



Sporting Heritage Group
FIELD SPORTS CONSULTANTS



POSITIVE STEPS
TO GET THE
MOST FROM
YOUR GUIDE
STAFF

A WHITE PAPER

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author has over 40 years of professional and personal experience in the field sports. He developed and managed the largest wildlife area devoted to the field sports in Illinois, guided hundreds of hunts, professionally trained dogs and horses, is an NSCA shooting instructor and has written and published on a wide variety of related topics. In the course of his career he has had the opportunity to hunt and fish throughout the western hemisphere including at more than 50 commercial preserves and lodges from Alaska to Mexico. He and Jonathan Sherrill founded the Sporting Heritage Group, LLC, in 2007.

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GUIDES ARE THE KEY

Your guides will make or break your operation. The main reason your clients are at your location is to catch fish or bag game. And your guides are their primary connection to that fish and game. Certainly your clientele needs to be wined, dined, and catered to. But mostly importantly they need to be put in an enjoyable situation and atmosphere where they can successfully do what they came for — hunt and fish. The quality of your guides has as much to do with that as any other single factor. Probably more. A good guide will dramatically improve your repeat business; a bad one will not only kill that but will hurt you in other less apparent ways, e.g., increase your advertising costs to fill those slots your bad guy emptied. And your “word of mouth” referrals will take a hit too. This paper addresses some of the important “do's and don't's” in acquiring, training, and retaining a superior guide staff.

RECRUITMENT: START WITH THE “RIGHT STUFF”

Finding guides is easy. Finding, and keeping, good guides is another proposition altogether. So what constitutes “the good guide”? Obviously he's got to be knowledgeable concerning the quarry, be it trout or ptarmigan. Experience can't be bought and knowledge can't be borrowed. So be sure it's there because you're paying for it — whether you get it or not — to the guides you do put out. Many, if not most, of the other attributes that are important in a guide and that may be initially lacking can be remedied in the training and indoctrination process. Lack of basic knowledge and relevant experience can't.

Guides should be physically fit enough to keep up with the “I-take-it-seriously” crowd when needed and astute enough to know that the pace generally is dictated by the least fit member of his current group. A fit guide says something about your lodge too. Proper physical presentation is an oft times overlooked factor. Similarly a guide's attire should be appropriate to the activity, i.e., an upland guide should dress the part and not appear to be just returning from cleaning the mule's stalls. Some degree of standards and standardization should be required. It's a nice professional touch to dress them in clean, pressed hunting shirts or fishing vests with your operation's name and logo on it. It's attractive and it's deductible. Besides representing the heart and soul of your business — indeed, taking over and running your business while afield — look at your guides as aesthetic accoutrements. You don't want your lodge looking like a back yard outhouse and you sure don't want your guide looking like he just climbed out of one.

Make sure that each guide is equipped with all the requisite and necessary “tools of the trade” (e.g., whistle, leash, vest/coat with a large game pouch) as well as with the various things the client might need and didn't bring (e.g., sunscreen, bug net face masks, an appropriate variety of flies, and the like). While there are obvious physical limitations on how much a guide can tote, the basic philosophy remains — it's better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it. If your guide or your guest might need it, your lodge should stock it.

THE WORST GUIDE IN THE WORLD

The worst guide I ever encountered was on a goose hunting trip near Attawapiskat on James Bay. He was a Canadian Indian named Leo. On our first — his last — day of the hunt he stormed down to the dock, flung sacks of decoys into the boat, scrambled aboard, grunted, fired up the engine, and cast off. Seemingly unable to speak English, the little communication he attempted was by pointing, mumbling and glaring.

After running the boat ashore on the low tide mudflat we were to hunt he grabbed the decoys and set out at top speed. The topography of a mudflat being what it is, we were able to keep him in sight most of the time. We caught up when he finally stopped, scattered the decoys, cut some reeds, and built a makeshift blind. Whereupon he “communicated” that he was returning to the boat to get something.

— Continued on next page —



The best guides have a knack for reading people and adjusting their approach and attitude from day to day and group to group. Some folks are funny about their hobbies and really want to go after it — serious, silent, and hardcore. A friend of mine once fished with a very fine guide who had recently taken out Hall of Famer, Ted Williams. He told my friend that after the novelty wore off the experience ranked somewhere between a root canal and a colonoscopy. But, he said, Williams was a helluva fisherman. At the other extreme are the guys that are more interested in talking and goofing than shooting and casting. Point being, your guide needs to recognize both extremes of the spectrum, everything in between, and then adjust his attitude and approach accordingly.

Every successful guide has his own big bag of tricks — among which are subtle, low key excuses for losing the fish or missing the bird — and the sense to know when to use them. Whatever makes your clientele feel relaxed, comfortable, and furthers his enjoyment is where the guide needs to go with them so long as it's safe, legal and ethical. In general, the guide should be well enough informed on your operation to be able to answer most any question that will be thrown at him. Almost anything and nearly everything will come up sooner or later, especially with that group that seems more interested in talking than stalking.

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES — HOW MUCH SHOULD A GUIDE TELL

There is one particular area that is touchy and close to being out of bounds. While a guide should never volunteer your management techniques such as where, when, or how birds are released, he should be prepared to give truthful, if somewhat evasive, answers. I hunted a top level facility where one of our group asked, during the course of the afternoon hunt, whether we were killing mostly wild birds — pheasants, in this particular instance — or whether they were predominantly pen raised birds. The guide assured us that they were “. . . at least 80% wild”. That evening I spoke to the guide privately, explained a little of my background, and told him that every bird I looked at had the membrane in the upper beak pierced as all pen reared birds that have been “spec'd” do. He still claimed most were wild and that “. . . that happens to wild birds from twigs and stems”. I understood what he was about and why and didn't pursue it any further but he clearly was hauling his own saw out on a very untenable limb. And, by the way, he was a really good guide. He just got overly enamored with that particular bit of subterfuge.

GUIDES AND GUESTS

It goes almost without saying that a guide should never cast a fly nor pull a trigger unless a guest specifically and directly requests it. And then only so long as the client deems it desirable. A request to a guide to get a fly to a riffle the client can't reach is not carte blanche to become his fishing partner for the rest of the day. Sooner, rather than later, the guide's going to work a piece of water or catch a fish that the paying fellow is gonna feel sure he would've gotten if he'd had the chance.

An hour or so later my brother and I had seen neither geese nor guide so we packed up and set out to look for him. He had made it back to the boat all right — and was fast asleep in it when we walked up. I suppose the upside was he must have been too tired to fire up the boat and leave us.

Turned out Leo was fluent in English but was extremely disgruntled that he had been made to stay around to guide part of the last group of the season. Don't hire Leo if he should apply. He got fired from his last job.



Often, after the boat docks or the guns are racked, a client will invite the guide to meet in the bar and have a drink. Almost invariably the guide has immediate and legitimate things to look after before he can do so but he does need to give the guest an honest answer — and follow through on it. It's really poor procedure to tell him, "Yes, I'll meet you in there in half an hour" and then disappear for the duration. If a guide gets an invitation he should do his utmost to accept and appear. But, just as the invitation to wet a line or take a shot isn't an invite to become the guest's new partner, neither is the invitation to the bar a request to drink the evening away together.

All of the above may seem like common sense. And it mostly is. But that doesn't mean that it's not occasionally ignored, disregarded, forgotten, and violated. I've been there — on both ends — and it is. Often times it's as much the fault of club management/ownership as it is of the guide. If not more so. Either the guide wasn't adequately and properly prepared in the beginning or when he slipped up it went unnoticed, ignored, and uncorrected. And whichever, it's unacceptable and it's going to hurt your bottom line.

There are several effective ways to address the training — both initial and in-service — for guides. The manager or owner can do it if he has the time, experience, and inclination. Certainly he should have an important role initially during the interview and selection process because he's turning his business over to those guides when the guests are out doing what they came to do.

One of the most effective and efficient processes I've encountered is to assign the hands on training to your best guide. He does it professionally day in, day out, season after season. He knows what your new guys need to know, he knows how to do what they need to do and he knows when to say what needs to be said. Plus he's likely to get a better reception as the proven voice of knowledge and experience than is the manager who usually doesn't guide on any sort of a regular basis. Your best guide(s) are extremely valuable resources for your operation in multiple ways. At any rate, whatever your approach to training your guide staff is, make it consistent and make it ongoing. Just like managing your habitat, it's a never completely finished process.

Another complimentary and effective tool is an annual training seminar which, again, can be conducted by your best man (or woman) and given for new and old guides alike just before the season. It serves numerous purposes, i.e., introduces all the guides, trains the new ones, refreshes the veterans, sets tone and expectations, and affirms your goals and professionalism.

KEEP 'EM UPDATED, INFORMED, AND HAPPY

Every venue should have, at the least, a printed checklist for the guide corps covering both the physical and social expectations so everyone knows what's what and can review it periodically. Some places have an operations manual with a section on guiding or even a separate guide's manual. It can be time consuming to do initially but it gives you a consistent structure and once it's done you have it forever. And it will pay dividends. Literally. If you don't care to do it in house, farm it out to someone who can. Whatever course you take have a positive and definitive approach that you apply and adhere to because . . . that's right, it will help your bottom line.

SHG

Sporting Heritage Group is all about the highest quality in the sporting experience. We are not travel agents. We are not outfitters. We are not realtors. We are experienced professional sportsmen and women interested in others with the same values, tastes and aspirations.

The Sporting Heritage Group was formed to assist both commercial and private hunting, shooting, and fishing venues interested in the traditional ethics and values so important to serious and dedicated practitioners of the field sports. We are a consulting group with vast expertise and resources. While we offer all phases of consulting services, Sporting Heritage Group, unlike most other consulting firms, has a strong and experienced operational component. We are dedicated to not only helping you acquire and establish your property and lodge but we will be there throughout with our quality assurance program to assure that you stay at the high level you seek. Some of the support services we provide include:

- Site selection
- Optimal habitat layout and management
- Planning & design
- Operational procedures
- Quality control programs

If you are interested in and share our commitment to excellence, visit our website www.shgconsultants.com to learn the complete array of services our group can offer you.



Let's look at some things you can do for your guides that they will appreciate and that will, at the same time, help your operation — the oft claimed but seldom achieved “win/win” outcome. In these cases it's “win/win/win” because you benefit, your guide benefits, and your clientele benefit.

Try hosting a Hickox or Smith dog training seminar. Or there are any number of other top trainers giving seminars and, by and large, they are excellent. By hosting one you can increase your exposure and get additional advertising in publications such as “Shooting Sportsman” since the pro trainer publishes the ads and schedules. You can also add to your income by offering lodging and meals to seminar participants. And, you can reward your head guide(s) by having them attend.

The next time you have a booth at one of the local outdoor sports shows take one of your main guys with you to help man the booth. Or send them in your stead. After you're comfortable with them in that situation, send them to SHOT Show or SCL.

Send one of your key people to an NSCA Instructors School. You should be able to find one or schedule one not too far from home. After they are certified they become doubly valuable to you. They can instruct your other guides and they can give instruction to your guests in the field or on your clays course. And in your advertising it never hurts to mention that you have NSCA Certified instructors on staff. Likewise, there are very good fly fishing instructional schools (e.g., Orvis) throughout the country that will work to the same end for your fishing guides.

While I have been on less than a handful of excursions that were absolutely wrecked by a poor guide (See sidebar, “The Worst Guide in the World”), I have been on many that had the potential for disaster but were saved — indeed, made memorable — because of an outstanding guide. Twenty five years ago I was on a hunt in Montana, got snowed in for three days, and became lifelong friends with the rancher/guide and his wife where we were “trapped”. It was more fun than a circus and two barrels of monkeys. I don't know how the hunt would've turned out had the weather not gone south . . . but I'm glad it did.

If hunting and fishing success were assured we'd probably just call it — shopping. But it's not. So when the weather bites or the fish don't, having a dedicated and entertaining guide can make up for a lot. And when everything does cooperate a good guide makes it that much better. Think about that when you select and train your guide staff.

SPORTING HERITAGE GROUP: OUR PROMISE

*Y*our attention to detail — be it with your guide staff, your habitat, or your choice of double guns — is what will separate you from the normal and the ordinary. We at Sporting Heritage Group are dedicated to that detail and to that separation.

Go to www.shgconsultants.com for information
on what we do and how we can help your operation.
Or contact Jonathan Sherrill at 317.412-4167.

