CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1: The Twenty-One Ceiling

You know the walk back to the truck. The gun is broken open over your forearm and the scorecard is folded in your shirt pocket. Twenty-one again, or nineteen, or on a gray morning with a crosswind, eighteen. You nod to the fellows at the next post, say something about the light, and drive home. Somewhere around the second stoplight a small voice asks the question you have stopped saying out loud: *Is this just where I am now?*

I have asked myself that question. I asked it for longer than I like to admit. This book is my honest answer to it. The short version is this: you have not reached your ceiling. You have reached the limit of what you can fix without knowing what you are fixing.

The comfortable spread between eighteen and twenty-one

Look at the numbers you shoot. Eighteen on a bad day, twenty-one on a good one. That three-bird spread has been with you so long it feels like a fingerprint. The bad days come from weather, fatigue, a slow squad or a late night. The good days come from feeling loose and seeing the birds well. Either way, the explanation always lives *outside* you.

That is why the spread is so comfortable. It asks nothing of you. A score that moves for reasons you cannot control is a score you are not responsible for.

Here is what the spread hides. Four to seven birds out of every twenty-five are getting away, and most of them are not hard targets. When I finally sat down with a coffee can full of my old scorecards in the garage, I sorted the misses by post. The surprise was not how many I missed. The surprise was that I missed the *same* birds, round after round, for years, and had never once written down why.

Shooters on the forums describe this pattern constantly. On ShotgunWorld, men who miss "easy" straightaway trap targets report the same story: the bird looks so slow and so straight that they lift their head to watch it, stop the gun and shoot over it. Those are not talent misses. They are habit misses, and a habit leaves the same mark every time.

> **Case:** In a long ShotgunWorld thread on missing straightaways, experienced trapshooters keep landing on the same culprit. They call it the easiest target on the field, and it beats them because they relax on it, peek at it, and send the shot high. Same bird, same fault, same result, season after season.

Why a long plateau is a diagnosis problem, not a talent problem

Talent shows up early. If you have shot for fifteen or twenty years and you still break twenty-one on a good day, you already have the hands, the timing and the eyes to break clays. You proved that on every bird you hit. The question that matters is narrower: what happens on the ones you lose?

I call the answer **the Diagnosis Gap**. It is the distance between *missing* a bird and *knowing exactly why* you missed it. Every plateau I have ever seen lives inside that gap.

> A score stalls when misses stay nameless. Name the miss, and the plateau starts to crack.

Consider how much is already known about why good shooters miss. The most commonly reported cause of missing straightaway trap targets is lifting the head off the stock. That fault usually sends the shot over the bird, and a low comb is often to blame (ShotgunWorld forum; Trapshooters.com forum). Another classic cause is quieter. When your focus slips from the clay back to the front bead, then back to the clay, the swing slows or stops, and the shot goes behind (Ducks Unlimited; Outdoor Life).

Notice what those two faults have in common. Each one leaves an address. A head lift tends to put the shot *over*. A drifting eye tends to put the shot *behind*. Each one has a cause you can check. And neither one is fixed by a new choke tube.

That last point matters for a man who has spent real money chasing his score. If you never diagnosed the miss, every purchase was a guess. Some guesses felt good for a round. None of them could reach a fault they were never aimed at. We will look at that money honestly in Chapter 3, without blame.

The quiet thought of quitting, and why it is premature

Let me say the thing nobody at the club says. Part of you has started to wonder whether it is worth it anymore. The shells, the dues, the Saturday mornings. You will not quit loudly. You would just shoot a little less, and then a little less.

Before you make that decision, I want you to meet a man who had every reason to make it first.

Giovanni Pellielo was born in January 1970. In 2025, at the ISSF World Cup in Lonato, Italy, he won the men's trap gold at age 55[10]. It was his first World Cup gold since Minsk in 2009, sixteen years earlier[4].

Sixteen years is longer than many plateaus. It covered seasons where he did not win, finals he did not reach, and plenty of people who thought he was done. He said as much more than a decade earlier: "Every year there's somebody telling me that I should stop. But every time I come back"[10].

I am not telling you that you will shoot like an Olympic medalist. Neither of us is going to Lonato. The lesson is smaller, and more useful. Age by itself does not close the door on getting better. A man in his mid-fifties can still find birds he used to lose. What closes the door is deciding that the misses have no cause. We will spend a whole chapter on what Pellielo's long career teaches a Saturday shooter in Chapter 20.

> If you quit at twenty-one, you quit without ever learning why the other four got away. That is the one outcome I want to talk you out of.

What this book will and will not ask you to change

You distrust quick fixes. Good. So do I. Here is the deal this book offers, laid out plainly so you can judge it.

What it will not ask

- **It will not ask you to buy a new gun.** The one you own is enough to break more birds than you break today.
- **It will not ask you to rebuild your style.** If you shoot trap one way after twenty years, we work with that.
- **It will not hand you a lead chart full of arithmetic.** You already know more about lead than you think.
- **It will not ask for a coach.** You train alone, so the methods here are built for one man and his own eyes.

What it will ask

- **That you give every miss an address.** Front, behind or over. Chapter 2 starts there.
- **That you check a few fundamentals in a fixed order.** Your mount, where your eyes are when you call, and where the barrel starts. These cost attention, not dollars.
- **That you practice a few minutes at home.** Short, frequent sessions beat long, rare ones (NRA Women). Whenever you do this, keep it safe. Open the action and *visually and physically* confirm both chambers are empty. Then remove every live shell from the room, not just from the gun, and keep any snap caps stored apart from live rounds (NRA Women; A Girl & A Gun). Never dry-mount in a room where live ammunition sits within reach. Never point the muzzle at anything you would not shoot, even when you are certain the gun is empty.
- **That you change one thing per round.** One correction, written down, tested. Not a pile of notes.

That is the whole contract. It is slower than buying something, and it works on a different part of the problem.

Tonight's exercise: open your own Diagnosis Gap

You do not need the gun for this. You need your last three scorecards and a pencil.

- ✓ Write down every bird you missed in those rounds, by post.
- ✓ Next to each one, write where the shot went: front, behind, over, or "don't know."
- ✓ Count the "don't know" marks.
- ✓ Circle any post or bird that shows up more than once.

The number of "don't know" marks is your Diagnosis Gap, on paper. For most veteran shooters it is nearly every miss. Do not be discouraged by that. A large gap means a lot of room, and the circled posts show you where to start.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Treat your eighteen-to-twenty-one spread as a symptom.** The same few birds are likely beating you, round after round.
- **Name every miss before you blame the weather.** Front, behind or over is the first step out of the Diagnosis Gap.
- **Stop spending money on faults you have not identified.** Gear cannot reach a mistake nobody has located.
- **Keep shooting before you decide you have peaked.** A 55-year-old won World Cup trap gold in 2025. Age alone is no verdict.
- **Fill out the scorecard exercise tonight.** Count your "don't know" misses and circle the repeats.

Once you have that sheet in front of you, an uncomfortable question appears. If a missed clay can only escape in three directions, why have you spent twenty years saying "I just missed it"? And what would change on Saturday if you could read every miss the moment it happened?