

Shooting for the DUKE



Since 1956, over seven million young people have earned a Duke of Edinburgh's Award – and many of them used an airgun in doing so. **Neil Hallam** explains how airgunning can play a challenging role in this well-known award scheme

Above: Young shooters take part in a grand final 10m air rifle event at Bisley, all part of their DofE award. Jack Chambers (striped shirt) is using an MPR version of the Air Arms S400 PCP

Many readers will, no doubt, have heard of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. The Duke founded the award in 1956 to help young people between the ages of 14 and 21 develop confidence, self-esteem and a sense of teamwork. Indeed, his own son, Prince Edward, went on to achieve a gold award in 1986.

It's a much bigger skills-teaching programme than you may imagine, though – there's around a staggering 850,000 participants spanning 136 countries currently working towards a Duke of Edinburgh's Award as you read this! Such 'DofE' programmes are run in all manner of subjects by local, licensed operating authorities – usually schools or youth groups – whose remit is to look after the administration of the award and maintain standards. DofE awards also include shooting – and airgunning schemes frequently feature in the activities programmes of uniformed youth groups, like the Scouts and Cadet Forces of the Army and Navy.

Wing Commander Mike Eveleigh is a Duke of Edinburgh's Award manager for the Air Cadets, and when I visited his corps, he was proud

to tell me that the Air Cadets are among the most successful DofE operating authorities. "We have over 3,000 cadets gaining an award each year, many of whom achieved their skill section through the Air Training Corps 3P Sporter programme of shooting."

Many schools also offer DofE as part of their extra curricular programme – and state school students wanting to shoot for their DofE award often do so with the assistance of other youth organisations. Additionally, some independent schools are able to offer airgun shooting within their own resources. For example, Christ's Hospital boarding school in Sussex offers both a Combined Cadet Corps and the DofE Award to its students. While practising the combined skills of the Army,

Airgun Shooter



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Navy and Air Force, their cadets are able to achieve their DofE skill by shooting with air rifles.

There are five sections making up a DofE award – volunteering, physical, skills, expedition and residential – and participants can choose their own activity within each section. The aim, however, remains – to develop a young person's physical, mental and team-working abilities.

If chosen, shooting – or marksmanship as the DofE calls it – fulfills the skill section, and the Duke of Edinburgh's objective for its skill section states that it should 'help participants develop new talents, learn to set and rise to a challenge, and also have fun.'

Participants spend at least an hour a week practising their skill, but the period of time increases with each of the three levels. At the bronze level, the young people practise their skill for three months, while they will spend up to 18 months developing a greater proficiency in the subject when going for a gold award.

Part of the DofE scheme is that participants must show their progression in the subject, 'proving they have broadened their understanding and increased their expertise in the chosen skill.' In other words, participants must get better during their period with the airgun. Showing progression

can be demonstrated by either learning a new skill from scratch, or by demonstrating quantifiable improvement – so those with some experience in shooting airguns can take part, with the aim of improving their current standard of marksmanship.

The scheme requires that any activity should be a challenge – but the challenge is not generic; it relates to the individual. For some, the challenge is simply to improve their grouping on a paper target. For others like explorer scout Edward Belcher, the challenge is overcoming a disability – while for air cadets Sarah Brown and Jack Chambers, their challenge was winning national championships and setting GB records with their airguns!

Of course, the core of the DofE awards is enjoyment – and the challenge of acquiring and succeeding with a new skillset must also be fun. This isn't a head-in-a-textbook exam, but a far more encompassing syllabus to participate in – and when airgun shooting is the chosen activity, the participating youth groups do this, thankfully, with many variations.

Some army cadets I met at Chetwyn Army Barracks in Chilwell, Nottinghamshire told me how new members begin their challenge by improving their grouping on a 10-metre airgun range. They add variety to their airgun shooting by playing, would you believe, 'airgun snooker'. This entails a picture of a snooker table fixed on the range, the balls on which the cadets then have to shoot in the same manner as

Above left: British champions of the 3P Sporter Air Rifle event – air cadets Lewis and Jack Chamber and Sarah Browne. All three chose shooting as the skill element of their DofE award – and Jack and Sarah set GB records!

Above right: Air cadet, Sarah Browne, uses a BSA Scorpion in the kneeling section of the Sporter Air Rifle event

Left: The cadet forces in particular champion shooting in their DofE programmes. Here, Corporal Daniel Wheatley proudly wears his DofE bronze on the sleeve of his military tunic



THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH'S AWARDS

Young people involved in DofE complete four types of activity at bronze and silver level, and five at gold.

Volunteering – undertaking service to individuals or the community in a bid to develop compassion, commitment and the confidence to make a difference.

Physical – improving in an area of sport, dance or fitness activities, the aim being to develop fitness, enjoyment and teamwork.

Skills – developing practical skills and personal interests, which helps realise potential and gain greater self-esteem.

Expedition – completing an adventurous journey, developing teamwork and leadership along the way.

Residential (Gold only) – to stay and work away from home with strangers, doing a shared activity to encourage self-management and discipline.



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EDWARD'S STORY

If the key objective of DofE is personal development, then it's perfectly highlighted in the story of Hollins Green HFT Club member, Edward Belcher, who shoots airguns to satisfy the award's skill section, and has chalked up successes in national and international competitions.

What's particularly remarkable, though, is that Edward suffers from dyspraxia, a disease sometimes called clumsy child syndrome, where the brain's ability to process movement is hindered – making his silver award achievement in shooting quite a feat.

Edward's father, Simon, found his son unwilling to undertake core muscle exercises, but the constant need to get up and down and move along the firing points, aiming as he went, was the perfect way to benefit his prescribed exercise regime, while also giving him a goal to achieve. "It was," says Simon, "press-ups by stealth!"

But the activity of HFT shooting helped develop Edward's chest and back muscles, along with improving the way his brain processed visual stimuli. "Being zeroed at just one distance," acknowledges Simon, "meant that Edward had to 'see' distances and make mental adjustments for range and aimpoints. It's done him the world of good."

Indeed, where many dyspraxia sufferers have low self-esteem, through participation in DofE and his shooting successes in HFT, Edward exudes a much more confident demeanour – proving just how positive a role airguns can play in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme.



the cue game. In other words, hit a red, and they can nominate a colour... the hardest ball (black) scoring the most points for an accurate shot.

According to the DofE programme, there must be a set objective to practising the skill, but there's a lot of leeway in the way this is interpreted. For some, it is simply showing an improvement in their shooting – something as simple as, say, a scout or cadet showing a tangible improvement in his or her ability to group a cluster of shots on the target.

Many choose a more structured objective, though – and this can be through competition, as demonstrated by the Army Cadets taking on their counterparts in the Caribbean (as previously reported in *Airgun Shooter*), or the Air Cadets at international Sporter events.

Some DofE participants choose to achieve formal qualifications, too – and these often lead on to coaching qualifications, which in turn puts something back into both the Duke of Edinburgh's scheme and, in the case of airgunners, the sport of shooting.

Interestingly, the DofE group or operating authority doesn't actually need the ability to offer airgun shooting themselves – because the scheme allows for participants to practise their skill under the watch of a suitable outside instructor. This could very well benefit existing airgun clubs, who could open their doors to new member. Take, for example, the case of a school wishing to include shooting as a DofE programme. They could agree on a shooting instructor from a local shooting club and, at the start of the programme, agree the aims and assessment criteria between themselves.

Opera star, Katherine Jenkins, is among many celebrities who have achieved DofE Awards – and while it's hardly surprising that her skill element involved studying for singing exams, her comments about the DofE scheme are quite valid for airgun shooters.

"If you love something," she said of her achievement, "work hard, be focused and disciplined, and then you will be ready when the right opportunity comes your way.

"My personal motto is 'it's never crowded on the extra mile', so I'm incredibly grateful I had the opportunity to do my DofE at school."

It's important to give today's youngsters opportunities to become tomorrow's shooters, I think it would be a very worthwhile exercise for both parents and enthusiastic young airgunners to canvass their schools and youth clubs to get more involved with the scheme, and specifically an *airgun* shooting programme. Even if the particular organisation doesn't have the facilities for a range, there's bound to be a nearby airgun club which can accommodate their needs.

Aside of giving young people the chance to experience airgunning first hand, it's also a chance for the airgun community to spread the word on how safe – and fun – our sport actually is. It's as much a chance for us to dispel any myths or preconceived notions about airguns and shooting as it is a chance to help youngsters blossom into adult life. ●

Above: Edward Belcher, shooting his Air Arms S400 Carbine in the National Scout Championships in which he went on to achieve his DofE silver award