

## **FHSU team on target with another national title**

Did you know that there are more than 500 shooting sports programs on college and university campuses across the United States? And one of the best collegiate shotgun teams is right here on the campus of Fort Hays State University.

The team's success is impressive, having won seven national championships in the past nine years! The most recent national title – last month in Marengo, Ohio – just might have been the most impressive yet.

At the Scholastic Clay Target Program (SCTP) meet, one of the largest and fastest-growing clay target programs in the country, Fort Hays State claimed another Division II national title, its seventh in program history. It also outscored all of the Division I teams in the process! Then, less than a week later, FHSU claimed a third-place overall finish at another national tourney – the Association of College Unions International (ACUI) Clay Target Championships in San Antonio.

Each year I have the honor of hosting the students in the president's residence to celebrate their victories and help pass out their championship rings. What a special privilege for me.

As I have gotten to know these athletes better, I have been impressed by their discipline – academic and personal – and their kindness. Much of this, I believe, is derived from the culture and caring oversight of Coach Duane Shepherd and his "all-in wife," Teresa, affectionally referred to by the students as "Mama Shep."

One student in particular, Heather Gordon, a past team president, has captured my heart. She is a truly amazing young lady and the epitome of someone who lives our honor code, Tiger Pact.

Heather grew up in Pine Valley, Calif., where she began shooting when she was about 8 years old. Her dad had taken her to a range for a .22 rifle competition, and they noticed a flyer promoting a scholastic shooting program. Dad signed Heather up for practice that following Tuesday – and she has been polishing her skills ever since.

Heather shared that she always wanted to be like her dad, who "competitively shot when I was growing up for his job in Homeland Security. That really piqued my interest."

Heather and her dad continued to shoot together through her childhood. She was only 15 when she shot her first 100 straight in trap. Throughout her teens, Heather continued to compete, learn, and flourish. When it came to choosing a college, it was an easy decision for Heather. She and her parents came on a college visit to FHSU before her senior year in high school, and that's when they met Dr. Duane and Teresa Shepherd. The combination of the Midwest hospitality that the Shepherds extended, along with the team's track record, resulted in a clear college choice decision for Heather and her parents.

Heather's love for this sport has only grown since coming to Fort Hays State. "I have never had a team experience like the one I am privileged enough to have had at FHSU," she said. "The professionalism and passion that my team has in this sport, especially when we travel and get to show off all of our hard work, is unlike any other."

The FHSU team primarily competes in the three common shotgun sports disciplines: skeet, sporting, and trap. It has, however, competed in almost all disciplines, including bunker, international skeet, and FITASC – an international form of sporting clays - arguably the ultimate challenge in clay target shooting. Like many of our athletic teams, the FHSU Shotgun Sports Team travels frequently to compete at matches against other colleges – another reason the members must develop the discipline to stay on top of their studies, other responsibilities, and, of course, their shooting skills.

The team is co-ed and averages about 25 team members each year. Students come from all backgrounds and states. Heather noted that there is “a great level of depth on our team.”

As team president (2018-2020), Heather and the officers worked with the Student Government Association throughout the year to access club funds. Like other sports, shooting develops one’s character, leadership, responsibility, teamwork, self-discipline, and focus – all characteristics key to a successful future. However, as members of a club sport, rather than a varsity athletic team, these students must oversee finances and host fundraisers for their sport.

“Looking over the past five years, it is surreal when I think of the accomplishments I have watched my team achieve. I also recognize, that as a team, we could never say enough kind words about Duane and Teresa Shepherd. The amount of effort they put into this team goes above and beyond. There is no doubt they are our biggest fans and support system,” Heather said.

Out of the seven national titles for FHSU, Heather has been a part of five of them. During her career, Fort Hays State also has several other top-three national finishes as a team, in addition to numerous individual titles.

Heather ended her college shooting career the best way possible – as part of 2021 SCTP national championship team – before moving on with her career (she is graduating next month) and her personal life (she is getting married in August).

“I could not have asked for a better place or support system than what Hays has had to offer,” Heather said. “I am excited to move on, but I will always miss competing at this level with the best team I could have ever asked for.”

When Heather walks across the commencement stage to receive her master’s degree in professional studies with an emphasis in criminal justice, I know I will be beaming with pride and feel deep gratitude for her time on our campus – and the forever spot she will continue to occupy in my heart.

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