

SWFSA Club History

The Southwest Florida Sportsman's Association began as the Cape Coral Sportsman's Association. In the mid 1980's the Cape Coral Sportsman's Association was formed. At that time the club used the Cape Coral Police Range, located behind the Reverse Osmosis Plant, as its place to shoot. Shortly thereafter that facility was closed due to complaints from residents living downrange. It seems some errant bullets were landing in their neighborhood. The club rented the Police Auxiliary facility on 47th terrace as its meeting hall.

Because the club suddenly had no place to shoot Carl Hanson, a retired Norwegian club member, offered to finance the purchase of property and develop a facility in conjunction with the club. He purchased a tract on Zemel Road in Punta Gorda and pushed up some berms. Cape Coral Sportsman's Association members shot there, sharing the range with a practical shooting (IPSC) oriented club, the River Rats.

Some time prior to 1993 Mark Lewis served as the club's President, his wife Debbie was Secretary. At the election meeting in November of 1993 there were some allegations of by-law violations regarding proxy votes, mailed in votes and some significant changes in the agreement with Mr. Hanson which were vigorously challenged by many members. This membership revolt, lead by then Vice-President John Pancari, resulted in his election as the new President and Mr. & Mrs. Lewis leaving the club. Subsequent auditing of the club's books raised many questions regarding misuse of funds, though they were never pursued.

Also during that meeting Mr. Hanson approached the club leadership with issues. The expense of developing the range was significantly more than he had expected and he alleged the club had not fully paid their share of those expenses. He proposed, if members wanted to continue using "his" range, the club would have to pay \$10,000 per year for the use of a single shooting bay. That amount was more than the majority of club members were willing to spend so the club declined Mr. Hanson's ultimatum, initiating yet another uproar; one which split the club into two factions; those who wanted to continue shooting at the Hanson Range regardless of the cost and those believing Mr. Hanson's terms were unacceptable. In the end Mr. Hanson returned money the club had previously invested in the project with each group going their own way.

The faction refusing to pay continued as members of the club and the others did not renew their memberships, aligning with Mr. Hanson instead. The difficulties with that election and the illuminating audit that followed led to a re-write of the by-laws including prohibition of husband and wife being on the Executive Board at the same time and the creation of a Board of Trustees to audit the books annually and monitor the Executive Board.

Around this time it was decided to change the name of the club to the Southwest Florida Sportsman's Association, believing it better reflected the geographic diversity of the membership. The club leadership then started a search for a new piece of property on

which to develop a range. About this same time the club moved its meeting place to Powell's Restaurant on Cape Coral Parkway primarily because Powell's did not charge for the meeting room, expecting, instead, to have members dine there prior to and during the meetings (this financial arrangement has endured albeit at many different restaurants in the area.)

Once suitable property for the new range was located and the membership had voted to proceed with purchase, a loan was procured from a local bank to complete the transaction, contingent on approval from the Charlotte County Board of Commissioners. Once the County's approval was granted the club constructed two 25 yard shooting bays (located where shooting bays 1 and 2 are today.)

With only 85 members left, money was extremely tight. A couple years into the loan someone suggested the members themselves should "invest" in the club under better financial terms and retire the banknote early. Twenty one members put up their retirement money or savings in amounts no greater than \$2000 (to avoid any individual member having the control Mr. Hanson previously exercised.) These investors were to be paid back with interest within 5 years. It is these 21 members who are "The Investors" honored on the plaque at the range.

John Pancari was determinedly focused on a timely repayment to the investors, those members who trusted him with their wallets. The fiscal policies he invoked and the corners he cut to save money are near legendary. There was much pain in the process, but John was insistent, he was driven and he prevailed. It took 7 years from the November 1993 revolt to the club owning its own shooting facility free and clear. Range amenities during the early years were primitive, little more than a hole in the palmettos with impact berms to catch lead. There were no permanent shooting positions; 55 gallon drums supported sheets of plywood for a makeshift shooting bench under clear, and sometimes not so clear, Southwest Florida skies. Weed control fabric covered the berms to prevent erosion. The county mandated security fence consisted of a 4' high section of chain link tied into the side berms immediately behind the firing lines. Stepping off the firing line meant moving outside the fence. There was no roof or other cover providing protection from the elements. There were no sanitary facilities; men used palmettos and the ladies, well... the ladies were just out of luck.

After the switch to "investor" financing a range improvement project was undertaken during which the side berms on the north bay (bay 1) were extended from 25 yards to about 75 yards. Volunteer labor constructed a covered firing line. Chalmer Irvin, with the help of many members, poured the slab and built a permanent cover with shooting benches. The south bay (bay 2) was left untouched at 25 yards. A pipe frame and tarp was attempted to cover its firing line, but the result was unsatisfactory.

With investors made whole again, John Pancari, his goal accomplished, graciously stepped aside. In November of 2000 Allan Whitman was elected President. First order of business was to contract for a portable toilet so everyone could relieve themselves without fear of snakebite or an audience.

To prioritize and evaluate range improvement suggestions a “range committee” was formed to develop a Master Plan. Mr. Whitman and his Executive Board actively recruited new members, mostly selling promises of one day having a nice place to shoot. Over the next 18 months or so they managed to scrape up enough money for some major upgrades. In October 2002 funds appeared available for a contract to construct a 100m rifle range in place of the south shooting bay (bay 2) and a new, wider, 25m pistol range south of that (bay 3). W.J. Sutton, of Punta Gorda, was contracted to do the earth work. The firing line at the 65 yard bay (bay 1) was left untouched. Friends of club members volunteered to survey the property, provide blueprints and physically stakeout the new ranges.

Although the earthwork was finished earlier than expected, severe November rains caused some berm damage and created delays in re-opening. Initially keeping the drainage functional was a trial and error proposition, mostly error. On a few occasions many 5 gallon buckets of water were carried from the pond to flush mud out of the drainage pipes. In January the north bay was opened for shooting but the 2 new bays remained closed. Finally February 8, 2003, with the bay floors finally dry and a new perimeter fence installed around the entire 10 acres (project organized by Bob Locker), all three bays were finally available for members use.

After the range re-opened then vice-president Lee Hampe was tasked with constructing the firing lines on the 2 new bays. Lee Hampe, Bob Reid and Chalmer Irvin completed the bulk of the work in April 2003 with many members providing additional labor during the many, many work party days. Berms were hydro-seeded in mid-April with the hope early wet season rains would be gentle.

Although the range was still not “finished”, are they ever really “finished”, it was now a respectable shooting facility. Recruiting new members was no longer a problem. The club was no longer selling a promise, a vision or wishful thinking. The Southwest Florida Sportsman’s Association had a nice place for members to shoot.

Mr. Whitman served as President until most of the major range improvements were complete, stepping down after 3 years in office. Bob Reid was drafted to serve as President in November of 2003, filling the office for 1 year. John Pancari was elected in 2004 to serve his eighth year in the top spot. In November 2005 Lee Hampe was elected, serving 4 years. Lee’s major goal was to procure the three parcels abutting the west boundary of the original purchase, effectively doubling the size of the club’s property to twenty acres. In late 2009 the last of the three parcels was secured. It remains to be seen what can be done with the new acquisition, though the plan is a shotgun facility for flying targets. At a minimum it provides the club with a buffer zone between the firing line and the western neighbors. Many small range improvements were completed under Lee’s guidance but the land acquisition will be his legacy.

In November of 2009 John Trotta was elected President and now has the reins.