Europeans don’t go goo-goo over a sparkling piece of walnut – they just want the stock to be serviceable and to last as long as the gun itself. But my customers, and most all American shotgunners, love their walnut,” says Chris. “They want burl and striping, cake and curl – that’s why I want to put a nice piece of walnut

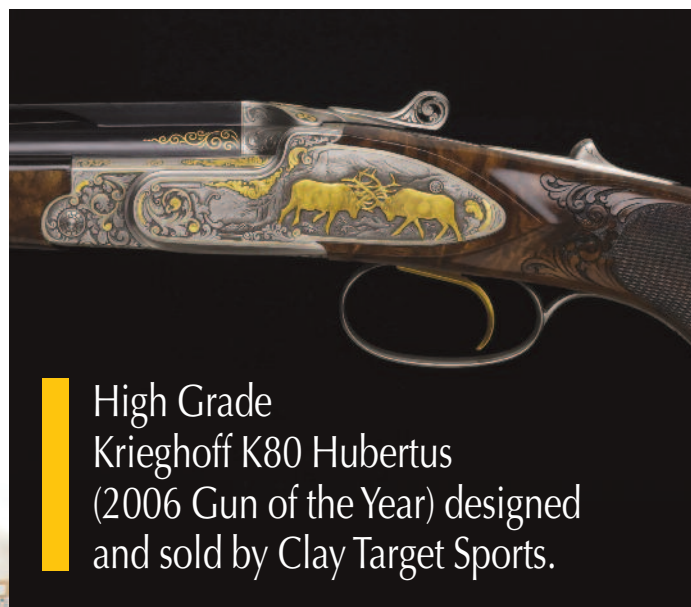
on every new Krieghoff that goes out the door.” Whenever possible, Chris likes to work by appointment. A gun sale appointment consists of having a stock properly fit, choosing the wood that appeals most and going over gun maintenance. It’s not uncommon for a person buying a shotgun to be at Clay Target Sports for four hours!

The Future

What about the future at Clay Target Sports? “We won’t be expanding, but we are always improving,” says Chris. “We added the Blaser line this year.

Customers were looking for a quality gun in that price range, and we think Blaser fits that niche well.” By limiting the number of shotgun brands he sells, Chris feels he is increasing the firm’s expertise, customer service and customer support.

Clay Target Sports has been one of the top Krieghoff dealers for 10 years, with sales ranging from standard grade to many different custom grades. The 2011 Krieghoff Gun of the Year will be the second designed by Clay Target Sports – the Neptune Primus M. Obviously, these are much treasured guns, with extensive and exquisite engraving



High Grade
Krieghoff K80 Hubertus
(2006 Gun of the Year) designed
and sold by Clay Target Sports.



RIGHT: CHRIS MAEST INDIVIDUALLY FITS EVERY TARGET GUN THAT HE SELLS.



done by masters who invest untold numbers of hours in their work.

I asked Chris about the K-20 and that model’s sales. “The K-20 is sort of a baby K-80,” he explained. “Initially our customers consider and fulfill their 12 gauge needs, buying a trap, sporting clays or skeet gun. Most of our K-20 sales are to customers who already own a K-80, or those who want to take the K-20 to South America for high volume dove shooting – in its element for that



type of shooting. Also very popular in K-20 sales are three barrel sets (20, 28 and .410) or two barrel sets. As with K-80 sales, some K-20 sales occur when a customer wants to trade in his standard receiver for an upgrade – like a Super Scroll or higher grade.”

I always knew that the K-80 was named for the year it was introduced (1980), but I always figured the K-20 was so named because it was basically a 20 gauge although 28 and .410 barrel sets are available. However, Chris straightened me out on that one. The K-20 model designation is for its year of introduction – the year 2000.

Used gun sales have always been a big factor in the bottom line at Clay Target Sports, and Chris has no reservations about predicting that this will continue in years to come. “We have a good used gun selection all the time. For one thing, I’ve already talked about how our customers like to upgrade. For another reason, customers come in wanting to buy a new gun – and they have one for trade. Your readers should check our website if they’re interested in good used competition shotguns. There’s always a good selection, plus that selection is constantly changing. Many of our pre-owned guns are K-80s, but not all. Many of those have only been shot a year or two – which is when a customer often comes in and trades up to a higher grade model,” explains Chris.



“We do a lot of Krieghoff model 32 upgrading,” he advised. Most all K-80 parts can be retrofitted to a model 32 Krieghoff (which are those made from the late 1950s through to 1980 – when that model was replaced with the K-80). “Some of the upgrading we do with model 32s would be restocking with K-80 wood, replacing triggers with K-80 adjustable triggers, replacing model 32 barrels with

K-80 barrels, plus most all internal parts in the 32 can be replaced with more modern and upgraded K-80 parts.”

Every year Chris likes to attend about 12 major clay target shoots. He doesn’t always attend the same shoots every year, feeling that mixing up the events he does attend helps spread the message all the more. Generally, he attends four trap shoots, four sporting clays shoots and four skeet shoots.



High Ribs

What about high rib guns like the K-80 Pro Sporter? “There’s a lot of current interest in the high rib guns. Will they be a passing fancy, or will they enjoy a stable foot hold? I think it’s the latter,” Chris predicted. “There’s a lot to be positively said for shooting with an erect head position – which is done so naturally with the K-80 Pro-Sporter. Also, one of the main reasons for missing targets has to be head lifting, and these high ribs, all of which come with adjustable stocks that can be set high, guard against head lifting,” explains Chris. “Then there’s the improved visibility factor. The barrels are out of the way, so not only is the first sporting clays target easy to see, the second target in doubles is also easy to see. Finally, a high, adjustable rib, in conjunction with the adjustable comb stock, allows the shooter a near endless variety of options with regard to point of impact and what the shooter likes to see looking down the rib.”

Barrel lengths of 32" (for sporting clays) and 30" (for skeet) are now the norm, with Chris confirming that 34" barrels for sporting clays are not now so popular – sales are running out of steam and Krieghoff doesn’t even offer 34" barrels anymore. “Those that do shoot 34" barrels like the longer sighting plane feature – but I

Clay Target Sports always has a wide array of competition shotguns for customers to peruse – both new and used.

Getting It Right

During our discussions Chris explains: "No one can be properly fitted to a shotgun until that person has first learned to mount the gun both correctly and consistently. That's why a gun sale appointment consists of first sitting down to determine what the primary use of the shotgun will be. Then the right dimension of wood is selected for proper fit, best sight picture and point of impact (POI). Next we determined if any stock alterations need to be made to further enhance the fit, i.e. comfort and ease of consistent gun mount. It may be a time consuming process, but buying a quality shotgun is a big investment and worth the time to ensure it's fit for purpose and a lifetime of enjoyment."

just don't see it. If a shooter has full concentration on the target, he or she shouldn't even see the barrel."

That said, Chris told me that about 50 percent of his sales are now sporting clays guns, 25 percent skeet guns and 25 percent trap guns. ■



CLAY TARGET SPORTS VARIES THE BIG EVENTS IT ATTENDS EACH YEAR, BUT CHRIS MAEST TRIES TO ATTEND FOUR SPORTING CLAYS SHOOT, FOUR TRAP SHOOT AND FOUR SKEET SHOOT EACH YEAR.

To contact Clay Target Sports call 609-921-9358 or on the web at www.claytargetsports.com Nick Sisley can be contacted at nicksisley@hotmail.com He has been a full time writer for over 40 years and has over 90,000 registered targets to his name. He is a Level I NSCA and NSSA Certified Instructor.