

# PORTAGE MAN NAMED STATE'S HUNTING SAFETY INSTRUCTOR OF THE YEAR



PHIL RHEIN/DAILY REGISTER

Mike Mittelsteadt, shown outside his home in rural Portage, was named Outstanding Hunter Education Instructor of the Year last month.

## SAFETY IS THE NAME OF HIS GAME

By Phil Rhein  
Daily Register

**M**ike Mittelsteadt almost dropped the phone when he heard.

"It was a total shock," Mittelsteadt grinned, describing the moment he learned he'd been named Outstanding Hunter Education Instructor of the Year. "I never expected it."

"I was not surprised," said Gary Schoppenhorst, a certified hunting safety instructor who has worked with Mittelsteadt for more than a decade. "It's definitely an honor he's earned. I can't tell you how many parents have come up to Mike and all the instructors and said what a great course it is."



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Mittelsteadt works with a student on the use of a muzzleloader rifle during a hunter safety field day.

# SAFETY

Continued from Page A1

Mittelsteadt has been teaching hunter safety courses for about 12 years now, helping to teach almost 1,500 students one of the most important lessons a hunter can learn: the proper way to handle a firearm "always, always, always as if it's loaded."

Conducting two classes a year, Mittelsteadt and a highly skilled collection of a dozen or more assistants work with groups of anywhere from 40 to 70 new hunters.

It's those assistants who he gives much of the credit of his award to, praising their dedication and professionalism.

"If you're surrounded with great people, they make you look great," Mittelsteadt noted proudly.

Many of their students are teenagers, a surprising number of them girls, but adults — especially mothers — make up roughly a third of each class, he said.

"Even a lot of older hunters are finding out they need the class to hunt in other parts of the country," Mittelsteadt said, noting that hunter education classes are required in Wisconsin for anyone born after 1973.

"They walk in the first day and they're totally green," he said, estimating that fully half his typical class has never even touched a gun at that point in their life.

But by the time those students complete the class, they will have actually fired a gun using live ammunition and learned to do it safely.

The course concludes with a field day that offers the chance to try bow hunting, firing a muzzleloader rifle and even a try at hunting a deer, using agricultural tags in a cooperating farmer's field.

"When they're done on that

Saturday, the reward is right there on their face," Mittelsteadt said with a satisfied grin. "They all have a huge smile on their face."

What sets Mittelsteadt's class apart from many others, though, is his adherence to the term "EDOC." A memory device for the guidelines — educate, demonstrate, observe and congratulate — it's a term he was introduced to while at the Hunter Education Instructor Academy at Fort McCoy.

Tim Lawhern, administrator of the DNR's hunter education program and developer of the Academy, said many instructors around the state are resistant to learning a new method of teaching their students.

For many instructors, he said, the model of lectures and slide shows used since hunter education classes began in 1967, worked for them and should work for new students as well.

"About two hours into the program, you start to see heads start to nod up and down," he said. "Once they've seen it and gone through it, they understand."

After attending the program in 2002, Mittelsteadt returned to Portage determined to revamp the entire teaching model of the course by moving to an intensely hands-on approach that reinforces lessons through direct participation.

"It's a big change and Mike brought all that back from the Academy," Schoppenhorst said.

While no live ammo is used

during the classroom portion of instruction, the students are able to handle some of the 40 or more firearms made available during the course.

"By the third evening, the students have unloaded firearms, they've come up and learned how to work the action, find the safety, identify the make, model and ammunition type," Mittelsteadt said, rattling off items with a tick of his fingers. "They grasp it quite quickly."

"People want to take his class and there's good reason for that," Lawhern said. "Mike's quality is probably as high as anyone in the state."

While enjoyable and engaging, Mittelsteadt hammers home the basic rule of firearm safety: treat every gun as if it's loaded, keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction, be sure of your target and keep the finger off the trigger until ready to shoot.

"If you follow those rules, you'll never have a firearms accident," he said.

"As a hunter, there's no excuse for mistaking a human target," Mittelsteadt continued. "How can you possibly mistake another human being for a game animal?"

Having taught for more than a decade, he's got no plans to stop in the near future.

"I want to see 25 years," Mittelsteadt said, smiling at the idea.

"I hear they give you an award," he joked.