

Real Hunters and Gun Controls

By JOHN R. SWINTON

STATE COLLEGE, Pa.—I was a ten-year-old kid raking walnut leaves on a crystal autumn morning when a pair of red-capped gunners walked up our lane and asked my father's permission to hunt our three acres. He cheerfully agreed. Until that morning, he always had.

In a flash, one of them swung and leveled his twelve-gauge shotgun and blasted a gray squirrel dancing along the electric wire that fed our house. Quivering shreds of squirrel fell into the yard, and the rest of the lead charge rained down on the Deshlers' roof across the field. My father banished the pair and then permanently closed our property to hunters.

Over thirty now, I've settled on fishing as the outdoor sport most congenial to my contemplative nature, as I call it. The winter trout season begins in Pennsylvania the first week of December, and I'll try, as always, to get in a few days of fly casting before ice seals the tiny ponds around Centre County.

My love of fishing can be partially measured by the fact that, cumbersome biped though I am, I will stand a good chance of getting shot for a deer as I wade the edges of a favorite trout pond. I had one close shave two winters ago when a deer slug thumped into an oak tree I was leaning against in a "no hunting" zone, and last summer a boy was killed near here by an eagle-eyed rifleman who mistook him for a woodchuck.

Do I detest hunters? No, I admire and applaud them. I've even joined them on occasion. Nevertheless, I'd like to see some tough gun control laws, the tougher and quicker the better.

The key to this apparent paradox is so simple that the gun lobbyists and outdoor writers have had to spend millions of dollars and tanks of ink obscuring it: The fact is that the serious, proficient hunters want gun controls.

What's the solution? Call a halt. Get every novice hunter to come out of the woods and lay down his weapon. But who is the novice hunter? Most National Rifle Association patch wearers and petition signers, 90 per cent of the outdoor magazine readers and every Abercrombie deerslayer who's had a couple of sociable belts.

And how do you weed them out? Easy. Make the annual hunting license application an occasion for a rigorous exam covering, at the very least, survival techniques, woodcraft, first aid, wildlife identification, and firearm handling, maintenance, nomenclature and law. And be sure to require a thorough physical, too.

Those who take the sport seriously would welcome the challenge and pass it. Some would fail. But most important, many thousands who now hold hunting licenses wouldn't bother to reapply. Good riddance: hunting is too often treated as a casual weekend lark, like golfing in woollens—except that the duffers have guns.

In the background you hear the dis-

contented grumbles of your state game commissioners who, after all, prosper by selling as many hunting licenses as they can. But then bureaucrats will be bureaucrats whether they lounge at a desk or play in the woods. Obviously, if a game commission concentrated on hunting safety—that is, on excluding rather than including incompetents—its bankroll, staff and influence would dwindle. Worse yet, its responsibility for wildlife management might begin reverting to nature.

And those outraged bellows of protest? They come from the N.R.A. and the gun lobby brotherhood bellowing on behalf of Remington, the Olin Corporation, Winchester, du Pont and the rest who so conscientiously force upon us that ambiguous "right to bear arms" and confer the "hunter" status on anyone strong enough to hoist a Saturday Night Special.

Forget the Field and Stream editorials (Guess who the biggest advertisers and most of the readers are?), and the N.R.A. posters, and the paranoid prattle of rural, woodloristic newspaper columnists. Those hunters most confident of their skill desperately want the other 90 per cent at home in front of The American Sportsman where they can't hurt themselves or somebody else. And if it takes a program of tight gun control and stiff examinations to put them there, serious hunters are all for it.

John R. Swinton has written on fly fishing for The Pennsylvania Angler.