



# Talbot on target! Benchrest

Communications Officer Sam Talbot continues his mission to shoot the SSAA disciplines, turning his attention this month to Benchrest

Coach Brendan Atkinson took me under his wing this month to learn the fine art of Benchrest shooting. Having represented Australia many times, including at this year's Benchrest World Championships in Canada, Brendan is well qualified to teach me a thing or two.

In fact he's a world champion in his own right, having been part of the Australian team which famously toppled the US powerhouse - the only time it has been done in the history of the sport. But enough about Brendan, this is about me, or at least me and Benchrest.

This discipline is performed using a firearm resting on a front and rear sandbag to ensure the rifle remains as still as possible when aiming and firing. Targets are typically placed at 100 and 200 yards and the object is to shoot the smallest five-shot (sometimes 10) group possible, meaning bullseyes don't matter but consistency does.



Sam uses the joystick with Brendan's custom-built rifle.



Sam learns about centrefire.

The ultimate Benchrest round would be to place all shots through the very same hole but, according to Brendan, in the 70 years of the sport's existence this has never been done although sometimes they go really close, so close in fact that a back target must be used to ensure all five shots have actually been fired.

But counting shots isn't the biggest challenge in Benchrest, it's mastering the wind. Reading the wind is a true art form and can severely impact what happens to your shot between leaving the rifle and arriving at the target. Learning to shoot can take a few minutes but reading wind and weather conditions can take a lifetime.

### Rimfire v centrefire

Benchrest can be separated into rimfire and centrefire and these can be broken down into heavy and lightweight classes.



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There are other classes but if you're a beginner, rimfire is the place to start. If after shooting rimfire you decide Benchrest is for you, it's probably time to move on to centrefire.

Distances and accuracy increase dramatically with centrefire but so do ammunition requirements. While rimfire is shot with any old box of .22LR, centrefire requires reloading - and buying from the store isn't really an option. Initially this was enough to scare me off as I just want to shoot, not reload, but as Brendan demonstrated, reloading is as much a part of the sport as aiming and shooting and is not quite as tricky as it seems.

### Benchrest isn't cheap

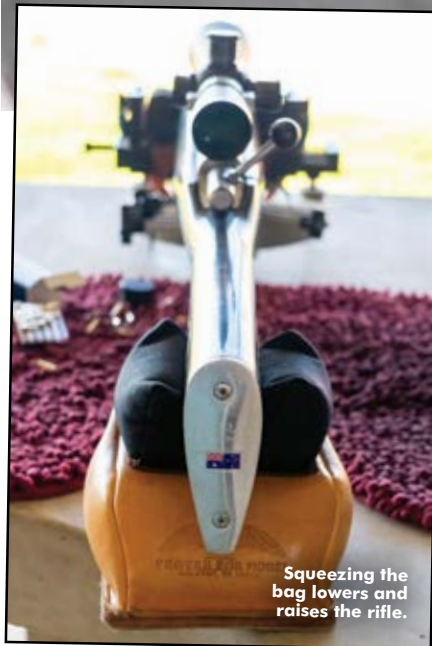
"Rifles used for Benchrest are made with the sort of precision Formula One cars are put together," said Brendan. "Take a bunch of components and marry them up so the synergy produced will win the day . . . if the operator does their job."

He reckons most of the top Benchrest components come from the US and aren't cheap, a serious custom-built rifle likely to set you back about \$5000. Most of these are chambered for the 6mm PPC cartridge, a modified version of an old .220 Russian case.

Luckily for me I didn't need to worry about that as set up in front of me was a rimfire Sako P94S ready to go. Before I did any shooting, Brendan made a point of having me test the trigger as Benchrest shooters like theirs extremely light, and even with the expectation of a super-light trigger I was stunned at how easily it went off. Similar to many Benchrest rifles, the



Most Benchrest competitors use tuners (weights at the end of the barrel) to help minimise vibration.



Squeezing the bag lowers and raises the rifle.

Sako trigger took just 1.5 ounces to activate but after a bit of practice I got used to it.

### Shooting groups

I had the front of the rifle on a rest and the butt on a sandbag. My right hand operated the trigger while my left hand squeezed and held the bag which secured the rifle and made it move up and down. The wind wasn't much of a factor so we didn't even put wind flags out. Typically these are positioned down the range so competitors can factor in the all-important element but with no flags all my focus was on being steady, straight and consistent.

The flags wouldn't have made a difference anyway as I shoot with one eye closed, a less than ideal arrangement given one eye is supposed to be on the target and one on the flags, yet despite my improper technique I still managed some decent groups.

The first ammo used for rimfire was Standard Velocity CCI followed by slightly more expensive match grade ammo. The difference between a \$10 box and a \$25 box of ammo was noticeable on the targets but was it \$15 of improvement? Well, in my opinion, you should do as the name suggests and use the more expensive ammo only for matches.

### Centrefire groups

For centrefire shooting I used Brendan's custom-made firearm from the US. The striking red rifle was completed with a two-ounce trigger, Kelby stock, Stolle action, 60x power March scope and of course uses the 6PPC cartridge, Brendan explaining this is considered the most



Inspecting the results at the beautiful and flat SSAA Monarto.

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accurate shortrange cartridge in Benchrest shooting. I was relieved to hear that as I figured I'd need all the extra accuracy I could muster, given the targets were being moved from 50 yards out to 100.

The rifle was paired with a new joystick rest which fits both ends, leaving the shooter with just a joystick to control the rest and therefore the aim. I enjoyed using the joystick as I felt I could be even more accurate.

At this point I also tried shooting 'free-recoil', meaning the only part of your body that touches the rifle is your finger on the trigger. In theory this sounds like it should be extremely accurate given no extra friction is being applied from the shooter's body, however I found it a little uncomfortable and performed better when I had my shoulder slightly on the butt of the rifle. For me a little extra friction helped but usually competitors try and limit this as much as possible. Some even put baby powder on their cheeks to try and minimise friction, which is why you might see shooters walking around with white faces at Benchrest competitions.

### Competition time

After practice it was time for real competition. I was given two targets to shoot the best grouping I could and after a couple of sighting shots was ready to attempt my first group. I can't stress how good my first four shots were. Unbelievably good. All four almost went through the bullseye and barely broke any excess paper after the first shot. Thinking I'd just about mastered Benchrest I took my fifth shot exactly as I thought I had the first four but to my shock it flew high and wide and the size of my



Many of the tools used for reloading.



From right to left are progressively cleaner patches. The last one shows most of the debris has been removed.

group was effectively doubled. Oh well, it was still a decent group.

My next target was a bit more erratic over the five shots but ultimately worked out to be slightly smaller than my first

group so we reached for the measuring tape (callipers), used to measure from the edges of the two farthest-apart holes. Since the size of your group is actually measured from the middle of the holes, you then subtract the diameter of the bullet to find the size of your group. In my case this was roughly .420 of an inch. I'll take that.

### Reloading

As mentioned earlier, loading ammunition is as much a part of Benchrest as shooting groups, at least for centrefire. Competitors often do their loading just before they shoot as changes in temperature can require slight adjustments to their loads.

"Some powders definitely perform better in certain temperature ranges and bullets are obtained from many custom makers, and right now the factory Berger bullets are very popular," said Brendan. "There are several manufacturers in Australia who produce world-class bullets for Benchrest though."

To give a basic idea, the reloading process starts with taking your used brass



A good day's shooting.

## Talbot on target!

and knocking out the old primer so you can replace it with a new one. You then add powder, the bullet, seat it and you're good to go. Or something like that. There are a few more tools and steps involved, especially when you start to really understand the subtle differences your ammunition can have.

### Cleaning

Many of us (me at least) only think to clean our rifles every couple of months or so, but most Benchrest shooters clean theirs after every group. The technical term for this is 'removing the by-products of combustion' but luckily the process is pretty straightforward. After shooting a group we pushed three white patches through the barrel, gave the barrel a quick scrub with a bronze brush before finishing off with some more white patches and kept feeding them through until they started coming out more or less clean. "If you don't clean the barrel it will maintain accuracy for about 35-40 shots and the reason we don't wait that long is because it becomes significantly harder to clean by then," said Brendan.

### Silver medal

Like many disciplines, Benchrest has awards and you can win silver, gold, ruby and diamond medals. The medal that caught my eye was the silver award, given for shooting a 'five-shot group at 100 yards which measures less than one-inch centre to centre'. I figured my grouping of .420 should meet the criteria for the award, so the range officer signed my target and I filled out the appropriate form (which



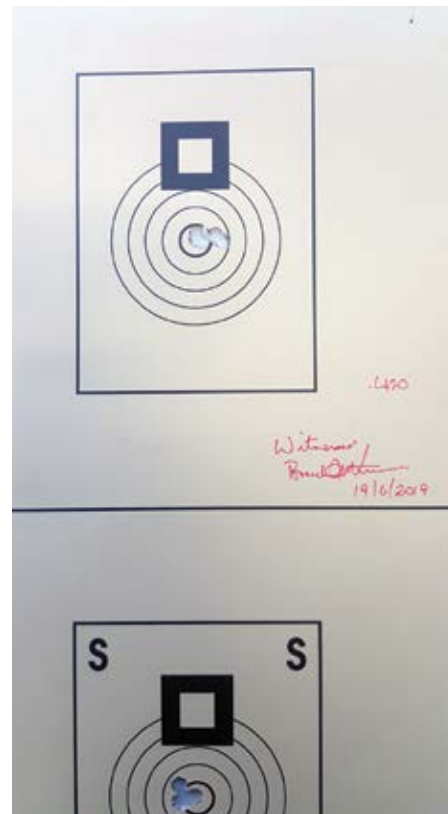
you'll find at [ssaa.org.au](http://ssaa.org.au)) and sent it off.

About a week later I received a letter and am happy to report that after more than a year of shooting Talbot on Target I've finally won something - the Silver Medal Award for Benchrest! It's always nice to win something and with shooting there are lots of opportunities to do that or to reach some other milestone. I'd go as far to say it's one of the best things about the sport.

### Wrap-up

Despite the silver medal it's unlikely I'll be spending \$5000 on a custom-made Benchrest rifle any time soon, although the discipline now has a special place in my heart. I'm interested in learning more about how to read the wind but first I need to practise shooting with both eyes open.

Benchrest is a lot of fun and challenges competitors on a technical and intuitive level. It tests their ballistics knowledge as well as ability to read the elements and if you're curious at all I recommend you give it a try. And one last 'thank you' to Brendan Atkinson for all his expert assistance at the range and in general. ●



The award-winning group signed by the range officer ready to be sent off.



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