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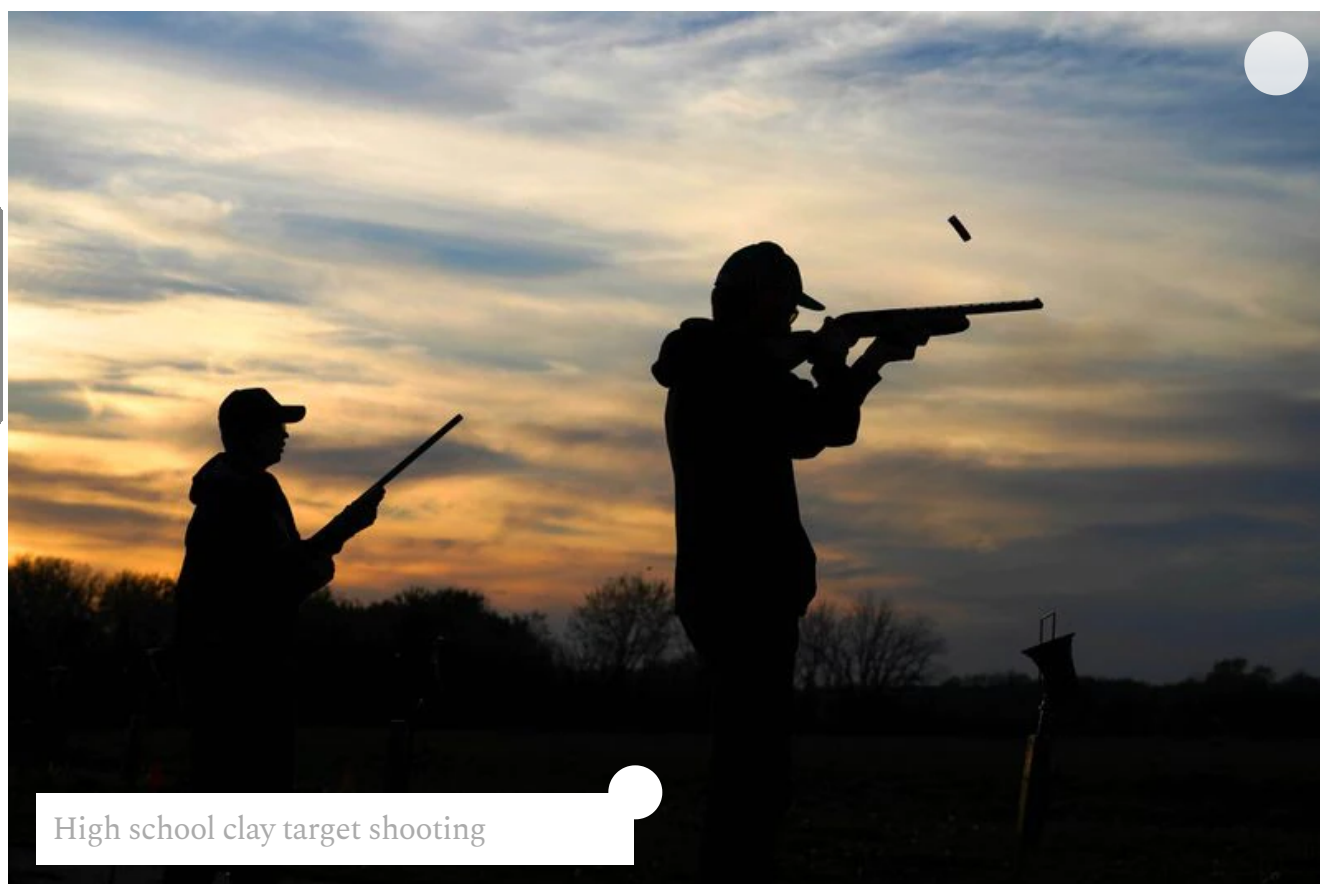
BREAKING NEWS NEWS

# Trap shooting is growing in popularity as a high school sport. In Illinois, students at 55 schools are participating.

By JOHN KEILMAN  
CHICAGO TRIBUNE | MAY 14, 2021



FEEDBACK



High school clay target shooting

Parkview Christian Academy, a private school in Yorkville, has one of the state's best clay target shooting teams. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

MORRIS, ILL. — If you stumble upon one of the fastest-growing high school sports in the country, you might take it for a church picnic until you notice the shotguns.

Trap shooting, a sport in which participants blast flying clay targets out of the sky, has over the last decade grown from a handful of schools in Minnesota to more than 1,000 across the country, including 55 in Illinois.

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They include Parkview Christian Academy, a Yorkville school whose co-op team holds weekly competitions at the Downers Grove Sportsmen's Club in Morris (like other shooting ranges that once dotted Chicago's suburbs, it long ago relocated from its namesake town to more rural surroundings).

On a recent Friday night, dozens of gun-toting teens gathered at the club as parents, grandparents and little siblings socialized in the back. When the shooters yelled "Pull," an automated machine hurled a 4-inch disc into the air; the teens attempted to vaporize it with a burst of lead shot before it hit the ground.

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Ethan Brockman, 17, from left, Tyler Sulzberger, 17, and Zach Sulzberger, 16, gather supplies before starting another round of clay target shooting at the Downers Grove Sportsmen's Club in Morris on April 30, 2021. More than 50 other students from several schools, grades 6 through 12, are part of the team based out of Parkview Christian Academy. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

Cory Withrow-Steil, a Newark High School freshman who is part of the squad, was one of the keenest marksmen: Every one of his 25 attempts ended with the “bird” exploding in orange shards.

“You’ve got to keep your mind clear,” he said. “All you can focus on is shooting and nothing else. That’s the most challenging part of it.”

## Gun sports revival

Trap shooting’s rise marks a comeback for gun sports in Illinois high schools. Many schools once had target shooting teams associated with their ROTC programs, but high school sports historian Robert Pruter said the Vietnam War cut into their popularity, and the Columbine massacre in 1999 finished off most of them.

“Columbine just made educators think, ‘We don’t want rifles in our high schools,’ ” he said.

That started to change in 2008, when three schools in Minnesota joined to form a small clay shooting league. It proved wildly popular: The number of teams doubled for five years straight, and soon the sport expanded outside of the state.

The schools now compete under the aegis of the USA Clay Target League, which is independent of state high school associations (the Illinois High School Association lists trap shooting as an “emerging sport,” but a spokesman said schools aren’t pushing for its formal inclusion).

### FEEDBACK

League President John Nelson said trap shooting’s surge in popularity is largely due to its inclusiveness. Boys and girls can compete together, and traditional athletic abilities such as speed and strength aren’t required. Even children in wheelchairs can participate fully, he said.

“What’s really great is that a third of kids (on trap shooting teams) don’t participate in any other sport,” he said. “If it wasn’t for this, those kids would probably do nothing. We all know that if they are tied with a sport, they do better in life.”





Shell cartridges are picked up after each session of clay target shooting at the Downers Grove Sportsmen's Club in Morris. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

Participants must take a gun safety course, and Nelson said the league has not recorded a single injury during its existence. That has swayed some school officials who were reluctant to allow kids to take part in a shooting sport.

#### FEEDBACK

“Back in our early days, we had a lot of doors closed,” he said. “Now we’re getting a lot of inquiries from superintendents and athletic directors.”

But not all schools embrace the idea. Dan Masters, who is heavily involved in the sport as president of the Prairie Central Sportsman’s Club in downstate Chatsworth, said several in the Chicago suburbs spoke with him about starting teams only to back away.

That is perhaps no surprise given the legal entanglements that come with firearms. Masters said children in Illinois can have guns only if their parents have a firearm owners identification card, or if they get their own FOID cards with their parents’ permission.

The card gives them the right to transport unloaded guns in cases, but woe be to them if they get pulled over and haven't adhered to the letter of the law.

"It's a ... tightrope that you walk with this," Masters said. "You have to police it to the (utmost) degree. You can't relax on safety."

## Growing popularity

But schools that take the plunge can see a return. Parkview Christian coach Jed Davis, a longtime trap shooter who is president of the school's board, formed the team several years ago with about a dozen kids and has seen it grow to more than 50, including students from schools that don't offer the sport.

One is Tate Spicer, a sophomore at Ottawa High School. He added trap shooting to his repertoire of football, wrestling and track three years ago after his uncle introduced him to the sport, and now ranks it among his favorites.

"It's not as physical (as traditional sports), but it really does take a lot of mindset and a lot of hand-eye coordination," he said. "I really do enjoy it a lot."

FEEDBACK





Coach Chris Brady, right, talks with Braeden Durbin during Parkview Christian Academy's team target shooting practice at the Downers Grove Sportsmen's Club on April 30, 2021, in Morris. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

Ashley Willames took up the sport after moving from home schooling to Parkview Christian when she began eighth grade. She said she wanted to get involved in a school activity and was intrigued by trap shooting.

“I was like, ‘That is a totally different sport,’ ” recalled Willames, now a sophomore. “I didn’t think I’d ever get interested in it. But my grandpa likes guns and shooting, so I was like maybe this would be something I could try; it would be neat to hang out with him. I ended up really liking it.”

She uses a 12-gauge shotgun, standard for trap shooters. Davis said most of his team members have their own guns — they cost from \$700 to \$2,000 — but other than that, the sport is inexpensive. Each kid pays a \$35 registration fee plus a weekly range fee of about \$20. The National Rifle Association supplies the roughly 2,000 shells the team goes through each week, he said.

The NRA says its foundation annually contributes more than \$1 million to high school shotgun programs around the county — its most recent tax filing showed 10 schools in Illinois received cash or material contributions — and that role unnerves Paul Helmke, the former president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence who now teaches at Indiana University. He said the NRA’s philanthropic endeavors can’t be separated from its political agenda.

#### FEEDBACK

“If they’re doing this, they’re trying to hook some people into the organization,” he said.

Nelson said the foundation gives grants only to programs that seek them and attaches no political strings. An NRA spokesman said the awards are meant to promote the safe and responsible use of firearms.

“Mr. Helmke’s views are as misguided as ever and completely outside the mainstream,” he said.

**‘A great sport’**

NRA involvement aside, Helmke said he has no objection to high schoolers participating in trap shooting. Vic Bencomo of the Giffords Gun Owners for Safety Colorado chapter, part of the gun control advocacy organization led by former congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, called it “a great sport. I’m glad to see this organization prioritize safety and training, which are fundamental to responsible gun ownership.”

The teams in Illinois are located well outside Chicago. Paige Johnson, whose daughter Shae is on Parkview’s team, said the sport is a natural extension of rural life.



FEEDBACK

Lane Provance, 15, practices his clay target shooting at the Downers Grove Sportsmen's Club in Morris on April 30, 2021. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

“We’re out in the country and we’ve always had guns around,” she said. “So to me it was just great that she had the opportunity to learn how to use it safely.”

Given the paucity of shooting ranges and the wide dispersal of participating schools, the teams usually compete virtually, logging their scores in a central



database. Five weeks of competition will lead to a state championship later this month in downstate Bunker Hill, and a national championship in Michigan over the summer.

Ken Cechura, president of the Downers Grove Sportsmen's Club, said the infusion of youth has been a boon to the sport. Aside from the high school shooters, he said, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and 4-H participants have come by to try their hand at breaking birds.

Sparkling a passion among young people is critical to helping trap shooting survive, he said. Like many other sports, it has seen its core enthusiasts age.

"If we don't get the kids interested now, there will be no future," Cechura said. "It's absolutely critical that we get young kids interested in the sport or it will die."

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FEEDBACK

John Keilman is a general assignment reporter for the Chicago Tribune, based in the suburbs. He writes about sports, education, health, drug abuse and many other subjects. Before joining the Tribune in 2001, he worked as a reporter in Virginia, Maryland and Ohio. Tips about strange occurrences, public outrages and inspiring people always welcome.

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