

I Never Intended to Collect Target Balls

By Mike O'Malley

Just as the journey was about to end, right before the moment of it never happened, Alex Kerr reached into the memory hole and snatched the target ball.

Mr. Kerr was the Godfather of target ball collectors. The target ball collection of Alex Kerr would remove the target ball from the shadows of lost history. It would set in motion the renaissance of target ball collecting. A champion shooter himself, he allowed the world to rediscover the important role the target ball played in the history of shooting. To understand how the target ball came to impact this history we will explore a shooting sport older than our country.

On July 4, 1776 the wording of the Declaration of Independence was approved by the continental congress. It was a formal document explaining why the members of congress had voted to declare independence from Great Britain. Eight days earlier on the Uxbridge Road near a town called Ealing, located in England, a club was founded. This club was the birth of what would become the most popular shooting sport in the United States of America. The Old Hats Club founded on June 26, 1776 was the first known trapshooting club. The sport of trapshooting began in England. The rules and handicap system of trapshooting were developed and refined in England.

Trapshooting derived its name from the practice of releasing birds from traps and keeping score on how many were shot and killed within a certain boundary. The pigeon became the preferred bird of trap shooters. The Blue Rock pigeon was considered the finest because of its wild and er-

become the first successful inanimate target used in trapshooting. Its time in the history of trapshooting had arrived. Glass target balls were introduced into the United States in 1866 by Charles Portlock of Boston. At first they were thrown by hand or very primitive launching devices. They



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ratic flight. The first written record of trapshooting in the United States was in 1831. It took place at the Cincinnati Gun Club. It is thought that passenger pigeons were used.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century animal rights groups, with the help of major newspapers, initiated campaigns against the use of live birds in trapshooting. Many could see the writing on the wall. The sport of Trapshooting would soon need a new target. The glass target ball would

offered little challenge to trap shooters used to the speed and erratic flight of live pigeons.

This would change in 1877 with the first successful glass ball trap invented by A.H. Bogardus. The glass ball could now be thrown at greater speed and distance. With the Bogardus trap and the many ball traps that followed, the glass target ball would now find acceptance in trap clubs. Glass Ball tournaments would now be incorporated into trapshooting competition.

The time of the target ball was short lived. In 1880 a new target was invented. George Ligowsky had a better idea. With his invention of the terra cotta clay target in 1880 the target ball would soon become a thing of the past. The Ligowsky clay target and the explosion of inanimate targets that came after it would eventually make the target ball a collector's item.

If you listen carefully you will hear echoes of the past reverberating in today's sport of trapshooting. To this day you will hear people refer to



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the modern composite target as a Clay Pigeon or Blue Rock.

The last Grand American Handicap of live birds was held in 1902 in Kansas City, Missouri at Elliott's shooting park. The park was known as Blue River Park because of its proximity to the Blue River. The Grand American Handicap of 1903 and all Grand American Handicaps since have used the inanimate composite target.

The target ball was used in exhibition shooting and Wild West shows into the early part of the twentieth century. It played a major role in the careers of many great historical shooters and showmen. I would encourage anyone to explore the rich and colorful history of the target ball. Become a target ball collector. It is not difficult.

I never intended to collect target balls. I had no desire to collect target balls. Trapshooting was my hobby. I bought my first target ball at the Grand American in 1989. I only wanted an example of trapshooting history. Sixteen years later my son Sean told me that he had seen a target ball like mine on eBay. "What is eBay?" I asked. Sean explained that it is an auction you can follow and participate in on a computer.

I owned a computer. My wife and granddaughter used it quite often. I considered the computer to be frightening, confusing and therefore a waste of time. I was taught to turn on a computer and bought my second target ball on eBay. Soon I had three then four. It was sometime around target ball four and thinking of target ball five that the light came on. I had no idea what I was doing. I had less than a clue of how to do it. Education was needed and needed fast. In an effort to gain knowledge I decided I would carefully study the many descriptions used by the sellers of target balls on eBay. Please do not let your children try this at home. It has been known to cause severe mental disorders in lab rats. On eBay I would read about pontil marks and vertical and horizontal maker marks on target balls. It was on eBay I mistakenly learned that the jagged edge on the neck of a target ball was not a manufacturing defect. It was a pontil mark caused when the pontil is removed from the ball.

Please folks, no letters to the editor about this idiot talking about pontil marks on a target ball. There are none.

I soon realized my eBay professors were not in agreement on the definition of pontil and maker marks.

There was no excuse for my ignorance. I had been taught better. As a young man I received a sound piece of advice from my father. He explained to me it was a terrible waste of time seeking help from someone who was not successful in the field I sought advice in. For example, never ask anyone how to make money that doesn't have any. I had passed this valuable information on to my son, Sean. He was smart enough to utilize it. Sean contacted through eBay not the sellers of target balls, but two buyers of high end target balls. Shortly thereafter two well known target ball collectors contacted us. They were trying to keep us from making a horrible mistake on an item we were bidding on eBay. All four of these men and many like them con-

tinue to be a valuable resource to us.

Glass target balls were hand blown into molds. The most common molds are the two piece and three piece molds. The vertical and horizontal maker marks described on eBay are mold lines. The vast majority of glass target balls have the jagged edge on the neck where separation from the blowpipe occurred. Target balls were made to be destroyed. With few exceptions little care was given to the finish of the neck. Yes, the blowpipe can be used as a pontil. In the case of the target ball the blowpipe is used only as a blowpipe. This information I learned from experienced collectors.

I told you it was not difficult. You just need to talk to the right people.

It is never too late to start collecting target balls. I started late in life. I knew less about target balls than you do if you are still reading this article. I could not even turn on a computer to "Google" target balls. Target balls have opened doors for me that I never dreamed I would walk through. They have introduced me to many wonderful people and have given me years of enjoyment. If you think you might be interested in the hobby of target ball collecting or would just like to know more about target balls, check out the website glasstargetballs.com.

Perhaps you think collecting target balls is out of the question. If so, I would like to leave you with a quote.

Michael Parkington a well known collector of British glass passed away in 1994. He left behind a quote any collector can appreciate. "One is an example, two is a mistake, three is a collection."

I never intended to collect target balls. I had no desire to collect target balls. Be careful out there.

If you have questions or interest in target balls, please contact me.

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THE FIRST KNOWN ILLUSTRATION OF TRAPSHOOTING THE SPORTING MAGAZINE 1793