

ONE ON

NICK SISLEY TALKS WITH JOEL ETCHEN

ONE



Joel Etchen was born in Sun Valley, Idaho. Scion to a family of some of the world's best shotgunners, his grandfather Fred taught shooting skills in Sun Valley during the summer months and then migrated to Miami to teach in the winter. There he had his own club – The Etchen Shooting Club. That club is long gone – the land no doubt gobbled up by land developers in the Miami area years ago.

Fred had to be one of the first to teach shotgunning skills in this country, although when he was teaching in the late 1920s and beyond, shotgun instruction already had a head start in England. An

Olympic Champion, Fred won a bronze medal in Trap in 1924 and was part of the team that won the Trap gold for the USA that year. He even wrote a book about improving one's shotgun skills – *“Common Sense Shotgunning.”* It was successful enough to have been reprinted, but more about that later.

THEN THERE WAS RUDY

Fred's son Rudy took up where Fred left off. Born in rural Kansas,

Rudy had a shotgun in his hands at a very early age. Once he had the local rabbit and bird populations well thinned, he was introduced to clay target sports. These days, practically every trap shooter is aware of his name. A Trap Hall of Fame early inductee, Rudy started in competition with a Model 31 Remington pump gun. He shot it plenty, and successfully, but in 1950 he began to shoot the then new Remington pump gun – the model 870. It was obviously an easy transition from one pump gun to the another, becoming the first trap shooter to ever shoot 100 straight with a pump gun in Doubles.

That 870 and Rudy became fast friends and his name kept attracting more and more accolades. He was also an excellent skeet shooter. In the field he was well known for his prowess on ducks especially, but other game as well. It was he who re-wrote his father's original shotgunning book, changing the title to *“How to be an Expert in Shotgun Shooting.”*

Joel Etchen is one of Rudy's sons, so came by his knowledge of shotguns and his ability to use them honestly. He started selling shotguns part time in 1990 in Latrobe (PA), but once he felt confident he could make a living selling shotguns, he bought a building near Ligonier, (PA) and remodeled it extensively. He has been eminently successful in the gun business – and though he sells other brands of guns, Joel specializes in selling the Beretta line.

Such has been his success that he has been their top independent Beretta dealer every year since 1997 – quite a record.

EARLY DAYS

Joel started shooting as a youngster but then took a shotgun hiatus due to the usual pressures – getting married, raising a family, working hard and getting his business started. In the 1980s he started shooting somewhat seriously once more. Currently he shoots 10,000 trap targets annually. He's been a member of the Pennsylvania State Trap Team for 18 years – another impressive record. Both Joel and Rudy are in the Pennsylvania Trap Shooting Hall of Fame. Joel has won the Pennsylvania Trap Doubles Championship twice, while Rudy has won that same title three times. To date, Joel has accumulated approximately 40 important State trophies. In 1992, at the Grand American, Rudy and Joel won the Father/Son Championship, a feat they had been trying to accomplish for several years. But 399s kept them out of that winner's circle. Many probably feel Joel had the 199s – but it wasn't him.

The year Joel closed his gun shop in Latrobe and moved to Ligonier, his business tripled – obviously the move was a good financial decision. By 2003, despite 9-11 two years previous, his

company had tripled their sales again – despite the sign out in front of his current location saying nothing about guns!

Teaming up with Beretta when he did in the mid 1990s was also a solid financial decision. Beretta's growth during those years was huge, what with outstanding designs to their over and unders and their semi-autos. But Joel took his own Beretta sales to a new level – creating several one-of-a-kind Beretta over and under Combos.

POPULAR COMBOS

His first Combo was with a 686 Silver Perdiz in 1998 – a 20 gauge receiver with a set of 20 gauge barrels and a set of 28 gauge barrels – both 28-inches (Beretta offered the same Combo but with 28 and 26-inch barrels). Seeing that shotgunners, especially sporting shooters, were moving to longer barrels, Joel eventually offered a special Combo with 30-inch tubes – yet another good decision.

As those first runs of Combo guns was ending, Etchen Guns came out with another special Combo, this one another 20/28 but a high grade 687 EELL receiver with special wood – as well as those 30-inch barrels. Not long after that, Joel met with Beretta's Carlo Ferlito and Beretta USA General Manager, Christopher Merritt. They wanted to set him up with his own run of

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special guns. That's when his special Combo guns started coming with their own unique Etchen serial numbers, with JEG logo and better wood. Joel is still selling these guns that are now made under a special agreement with Beretta.

Of special note to our readership is their 687 Trap Silver Pigeon II Combo – which is offered in both a top single Combo and an unsingle Combo – obviously, all these trap guns are unique to the Joel Etchen Company. "Word of mouth has been huge with regard to our success," Joel told me. "Of course, it didn't hurt that my father and grandfather were outstanding shotgunners." While name recognition has been important to the Joel Etchen Company success, there's no question as to the contribution Joel has made to the business.

COMMITTED STAFF

Mark Shimchick is the wood smith that works right in Joel's building – another good decision to have him on hand. A specialist in creating adjustable combs out of existing traditional combs, his work in this area is excellent. If a customer wants an adjustable comb put on a new gun or an existing gun, Mark can do it – very well and very fast. Mark is also a gun fitter (and a top trap shooter in his own right), appreciated by customers buying new guns that don't quite fit – but



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not for long. Some customers want their trap guns fitted with special butt plates – it's always expertly and efficiently done.

Joel's nephew, Matt Smith, is the chief shotgun salesman at the shop. Joel says many of their customers now know Matt better than they know him – he's been there for many years.

CURRENT MARKET

What does Joel think of the state of trap shooting in today's market? His opinion is that the bigger clubs are doing just fine, while some smaller clubs and many of the smaller shoots are struggling in this down economy. "I think the state of health with regard to sporting and trap is fairly good, especially from the standpoint of my business. My typical customer is 50 – 75 years old. These guys (and gals) are going to shoot no matter what. I just sold a new Beretta to a guy who was 89 years young!" Etchen smiled. He's currently not seen a significant down turn in his business – not true for most of today's gun shops.

However, selling guns to mainly 50 – 75 year old folk does not bode well for the future of gun sales nationwide. But Joel is optimistic about the Scholastic Clay Target Program (SCTP), recently spun off by the National Shooting Sports Foundation to the Scholastic Shooting Sports Foundation (SSSF). Further, the Amateur Trap Association has started its own youth program - Academic Integrity Marksmanship (AIM).

As regards target difficulty, Joel feels certain that clubs are going to continue to use the so-called #2 hole. "Many clubs have tried the #3 hole in the past, but shooters want to break targets – not miss them. There were too many complaints. I think #2 hole targets are here to stay."

Interestingly, the business enjoys a fair number of gun sales to those who shoot bunker trap and modified bunker. Though the clubs with these facilities are few, they seem to be growing – at least in the mid-Atlantic area where a large number of Joel's customers come from.

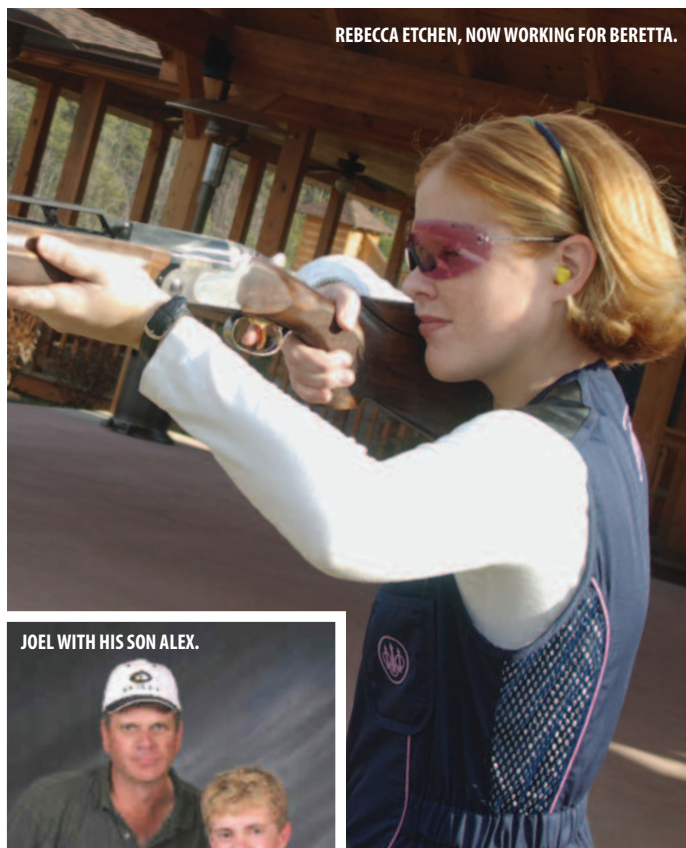
As many guns as Etchen sells to customers who walk through his front door, he also sells a significant number of guns through the Internet – not through typical gun sale sites – but through his own website (www.joeletchenguns.com).

"With the current state of the economy, many trap shoot sponsors have backed off," Joel confirms. "Luckily we have Krieghoff to help sponsor the Pennsylvania State Trap Shoot, providing a gun to the winner. In that unique shoot-off, we see hundreds of shooters out there vying for this \$10,000 plus over and under target gun. But we have lost some very big trap sponsors due to the downturn – General Motors for example."

FAMILY AFFAIR

Joel's personal trap gun is a Beretta DT-10 for Doubles and a Silver Seitz for Singles. His every-day gun for hunting and sporting is an old 682 Beretta Sporting that he knows has had over 100,000 rounds put through it – yet he's never touched the innards, even for minor spring repair. He recently had it fitted with a set of 28 gauge barrels.

Daughter Rebecca is sort of following in her father's foot prints having won the Vandalia Handicap in 1991 and the George McCarty Handicap at the Pennsylvania Trap Championship in 1999 – all when only a teenager. Right out of college she went to work for Beretta in Accokeek, Maryland. In May 2009 she finished her second degree –



REBECCA ETCHEN, NOW WORKING FOR BERETTA.



JOEL WITH HIS SON ALEX.

SON ALEX IS ALSO A TOP SHOOTER, WITH WINS IN THE OHIO STATE TRAP CHAMPIONSHIP AND THE PENNSYLVANIA GRAND. ALEX ALSO FOLLOWS A BIT IN JOEL'S FOOT PRINTS – WORKING IN THE ILA DIVISION OF THE NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION.

going nights to Georgetown University (while still keeping her day job at Beretta) to obtain her MBA. She heads up Beretta's clothing division these days.

Son Alex is also a top shooter, with wins in the Ohio State Trap Championship and the Pennsylvania Grand. Alex also follows a bit in Joel's foot prints – working in the ILA (Institute for Legislative Action) division of the National Rifle Association.

If you ever drive east on US Route 30 out of Ligonier and see the Joel Etchen Company sign – don't hesitate to stop. They'll be sure to unlock the door for you. Once inside, no shooter will fail to be impressed with the many fine Beretta and other shotguns on display – but be prepared to be tempted. ■

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