

OLYMPICS

Lawyer making case for Games

■ Assistant public defender Antonio Valiente is a recent convert to skeet shooting and hopes to make the Olympics for Paraguay.

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He was never a hunter or gun enthusiast. He didn't fire his first shotgun until just six months ago.

But these days, when Antonio Valiente, a Miami-Dade assistant public defender, leaves the courtroom, he sheds his tie, packs up his double-barrel shotgun and drives out Tamiami Trail to blast clay pigeons out of the sky.

In a ridiculously short time, Valiente has developed into such a sharpshooter that he will be competing in international skeet shooting events for his native Paraguay — and a shot at Olympic glory.

Starting with a World Cup event in Arizona this week, Valiente will shoot in a series of international competitions with hopes of earning a spot in the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. It won't be easy, with Valiente juggling intense target practice and a full-time job defending indigent clients accused of everything from armed robbery to murder.

"Pull," Valiente bellows to attendant at the Trail Glades shooting range near the Everglades. She presses a button. In less than three seconds, a bright orange disk flings into a perfectly blue sky.

• TURN TO LAWYER, 2B

OLYMPICS

Legal eagle also a sharpshooter

• LAWYER, FROM 1B

He instantly snaps his shotgun up, from hip-level to shoulder, squeezing off a round. The disk explodes, peppering a shallow pond with bits of orange clay shrapnel. A puff of black smoke swirls upward into the sky.

"You want to practice hard and then, in competition, you just let it happen," Valiente says, as he moves from shooting station to station. "You miss one target, it's a big deal. You can't be distracted."

For Valiente, his emergence in a shooting sport has been entirely unexpected.

His family actually hails from Brazil, though his father and brother live in Paraguay, and he grew up in Miami.

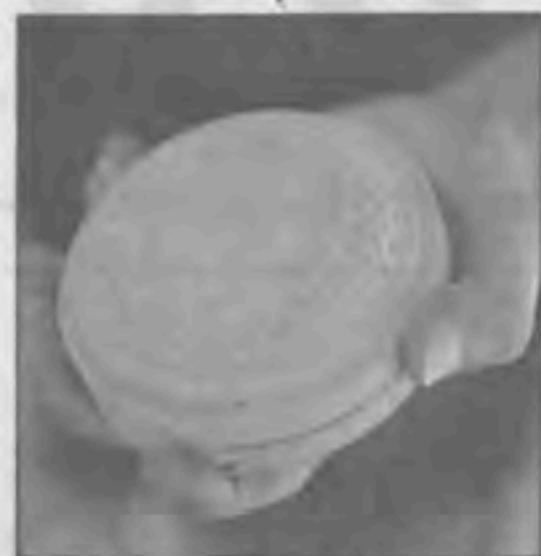
The 30-year-old played lacrosse in high school and college, honing his reflexes as a goalie. Later, after graduating law school at American University in Washington, D.C., he joined his brother racing motorcycles.

Valiente never cared for firearms until September, when he and his brother tagged along to the Trail Glades range, off Tamiami Trail near Krome Avenue, with a buddy who had bought a new shotgun. Afraid of the recoil, Valiente wielded the weapon with trepidation.

"I think I fired from the hip," he said.

But Valiente enjoyed the challenge and complexity of the sport. He soon realized that if he shot well enough at international competitions, he could make the Olympics.

The reason: Paraguay has never before entered a skeet shooter into the Olympic



games. He will be the only one competing for a berth. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," he said.

Within months, Valiente had convinced Paraguay's national shooting federation to sponsor him for international competitions.

He also joined up with one of America's most accomplished skeet trainers, Craig Hancock, of Eatonton, Ga., who has coached his own son to two Olympic medals.

"He's not too old to learn anything. Usually, the younger the better, but he's picking it up fast," Hancock said. "And he picked the Olympic sport, the international sport, the hardest one."

Indeed, the international skeet shooting is no easy Duck Hunt video game.

Unlike American skeet, shooters in international competitions cannot hold their weapons raised on their shoulder before the target is rocketed into the sky. Valiente must refine the motion of snapping the shotgun into place, something he practices constantly at home.

Shooters must fell clay pigeons hurled into the air at various angles. They get 25 shots for 25 targets per round while shooting from eight different "stations," some more difficult than others.

Destroying the clay tar-



AL DIAZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

MARKSMAN: Assistant public defender Antonio Valiente hopes to represent his native Paraguay in the 2016 Olympics in skeet shooting. He picked up the sport last September and is already proficient at hitting the clay disks like the one above.

gets — which can travel at about 62 mph — means pinpointing the spot the pigeon will be before it actually gets there.

Hand-eye coordination and reflexes are the keys. At his office next to the Miami-Dade courthouse, Valiente hangs special sports therapy balls, printed with numbers and letters, from the ceiling — swatting them, then following them with the eyes helps to sharpen vision.

For Valiente, an assistant public defender since 2009, his training regimen must be precise and strict, every minute planned out so as not to shortchange his clients.

He often arrives early to the office of the Public Defender, where he handles major cases in the division of Miami-Dade Circuit Judge Bronwyn Miller. On a lunch break, he slips out after the morning calendar to hit the range before returning to work well into the night.

Trials, however, take priority.

In February, Valiente stopped shooting at the

range for several weeks during the Watson Dorval trial — his first capital murder case as the lead defense attorney. The result was a win — jurors acquitted Dorval of fatally beating his girlfriend's baby son after Valiente raised the possibility the mother was the culprit.

Practicing skeet is not unlike prepping for a trial. But instead of crafting summaries of depositions or practicing closing arguments in the front of a mirror, Valiente carefully plans efficient routines, sometimes shooting from unusual spots to force his eyes to adjust to a different horizon.

But the actual trials and competitions are wholly different beasts.

In the courtroom, multitasking is crucial. Defense lawyers must pay attention to a whirlwind of moving parts: jotting down and analyzing testimony of witnesses, how prosecutors phrase their questions, even how their client's demeanor is at the defendant's table.

But at skeet competitions, shooters must maintain a singular focus: Block out

distractions. Don't think about your score. Rein in the "runaway mind," Hancock says. "Once you get into the higher levels, you end up playing a lot of mind games on yourself."

Valiente found out the hard way. In his third competition, he suddenly found his hands shaking uncontrollably.

In another event, Valiente shot a perfect score through six stations — until the thought flashed in his mind that he happened to be shooting behind Kim Rhode, a five-time skeet Olympic medalist. Valiente promptly missed the next shot, a relatively easy one.

"It flashed in my mind literally for a second. It was enough to throw me off," Valiente said. "So much of this sport is psychological."

He'll have more than a few events to iron out the jitters. Starting on Wednesday, he'll compete in a World Cup event hosted by the International Shotgun Sporting Federation, followed by similar events in Mexico, Germany and Spain.

Like good case law, there is precedent for Valiente to succeed.

On a recent weekday, as Valiente blasted the clay disks out the sky, Douglas McCutcheon, 71, sipped water and rested in the shade. A snowbird who owns a limousine company, McCutcheon shot for his native Canada for 10 years, earning medals in two international World Cup events in the 1990s.

McCutcheon did not start competing until the ripe age of 48. He praised Valiente.

"You just have to have good eyes, good reflexes," he said. "And you've got to practice — a lot."