



# BEST SHOT

## TAKING THEIR

The Southern Guilford High School hunter safety team featured 23 students, including: Top: Katlyn Elks; Middle: Brayden Beaman; Bottom (left to right): Jordyn Leonard, Emily VanHorn and Brayden Beaman.

### A diverse high school team learns valuable lessons while preparing for the Youth Hunter Education Skills Tournament

written by Josh Leventhal · photographed by Melissa McGaw



**A**ngela Holmes could hardly believe her eyes on an early, frigid morning in January. She was watching her son, 15-year-old Asaiah McIntyre, standing along the edge of a rural field in the suburbs of Greensboro with his high school teammates. He wasn't there for football or track, among his sports of choice growing up in California before Angela moved the family to North Carolina less than a year ago. No, Asaiah was with the Southern Guilford High School hunter safety team, shotgun in hand, firing at clays for the first time in his life.

"Pull!"...Boom!

Angela, who admittedly is wary of guns and had concerns when Asaiah told her about the team months earlier, stood to the side with other parents watching the team prepare for the Youth Hunter Education Skills Tournament hosted by the N.C. Wildlife

Resources Commission in the spring. So stunned by what she was seeing, Angela took out her phone, opened the FaceTime app and began sharing Asaiah in action with family back home.

"Pull!"...Boom!

"They love it. They think this is the best thing," Angela recalled at a practice six weeks later, before pausing and taking in her new rural surroundings. "We get out here and this a whole different living experience. The country life, I call it."

Country life has included this exciting new activity for Asaiah. Upon arriving at Southern Guilford High, Asaiah enrolled in the school's agriculture program, became a member of FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America) and completed the hunter education certification required to participate on the team. Although Asaiah has never hunted, he has long watched shows about it and felt that taking the class and joining the team was a natural next step.

"I enjoy competition. I've always been very competitive," Asaiah said. "Before I moved here, I always played a lot of sports."



Above: Asaiah McIntyre takes aim on the rifle range at the last practice before the District 5 tournament. Right: McIntyre, who joined the team soon after moving from California, loads his block with ammo at practice.



Anything that could be challenging for me, I would try to do.”

Angela wasn't so sure about this challenge. Yet after two months of early Saturday morning practices, she supports Asaiah's new interest. She has seen his confidence grow along with a sense of responsibility from learning how to safely handle firearms.

*“It doesn't matter if you're the biggest, strongest football player or a petite girl, when you get on the line the same skills are going to be used regardless of the size difference.”*

“I had an anxiety attack at first because I am afraid of guns,” Angela said. “After coming out and having the [team] meetings and they explained it in a little more detail, I was like, ‘Okay. We can stay and watch.’ It was so organized, and they are really strict about safety. So, when I had seen that, I was like, ‘Thank you!’ I had a little ease. And then to see how he is growing and doing it and shooting and how much interest he picked up in it, I was like, ‘OK, we can make it do.’”

### Beginning with the Basics

Schools in North Carolina that offer basic or advanced youth hunter education programs are eligible to participate in the Youth Hunter Education Skills Tournament. The tournament debuted in 1978 as an incentive for schools to host and sponsor hunter education within their curriculum and as a reward for students in the program. It has grown significantly over the years, with more than 4,000 students competing in shotgun, riflery, archery, orienteering and written hunting skills categories.

What was once primarily a rite of passage for kids with hunting backgrounds has become increasingly popular at schools in more urban areas and with students without hunting experience. Carissa Daniels, the Commission's outreach manager in the Wildlife Education Division who oversees the youth hunter education program, said the biggest demographic increase has been among girls participating in the tournament.

“It doesn't matter if you're the biggest, strongest football player or a petite girl, when you get on the line the same skills are going to be used regardless of the size difference,” Daniels said. “It's a sport where women shooters can be on an equal playing field with men.”

With the tournament's growing popularity has come increased competition. Several schools have developed powerhouse programs that annually compete for the top spot. At this year's tournament, Gray Stone Day School won the high school division for the fourth time in five years, edging Elkin High School, the 2021 champion. Forbush High School won back-to-back titles in 2015 and '16 and has long been one of the dominant programs in the state.

While the focus on the competition has been raised—Daniels compares the event to “travel ball with guns”—the mission remains the same as when the tournament debuted 44 years ago: to provide school-aged hunter education graduates an opportunity to go beyond the basics and to promote the hunter education program and the safe sport of hunting and shooting.

### A Team Effort

Southern Guilford High School falls into the non-traditional category of participants. The team features 23 students, including 10 girls. Just five or six members have hunting experience.

Brad Hensley teaches agriculture at Southern Guilford, is one of the school's two FFA advisors and has coached the hunter safety team for 13 years. Like any good coach, he wants his team to succeed and achieve their goals. However, he sees a larger mission for getting kids involved in the hunter education program and shooting sports.

“I hope they will find something where they belong and fit in. I think that's big,” Hensley said. “I want to expose kids [to hunting and shooting sports] who don't come from that traditional background that so many in the hunter ed program come from. Probably my biggest goal is when they become parents or aunts or uncles when they get older, I want them to be somebody who is promoting shooting sports. I want them to promote hunting and I want them to get more people involved in it. If you think about the mission of hunter ed in North Carolina, one of the biggest ones is exposing people who don't know anything about it and trying to tear down stereotypes of who hunters are and why hunters do what they do.”

Southern Guilford's season is divided into two parts. In the fall, students take the hunter education course a few evenings per week, focusing on topics including how firearms operate, basic hunting safety and more. “It's really basic knowledge that most of us probably learned as kids, but not my kids,” Hensley said. “We're not a traditional school. I've got kids who live in Greensboro city limits, where the only thing you can shoot at your house is a bow.”

Beginning in January, the students move outside to begin shooting practice in preparation for the District 5 Youth Hunter Education Skills Tournament, a qualifier for the state tournament. Practices are held Saturday mornings from 9 a.m. to noon at the property of a student's family a few miles from school. Students rotate through three



Top: Southern Guilford coach Brad Hensley gathers the team before an event at the District 5 tournament. Above: Shotgun coach Mark Cox (far left) instructs at practice while launching clays for (back to front) Madison Smith, Ella Graham and Hannah Barnes. Madison Smith pauses before firing at a clay during practice on the shotgun range.



The Southern Guilford High School hunter safety team poses for a photograph after competing in the District 5 tournament, an eventful day that began before dawn and included three shooting competitions.

Retired N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission wildlife law enforcement officer Brent Ward, a volunteer at the District 5 tournament, tabulates Ella Graham's archery score. Right: Southern Guilford instructor Jabbo Emory provides another set of eyes for the archery team at practice.



stations run by assistant coaches: shotgun, riflery and archery.

Jessie Emory, a 2018 graduate of Southern Guilford, serves as the archery coach. Emory considered the team “the best thing about school” when she was a student, so she jumped at the opportunity to help coach. “I loved this so much I wanted to come back and help.”

Hensley noted that this year's team featured an increase in new archers, which he thinks is a credit to Emory's enthusiasm and passion for archery. Those students have gone from learning the basics to competing at a high level in a short period of time. “Most of them this year had never even picked up a bow before, so I had to show them everything,” she said. “They just wanted to do it.”

A big part of the growth for new archers and shooters, Emory said, comes from overcoming their fears. “They're normally scared [at first] because you hear all of the bad stuff about guns and everything. Once they get over that, they love it.”

During a team practice in February, Angela Terry and Susan VanHorn stood to the side at the shotgun range watching their kids practice with the team's top shotgun squad. Zach Terry and Emily VanHorn joined Zeke Duncan, Nathan Farlow and Jakob Pickard rotating through the range's five stations, shooting at clays launched by shotgun coach Mark Cox.

Zach Terry has played sports most of his life, including on Southern Guilford's football team. His mom thinks participating on the hunter safety team provides a different lesson than the other activities because it requires a high level of responsibility and the individual nature of it develops accountability.

“Each week they see themselves get better,” Angela Terry said. “You see yourself get a higher rifle score or see yourself get a higher bow score or you might get one or two extra clays and you see yourself improving. I think they are building confidence each week.”

Emily VanHorn is following in the footsteps of her three older brothers who participated on the team. She grew up coming to practices and watching them shoot and decided if they can do it, then she can too.

“I've always come out here and watched my brothers do it and I just thought it was interesting,” Emily said. “And there were never a lot of girls out here, so I figured I'd come out here and try it.”

The second shotgun team soon replaced the top team on the range for the next round of practice. This squad highlights the diversity of Southern Guilford's team in that it is made up entirely of girls: Hannah Barnes, Emerson Beaman, Katlyn Elks, Ella Graham and Madison Smith.

In addition to the fun of shooting, Hannah Barnes said she enjoys the social aspect of being on the team and getting to compete with her friends. “I just like being

out here and getting the experience with everyone else, having a good time. It's better than sleeping in on a Saturday and not doing anything.”

### Game Day

The team got off to an early start on the morning of the District 5 Tournament in March. They met at a Walmart parking lot at 4:45 a.m. and traveled along Highway 421 together to the Chatham County Wildlife Club, the longtime home of the event. Only a single lane leads in and out of the complex in Bear Creek, so Hensley has learned to arrive early and miss the traffic. They pulled up at 5:30 a.m., roughly 30 minutes before the gates opened.

The tournament feels more like a festival than a sporting event. A crowd of more than 1,000 competitors and supporters packs the grassy parking areas with tents, canopies and camping chairs as teams set up gathering bases for between events. The tournament featured 60 shooting teams from 31 schools and the crowds certainly added a level of pressure for the competitors.

“When those kids shoot at practice, there might be five or six people standing around watching,” Hensley said. “But [at the tournament], there's hundreds standing back there waiting for their turn to go. It's definitely a different feel.”

Southern Guilford was the first team to compete in shotgun with their three squads

Top: Wildlife Officer Jonathan Sprowl gives the Southern Guilford team safety instructions before they compete in archery. Middle: Jordyn Leonard, Emily VanHorn and Brayden Beaman compete in the standing portion of the riflery competition. Bottom: Longtime volunteer range master Karl Ernst keeps an eye on the time and the competitors.



hitting the range at 7:45. The combination of nerves and sleepiness contributed to the kids not hitting as many clays as they normally did at practice.

The team moved on to riflery next, and after a few hours wait, sat down to listen to the instructions of longtime Range Safety Officer Karl Ernst. “Pay attention to what you are doing and make [each shot] count,” he instructed the kids. “Safety! Safety! Safety! First, last and everything in between. We want you to go home in one piece.”

Ernst has served as the tournament's range safety officer for the past 37 years. He's a retired hunter education instructor who likes having a positive impact on the kids. “I enjoy getting the young people into shooting sports and I enjoy getting them into it safely,” he said.

Southern Guilford fared better at riflery, with Zeke Duncan, Nathan Farlow, Abigail Haines, Jordyn Leonard and Emily VanHorn putting up the highest score in school history. Southern Guilford completed their day at archery with a solid showing.

Asaiah McIntyre kept a positive attitude after his first experience in the district tournament. He competed in the riflery and archery events. While he was disappointed in his riflery performance, he felt better about how he did in archery. Either way, he plans to keep competing.

“I'm coming back next year,” he said at the end of the day.

That's the sentiment Hensley hopes to hear from his students, that they'll keep at it. While Southern Guilford was not among the five teams to advance to the state tournament, Hensley believes they achieved their mission.

“Yeah, we are not winning trophies, but I think our program is winning in another way: We're winning people,” he said. “And if you think about it, that's what the hunter ed program is all about—winning people.” ♦



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