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Club targets safer shooting

MIDDLETOWN: Middletown Pistol and Rifle Association members say they recognize the responsibility that comes with gun ownership.

By Marc Davis

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Ed Dubin has been on safari in South Africa and Zimbabwe. He has hunted antelope and warthog.

Dubin, a 64-year-old Florida resident, has a lifelong affinity for guns – rifles and pistols. When not hunting, he can often be found at the Middletown Pistol and Rifle Association's shooting range.

Dubin thrives on the challenges presented by competitive pistol and rifle shooting, what fellow club member Bill Diana described as "chasing that mysterious bull's-eye."

Dubin has spent countless hours practicing and competing, forever honing his accuracy.

You can find a lot of people like Dubin at the MPRA and the mid-Hudson's other shooting clubs.

The 168-member MPRA hosts shooting matches, and members – many of them hunters – also compete in the Orange and Ulster county pistol leagues and in tournaments throughout the country.

All MPRA members belong to the National Rifle Association. And they are mindful of the responsibilities that come with owning guns.

The MPRA members won't pat themselves on the back for their safety-first outlook. They believe they are practicing common sense. They also believe they are representative of gun club members throughout the country.

Who they are

MPRA members have spouses, they have children, they are gainfully employed or retired. Many have served in the military.

Edgardo Ruberte, the MPRA's vice president, served in Vietnam and Desert Storm. These days, he is a New York City transit authority supervisor residing in Montgomery.

Ralph Vitagliano of Monroe served in the Navy during World War II. Diana, a self-employed auto mechanic living in Scotchtown, was a member of the Air Force reserves from 1969-75.

Bill Mielke of Howells served in the Navy and owns a florist shop near Howells.

Not everyone has a military background. Sue Pallak of Rifton, one the club's best pistol shooters, is an accountant. And then there's Dubin, a retired junior high school science teacher who lived on Long Island before moving to Florida.

Safety conscious

Broach the subject of gun safety and every MPRA member recites – without fail – the three fundamental safety rules set down by the NRA:

- Always keep the gun pointed in a safe direction.
- Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot.
- Always keep the gun unloaded until ready to use.

Signs featuring these guidelines are posted at the club's firing range.

George Heitz, like everyone else, abides by the rules. Heitz, a 67-year-old Walden resident and retired elementary school teacher, joined the MPRA in 1961, a few months after the club was incorporated. He said no one has ever suffered a gun-related injury in the club's history.

Heitz said the same of the Wawarsing Sportsmen Association, of which he also is a member. Dubin makes similar statements about the three shooting clubs he was affiliated with on Long Island.

MPRA matches are supervised by club members. A competitor can't cross the firing line until the supervisor has visual confirmation that all firearms are unloaded.

New club members must participate in two club matches before they are given keys to the shooting range. Veteran members monitor newcomers to see they abide by safety rules.

'Why do you need a gun?'

Not everyone shares the club members' interest in guns.

Those interviewed for this story had no horror stories to share regarding encounters with anti-gun supporters, although many have been peppered with questions, sarcastic comments or dirty looks.

"Why do you need a gun?" is a common question Dubin has been asked.

Mielke recalled a recent conversation he had with a female customer at his florist shop. Mielke casually mentioned he coaches the Hudson Valley pistol team that competes in the Empire State Games.

The customer was aghast.

"She just made a face, she didn't say anything," he said. "I just told her and I dropped it when I saw she

made a face."

Many club members believe the media fan the flames whenever there is a gun-related fatality. The members point out fatalities occur when people misuse guns.

"Safety has always been a priority with firearms. It has to be," Ruberte said.

League lineups

(Clubs competing in two popular shooting leagues in the mid-Hudson.)

Orange County Pistol League

Middletown Pistol and Rifle Association

Monroe-Chester Sportsmen Club

Black Rock Fish and Game Club

Dutchess County Pistol Association

Pleasantville

Master Class (public range in Monroe)

Ulster (represents variety of clubs located in Ulster County)

Woodbury Field and Stream Club

Ulster County Pistol League

Middletown Pistol and Rifle Association

Morgan Hill Game Association

New Paltz Rod and Gun Club

Rondout Rod and Gun Club

Ulster Heights Rod and Gun Club

Saugerties Fish and Game Club

The leagues run September through March. The matches feature bull's-eye shooting. Individual and team scores are kept.

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