



Competition ends yearlong children's gun safety course



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Gun smoke drifted over a jovial crowd Monday afternoon as parents chatted and children lined up at the shooting range to try out a few unique firearms.

The annual Top Shot competition, held at the Lee County Wildlife Club, was both a contest and an end-of-year celebration for members of the Youth Hunter Education program -- a state-coordinated program to teach children gun safety and other skills. About 50 children from fifth to 12th grades participated in this year's program, according to club board member Rick Foster.

During the yearlong program, the children go through a hunter safety course and then meet weekly to practice firing shotguns and rifles, archery and "orienteering," or using a map and compass to navigate their way through the woods. They also participate in shooting competitions throughout the year.

At the end-of-year celebration, children were given the opportunity to practice shooting weapons they weren't familiar with, said board member Cecil Yates, who

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organized the event for more than 15 years.

"Each time we have some firearms that they've never seen before. They come up to the table and they're instructed on what the firearm is and how it operates," Yates said. "It really tests the kids' skills at how they adapt to different firearms."

Over the percussive bang of gunshots, volunteers from the club coached the children on how to safely fire a .357 Magnum revolver; a .17-caliber rifle with a scope; a .22-caliber Ruger Mark III semi-automatic pistol with a red-dot sight; and a .30-caliber M1 carbine rifle from World War II.

"Don't let the gun jump, take your time," volunteer Barry Benjamin told one participant. "Sight, and then follow through."

Joshua Givens, 13, of Sanford, said his favorite gun at the celebration was the World War II rifle.

Joshua enjoys firing bigger guns, he said, and loves his dad's Colt 1911, a historic .45-caliber handgun.

"The small ones don't have a kick, which is better for if you want to get back on target quickly," he said. "But if you want to have fun and you like the shake of it, the bigger guns go 'boom' and you feel it more."

Joshua's parents, Becky and James Givens, said Joshua's interest in shooting was the main reason they became involved in the Youth Hunter Education program. They wanted him to have the opportunity to shoot, as well as learn how to safely handle and use firearms. James, a U.S. Army veteran, volunteers as a coach for the program.

"We're repetitively, every week, going over safety things -- a gun is not a toy, a bow is not a toy, these are the rules for doing it, these are the rules for competition," he said. "So they're learning discipline."

The training shows, James said. When hundreds or thousands of kids get together for shooting competitions, he said, you don't often see them goofing off or running around.

"They have discipline enough to follow the rules, they know how to handle a weapon and they're responsible," James said. "You don't see 2,000 kids gathered around, too often, that you can trust with multiple different types of weapons."

As children cycled through each station at the Top Shot competition, that discipline was on display. Volunteers blew whistles to indicate when the range was hot and kids were careful as they loaded and unloaded each gun. After everyone got their turn to shoot, the contest wrapped up with a pizza party and awards ceremony in the club's main office.

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