

**Responsible gun safety is no accident - Monday, June 9, 2003**[Print Page](#)

SUMMARY: Following a few simple safety rules and common sense prevent tragedies like this.

Bret Chaussee died the kind of death that's practically unheard of in America. The 49-year-old Philipsburg man was shot to death May 25 at a gun club. Normally, your average gun club would have to rank among the world's safest places. The potential danger inherent when you have groups of people with loaded guns makes most gun club members, visitors, officers and managers absolute zealots on safe gun handling.

Obviously, something was amiss at the Trout Creek Trap Club south of Philipsburg late last month when a small band of men gathered to shoot clay pigeons.

Twenty-four-year-old John Hefty of Whitefish jacked a shell into a borrowed 12-gauge shotgun, and the gun fired. The blast caught Chaussee at close range, high in the back and side. Witnesses later testified that there'd been a bit of drinking going on; Hefty's blood-alcohol level registered 0.098 when he was tested two hours later - too high to legally drive a car.

Jurors at a coroner's inquest in Granite County last week found the shooting involved no criminal means. They ruled against potential charges of negligent homicide, criminal endangerment or negligent endangerment. That's what we have juries for, to make these kinds of judgments. But if anyone thinks this was an accident, think again.

When people consuming alcohol point guns in the wrong direction, it's only an accident if someone isn't killed.

The No. 1 rule of firearm safety, according to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, is "Always Keep the Muzzle Pointed in a Safe Direction." You simply can't kill or wound anyone if you follow that rule. Another important rule is "Learn Your Gun's Mechanical and Handling Characteristics." Hefty testified last week that his gun "just \$ went off." The state Crime Lab determined Hefty's shotgun, which he'd borrowed from a friend, was properly functioning when technicians tested it. Alcohol? Responsible shooters lay off the sauce until after the guns are cased. Anyone who drinks knows perfectly well that alcohol affects judgment and motor skills, and common sense tells you that alcohol and guns are an awful combination.

We scarcely need another tragic reminder of the need for safe and responsible use of firearms, but that's what we're left with here.

As the National Shooting Sports Foundation says in its widely distributed literature, "From the time you pick up a firearm, you become a part of a system over which you have complete control. You are the only part of the system that can make a gun safe - or unsafe."

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