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# Gun lobbyist hits bull's-eye this season in Springfield

## NRA man in Capitol has winning spring

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ROCHESTER, Ill. -- Todd Vandermyde takes aim slowly, raising his automatic pistol in a calm motion as the paper silhouette races through the target range toward him. One, two, three, four, five shots--all within the inner two rings of the paper target.

"You can't get tense," Vandermyde said. "You draw, clear your holster, sweep the safety and concentrate on your target. Get your sight alignment. That's the key to everything."

For Vandermyde, that's a philosophy that works not just at the local shooting range he frequents, but also at the nearby Illinois state Capitol where he is the lobbyist for the National Rifle Association.

Vandermyde, 40, has been like Rambo at the Statehouse lately. He has had success at beating back gun control legislation for years, but nothing like this year.

Instead of playing defense in this spring's legislative session, Vandermyde went on the offensive and pushed more than 30 bills that would loosen gun controls already on the books. Carefully studying the politics and viewpoints of lawmakers in both chambers, he crafted measures he knew could at least get through committee and onto the floor. In one case, he outfoxed a canny group of anti-gun lobbyists by pairing an idea they dearly wanted with one they found distasteful.

Before lawmakers leave town for the season, he may very well put four NRA bills on the governor's desk.

Rivals blame Vandermyde for making the city and suburbs a more dangerous environment.

"People are dying because of his efforts," said Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago), head of the Senate Judiciary Committee and a key opponent of the NRA agenda. "He blocks reasonable gun control. He blocks public safety measures. I disagree with just about everything he does."

But at gun shows and target ranges, Vandermyde is a hero.

"We don't believe in Chicago-style gun control," said Rich Pearson, past president of the NRA's sister organization, the Illinois State Rifle Association. "All strict gun laws do is disarm the innocent people so they can't defend themselves. Todd's fighting for that principle."

### Lifelong love of guns

For Vandermyde, the fight is more than just a job, it's a personal commitment. Before he was an NRA lobbyist, he was a member. Vandermyde, raised in Downers Grove and the son of a Republican precinct committeeman, has been a gun lover since he was a teenager building a makeshift shooting range in his family's garage.

Vandermyde enlisted in the Army, where he eventually ended up in the Special Forces and later signed on as a Pathfinder

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plotting cargo drops and coordinating helicopter movements.

When he returned to the suburbs, Vandermyde went to work as an operating engineer. Also an avid motorcyclist, he got active in the fight against a mandatory state helmet law and helped a cyclists lobbying group, ABATE of Illinois, keep Illinois as one of the few states that doesn't require riders to wear them.

Seeing his success in the helmet fight, Illinois State Rifle Association board members in 1993 asked Vandermyde to join their board and begin lobbying for the gun-rights organization. He now lobbies on behalf of NRA, ABATE and an operating engineers union.

Today, with his flattop, camouflage-inspired blazers and cowboy boots, Vandermyde has a close connection with the cause he represents.

On weekends, he travels from his Yorkville home to attend hunting banquets and Ducks Unlimited fundraisers. When he's out of town, he likes to stop by and shoot the breeze with local gun shop owners. When he goes on vacation with his wife, Amy, and his two young sons, he often tries to squeeze in some hunting.

#### Passionate volunteers

"It's a natural organization," said Vandermyde. "What does the anti-gun crowd do on a weekend? Get together and talk about the gun they didn't buy? The deer they didn't hunt? Gun owners get together all of the time and talk about the things we have in common."

For that reason, they're easy to mobilize. When word spreads via e-mail, phone tree or word of mouth that they are needed, NRA members are more than happy to volunteer for campaigns or to drive to the Capitol in their camouflage to remind lawmakers that they are paying attention to a gun vote.

Even though Chicago Democrats control the governor's office and both chambers of the legislature, that doesn't mean an easy ride for gun control measures pushed aggressively by Mayor Richard Daley. The gun lobby is much stronger Downstate, and Democrats from outside the Chicago area are just as likely to vote to protect gun owner rights as are conservative Republicans.

That's why Daley has long been unable to pass a bill restricting people from buying more than one gun a month.

#### Winning over lawmakers

Lawmakers are poised to pass a bill to require the destruction of records tracking who buys guns in Illinois and how often despite objections from a wide array of law enforcement officials who see the records as an important crime-fighting tool. Vandermyde won support for that bill by pairing it with a big item on Daley's wish list--required background checks for all firearm purchases at gun shows.

In fact, in all but one of the major votes pitting the NRA against gun control groups this spring, lawmakers have sided with the gun crowd.

Rep. Harry Osterman (D-Chicago), a key workhorse for many Daley bills, said he thinks gun owners get their way so often not because they represent the opinion of most Illinois residents but because they have a disproportionately loud voice in Springfield.

"The NRA leaders are masters of misinformation," said Osterman. "They have a vocal minority, whose leadership gives them misinformation on what bills are good and bad."

People who agree with him haven't yet spoken as loudly, said Osterman.

"I think that other citizens who care about gun control have to be as organized and as vocal," said Osterman. "And to date that hasn't happened."

'Summoning the troops'

Vandermyde sees his job as similar to that of the Army Pathfinder he used to be--going in on the ground, assessing the situation and then coordinating the movement of troops.

"The goal with a massive troop movement is to get as many guys in and out, and to have as little exposure as possible," said Vandermyde. "I go in and say, 'This is the way I would recommend plotting it all out.' After that, I'm just responsible for making sure helicopters aren't flying over other helicopters."

One recent day, Vandermyde took a break after a frenetic day of lobbying to fire off a few rounds of a .45-caliber pistol at a range in Rochester outside Springfield. As is often the case, his shooting partners included Pearson and another past president of the group, James Vinopal.

Vandermyde jokes that the only gun control he likes is the kind you get when you fire with both hands on the weapon.

He shoots mostly with an automatic, favoring what gun enthusiasts call the Weaver stance, standing at a slight angle to the target while pushing with the strong arm and pulling with the weak one to control the lift of the muzzle.

As the group left the range, the owner, Sonny Siddens, offered support for their lobbying efforts.

"When you need help up there, just whistle," Siddens said. "I'll summon up the troops."

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