

Anything She Sets Her Mind To

By Holly Santman



When you drive out to the Ben Avery Clay Target Center on a Sunday evening, you will see all the usual suspects. Retired men killing time and young boys just learning how to shoot.

But at the far end of the fields, you'll find something different.

You'll find a high school shooting team.

An all-girls high school shooting team.

The Xavier Hotshots, as they're known around school, began in 2012 as a club and became a varsity sport in 2017. They come out almost every Sunday evening to practice. The team shoots three events: trap, skeet and sporting clays.

While each event is different, they all have the same goal. Shoot the neon-orange clay targets out of the air and hit as many as you possibly can.

“(Sporting clays) is basically like golf and bird hunting but mixed with clay targets,” senior London Wood said. “So, you're walking through a course and then you shoot. It sometimes goes

up really high, just like crazy shots, trick shots almost. One even goes down to the ground. It's called a rabbit, it's super fun. It's my favorite shot."

Wood is a captain on the Hotshots, but she didn't expect to be there when she started. Like many other girls on the team, she didn't really want to join the team at first.

"My dad really wanted me to try the sport and I was super reluctant at first, but I ended up really loving it," Wood said.

"It's one of the more controversial sports, but at orientation for my freshman year the girl next to me said something about it and my parents overheard her and were like, 'You're doing that,'" sophomore shooter Jasmine Ogden said. "I really didn't want to. I was very opposed at first...but shooting is my favorite thing now, so it worked out."

During the 2020-21 school year, there were 13 girls on the team. The Hotshots are now comprised of 22 shooters, including 14 freshmen.

Most of them had never picked up a shotgun before joining the team. Even the head coach fell into the team accidentally.

"(A parent) wanted me to run the team," coach Brian Trapp said. "We had a sit-down with Sister Lynn, who is the athletic director at Xavier, and (the parent) was telling Sister Lynn and she said, 'Oh, by the way, here's your head coach.' Excuse me?"

Trapp said he enjoys coaching the team and working with the girls because they are so eager to learn.

"I have no idea how I'm going to get out of it because I'm not getting any younger," he said. "But I'm enjoying the heck out of it because it's so rewarding to watch these young ladies."

Unlike more traditional sports where height, speed and build often make or break an athlete's success, this is a sport most people can excel at with a little practice. There's no specific body type or skill level necessary.

"The neat thing about this sport is you don't have to be fast," Trapp said. "You don't have to jump high. There's no special requirements other than your ability to listen and learn and to work hard."

This also means the learning curve is different for everyone.

"I had a really unique experience," Wood said. "I started (shooting) right-handed but then I realized I was not doing as well. They tested my eye-dominance and I'm left-eye dominant, so I had to switch my hands. Otherwise, I would have to wear a patch over (my) eye."

The Hotshots team falls under a group called Scholastic Clay Target Program (SCTP), a shooting organization for competitive youth shooters. Under SCTP, kids can start shooting at the age of nine, but most Xavier girls don't start until their first year in high school.

In short, they need to get better, faster if they want to keep up with everyone else on the field.

So far, they've been successful. They took home two trophies from nationals last year in Ohio, now proudly displayed at Xavier.

One draw of the sport is equality. In competitive shooting, men and women are scored exactly the same.

"It's one of the only sports where you can score without having to actually look at the gender of the person," Wood said. "So, I could be shooting next to a 60-year-old man and our scores could be the same, or completely different depending on how we do."

Scores are based solely on how well the athletes shoot, both individually and as a team. The Xavier team has used this to their advantage, often surprising many of the boys they shoot against.

"Name me another sport where women can compete at the same level as a man," Trapp said. "There isn't one. These kids, these girls compete against the boys. And a lot of times they kick the boys' butts, which is a good thing."

Competitive shooting, like many other sports, is overwhelmingly male-dominated, which brings its own set of challenges.

"I've been to a lot of tournaments and competitions and we're the only girls there a lot of the time," Ogden said. "It's just like a bunch of boys and us and it's kind of hard to be a girl in a male-dominated sport just because the boys that you shoot with can be kind of mean sometimes."

"At nationals everyone was like 'Oh my gosh, you're an all-girls team,'" junior Lily Nelles said. "Like yeah, but just because we're all girls, doesn't mean we're any less good than other teams, so I just need people to realize that."

The girls on the team said shooting gives them a sense of confidence, lifelong friends of all ages and shows them that they can do anything they set their minds to.

"It definitely shows me that a woman can be anything she wants to be in any sport," Nelles said. "It definitely shows that there's no boundaries for us and just because we're girls doesn't mean we can't play sports like boys do."