

The Over 40's club

Part one of two - The Vertebrae.

Hi everyone,

Actually this article is not just for the over 40s - far from it. If at any age we take our body for granted and not give it the proper care and attention it deserves, it is bound to lose its elasticity sooner or later. Since the vertebrae is the part of our body which gives us the most trouble in smallbore prone shooting as we grow older, dealing with that will be quite enough for part one. The eyes will come under scrutiny in part two. The muscles controlling our vertebrae will lose their original pliable state over time unless we keep them exercised. In fact all our joints may be showing signs of wear and tear with age, but they can usually be accommodated in other ways without affecting our shooting to any extent.

The first point to remember is that Smallbore prone shooting requires us to assume positions which would seldom be encountered in our day-to-day lives. Now stop to think of what parts of your spinal system are flexible and in what direction. We can bend forward without difficulty – yes. We can rotate the spine in order to look over either shoulder to a reasonable degree - yes. We can bend our heads back a little and also tilt the head forward and to the side towards either shoulder – all reasonably good so far, but that is only because we use those parts regularly. Arching our backs to any great degree is probably not something most of us would do every day. So to what degree can we arch our backs in comfort? Not far I expect if over 40 unless of course you happen to be a ceiling painter! If we are expecting the top few sections of our vertebrae between our shoulders and where it enters the base of the skull to do all the bending so as to allow us to get our head upright enough to shoot in comfort, then we will certainly be in trouble. It all comes back to the proverb of 'Use it or lose it'. However, just because we can move parts that we use regularly enough to get us by, doesn't mean we shouldn't think about exercises which will improve the range of all those movements. Let us say you already belong to the over 40s Club and that the lazy hazy days of your youth are already behind you, you can either accept the fact that your vertebrae will no longer bend gradually over its entire length as it once did, or do something about it.

If as a prone shooter, you have been setup in the classic position but now having trouble getting your head back far enough see through the rear sight without strain or looking through your eyebrows, you may need to think about raising your shooting position. That may fix your problem, at least temporarily. The downside is that the higher the position the more likely it is to become unstable. Having said that, I remember once watching one of Waikato's well-known 'Master Graders' who was involved in a shoot-off. His position was so high that he looked more like a spider, but nevertheless won the shoot off.

The other option or perhaps as well as, is to do exercises to make the spine, in particular more flexible allowing one to arch the spine all the way through its entire length, instead of cramping up a few joints at the top end of the spine. Although there are many types of exercises one could do, I would strongly recommend either taking up a class in Hatha Yoga or teaching yourself by means of a

CD or video. I am quite certain that having practised hatha yoga during my competitive shooting days was a great benefit to me. If you are limited for time it might well be a good idea to concentrate on one particular sequence called 'Salute to the Sun'. Unless you feel you would like to go into Hatha Yoga as an overall exercise, Salute to the Sun will adequately cover all you need to make your spine more supple. As there are several types of yoga. It is very important that you select Hatha since that is the type of yoga which is generally accepted by European Society because all the movements are purely physical with controlled breathing to relax the mind and body. Very good too, I imagine for anyone who suffers from nerves while shooting. I googled 'salute to the sun yoga' and came up with the following video entries to click on - Yoga for beginners – YouTube, How to practice Sun Salutation, Yoga Salute to the Sun – YouTube. I found the third one very down-to-earth but do not give any breathing information. Breathing does take quite a bit of practice but as a rough guide it works a bit like a pocket knife. As you open up the knife, inhale. As you fold away the blade, exhale. Both inhaling and exhaling right from the upper chest right down into the abdomen is important.

Even if you are only able to set aside a short time each morning to exercise, may I suggest you try the following - though not as good as the real thing will give you noticeable benefit over time: Stand with your feet together with palms of your hands together in front of you, fingers pointing upwards, look straight ahead while breathing normally. When you are ready slowly raise your arms over your head and as far back as is comfortable but no more. Do not force yourself to go further. During this arching exercise you should be inhaling slowly. Hold your breath for a few moments, then slowly as you exhale bring your outstretched arms over your head and down to your sides, then totally relax. Repeat this exercise several times. The breathing technique required does take a little practice since it requires you to consciously fill your entire lung area right from the upper chest into your abdomen. Strangely enough without being silly about it, doing such an exercise does fill you with a sense of well-being. It is the breathing technique which oxygenates the system that does the trick. The Salute to the Sun is an exercise which I have been doing for many years whenever I have a few minutes to spare and/or think about it at the right time. Yoga is beneficial to everyone regardless of age.

Finally, we must remember we only get out of life what you put into it. A case in point is that Auckland has produced somewhere between six and eight world-class smallbore prone shooters over the last thirty-five or so years. These elite men and women have only gained that status by putting in the hard yards.

I would be delighted to hear from anyone who wishes to further their shooting and general well-being by taking up Hatha Yoga, just to know how you are getting on with it. My email address is dugard@xtra.co.nz

Best regards,

Gordon.