



Newtownstewart man Matthew Canning completed the successful defence of his All Ireland titles.

SILHOUETTE SHOOTING

Canning pushed to the wire

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ACE marksman Matthew Canning successfully defended his Irish Smallbore Silhouette and Hunting rifle titles in the recent two-day All Ireland Championships at Dublin's BRC Shooting Club grounds although the Newtown man was pushed right to the wire before securing the prestigious honours.

In both disciplines the eagle-eyed Tyrone man faced stiff competition from arch rival Fabian Connolly, winning the silhouette crown by a meagre point before emerging victorious from a nerve-jangling shoot-off to complete a sensational double.

The sparkling triumph was the culmination of hard graft and recent success at the European Championships and afterwards the self-effacing Newtown sharpshooter admitted that nerves had played a huge part in an intense and high pressure shoot-off.

"My heart began racing faster and faster and I could hardly believe my eyes when the final target dropped" he said.

"All I could do was take in slow deep breathes to help reduce my heart rate in the case that a sudden death shoot off

would take place, but seeing Fabian miss that critical shot allowed me to breathe a sigh of relief and I am over the moon to have secured both national titles," beamed the proud champion.

Canning's double success was far from straight forward, although a solid 31/40 left him leading Connolly by a single point at the end of a tense opening day in the smallbore silhouette while the heavyweights were deadlocked 33/40 in the hunting rifle category.

Improving conditions should have produced higher scoring on day two and initially that was reflected on the leaderboard as Canning opened with perfect 10.

At the conclusion of their 40 shots the pair remained inseparable on 35 but when the day one scores were factored in Canning claimed the crown by that solitary point.

In stark contrast the conclusion of the hunting rifle was riddled with nerves, uncharacteristic mistakes and unforced errors. Canning got off to an abysmal start and somehow proceeded to miss three of the opening 10 targets.

A nine on bank two suggested all was not lost but once again some sporadic firing left the Newtown man staring down

the barrel of defeat following a four out of 10 during his third round of shots.

Canning couldn't afford any further slip-ups and salvaged a degree of credibility by dropping just the one shot on the final round for an overall total of 29/40 - hardly gold standard but just enough to leave the Tyrone man in with a fighting chance.

Prospects were far from encouraging and Canning's grip on the national crown had loosened significantly as challenger Connolly was put under the spotlight.

And moments after taking centre stage it was obvious the pressure was also getting to Connolly who faltered throughout, his final round of five out 10 ensuring a dramatic shoot-off and giving Canning a second bite at the cherry.

Nerves though remained the predominant factor. After four shots apiece both shooters had toppled two targets, leaving the outcome of two days of intense competition to be decided by the final two shots.

Canning could scent victory and sent his final target crashing to the dirt to put all the pressure on the shoulders of his opponent.

Connolly eventually crumbled by missing the final target, much to the relief and jubilation of the defending champion.

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