

## **In to the ZONE**

**By Rod Slings**

It was opening day of the Iowa shotgun deer season. The state police radio dispatcher's voice cracked with emotion as he radioed. "C-320 there has been a man shot in an apparent hunting related accident!"

The dispatcher advised the ambulance had already been tripped out and gave the location of the incident. Both state conservation officers C-320 and C-391 were enroute to the scene about 20 miles away.

As the responding officers proceeded to the scene, each was going through a mental checklist to prioritize tasks that would be required. As the officers arrived at the farmhouse, the 25-year-old victim was being loaded into the ambulance. The victim was suffering from a single 12-gauge deer slug wound to the upper inside thigh. Hunting party members huddled together, obviously distraught, as hunting licenses and drivers licenses were collected from the group. It was announced that the young man's father-in-law Jim, was the shooter.

Each member of the group was asked to provide a written statement as to what they saw, heard or experienced leading up to and after the incident. After statements were written the father-in-law, who admitted to being the shooter, offered to take the officers to the scene. Traveling through a snow-covered cornfield to a wooded area beyond the father-in-law described the hunt.

The deer hunt involved a party of six friends and relatives. The hunters began their push from the east working the timber to the west. Near the end of the hunt, a coyote ran in front of Jim. He killed it with one shot. As Jim walked the officers through the hunt step by step, the emotions that he experienced at the time were apparent in his voice: his excitement of seeing the coyote, firing the shot and the success of his marksmanship. You could tell Jim was going into, "the ZONE." Once Jim made the shot, he cycled the pump gun immediately as he always did. As Jim turned toward the direction of his son-in-law, the gun muzzle caught on some brush. The safety still off, the gun discharged, striking his son-in-law, 27 yards away in the upper thigh. The wound was non-fatal with no permanent damage.

As Jim re-lived the incident, his excitement in killing the coyote reminded me of harvesting shots I had made in the past and the excitement I had felt when calling in a turkey, making the shot and retrieving the downed bird; or in making that shot on a pheasant, or in the excitement of the dog's retrieve. Being drawn into "the ZONE".

Lesson learned. Don't be drawn into "the ZONE"; hunters must focus on safety skills whether they are cycling a pump shotgun after a shot, controlling muzzle direction, or returning the safety to the safe position. Use of firearms safety skills must be automatic whether the hunter is a beginner or a veteran. Not getting caught up in "the ZONE" is imperative. A good investigator always considers the shooter's state of mind when investigating a hunting incident. Remember, if we don't know how incidents occur, we can't prevent them!