



Talbot on target! Practical Shooting

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



It's a touch ironic that Practical Shooting for me involved more theory and calculation than any discipline I've tackled so far but, when the time comes for action, it more than lives up to its name and is one of the most physically demanding disciplines the SSAA has to offer.

What is Practical Shooting?

This is one of the fastest-growing shooting sports in Australia. A high-speed, high-energy and quick-thinking discipline, it's intended to offer challenging and active shooting matches that test the capacity of both competitor and equipment.

With its roots in WA as a state handgun sport, it has since expanded and is now

recognised nationally. Each country which conducts International Practical Shooting Confederation (IPSC) shooting usually runs a national equivalent and Practical Shooting is the SSAA's. It's suitable for a variety of firearms and offers categories, events and matches for everyone.

The most commonly used firearms are handguns but the competition I attended was for rifles. Just like other Practical competitions though, mine consisted of various stages with competitors scored on time and accuracy. What makes Practical unique is all targets and distances are different for each competition and stage and depending on the stage, competitors will be given more or less information on what's required of them, meaning sometimes

you really have to think on your feet, all of which makes for fun and exhilarating shooting.

Similar to other disciplines there are two basic divisions in Practical Shooting: Standard and Open - Standard for rifles and scopes up to a value of \$5000 while Open can be as expensive as you like (which means *very* expensive for some). Rimfire Rifle is shot at a maximum of 100m and Centrefire at 500m maximum.

Having a shot

SSAA Practical Shooting SA, a relatively new club, invited me to one of their shoots to show me the ropes. I arrived the day before a competition called Monarto Meltdown, a big event they were hosting



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which attracted lots of sponsors and was the second major event in the Precision Rifle Series. The competition used SSAA rules and followed the Northern Territory rule book since the Rifle part of Practical is still finding its way.

Large events often have warm-up days before competition and I've found these to be excellent learning days with lots of people ready to offer help or keen to show you their equipment. The atmosphere is much more relaxed so if you ever feel intimidated about heading to a competition, find out if there's a warm-up day to relieve some of the pressure.

First thing I noticed was most shooters were a bit younger than you might find at other ranges.

"A lot of our people grew up shooting then gave it away for a while and now they're back in their 30s with time and money to take it up again," said Steve Spelman, secretary of Practical Shooting SA.

At the range, Steve showed me some of the stages and the many different shooting surfaces competitors have to navigate during stages. One was a platform hanging from chains - I usually find balance on terra firma challenging enough, let alone adding in the wobbles of being on a levitating plank. A farm gate, giant log and a pile of tyres were just some of the other items placed in stages which required shooters to interact or use them in different ways, all the while shooting targets at different distances under strict time limits.

"Practical is based on hunting and military shooting so the stages reflect that," said Steve. "The only limiting factor



If only 3P allowed the use of a tyre stack.

is safety, which always takes priority." Interestingly, no shots were taken offhand or unsupported.

Synthetic rifles

Another thing that struck me was the absence of wood on the firearms - all the rifles being synthetic - and Steve explained there are a number of advantages with the newer synthetic rifles. "The butt for example is better than a wooden stock as it's easy to customise and adjust and they're stronger, less water absorbent and

can weigh whatever you want," he said. "But a better rifle won't automatically make you a better shot."

Steve lent me his Ruger Precision which is more or less straight off the shelf and complete with a Vortex Viper PST scope, making it a solid rifle for the production category (the Tikka Atax would be another good scope for Production). All ammunition is handloaded and we used 6.5mm Creedmoor, popular thanks to its relative price, reliability and accessibility.

Shooting from the bench I had no trouble hitting targets from 200m to 400m, mostly thanks to Steve's knowledge of his equipment. By knowing bullet speeds, wind speed, target distance and a number of



A very adjustable butt.



Measuring wind speed with a kestrel.

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other variables (including the Coriolis effect - rotation and curvature of the earth), Steve used a phone app called *Applied Ballistics* to calculate exactly how many scope clicks were needed to hit the targets.

And while any ballistics calculator can work (there are plenty free ones on the internet) there is still a great degree of skill needed to make the shot - the app will not do all the work by any stretch of the imagination.

I was surprised how technical this type of shooting is though. Usually I just grab any old factory load and hope for the best, even with shotguns it didn't faze me whether I used 24, 28 or 32-gram loads or any shot size from 6-9. Unlike me though, competitors warming up for the competition were using range finders, kestrels and apparatus like MagnetoSpeed to properly measure bullet speed.

"We do our own reloading because factory loads don't always give consistent enough bullet speeds," said Steve. "The more accurate we can be with our bullet speed measurements, the more accurate our calculations and consequently our shooting will be."

Kestrels, bags and dope!

Many of you will know a Kestrel weather meter is used to measure wind speed, this being crucial information in determining

where to shoot and what adjustments to make. When all of this is done for all possible targets on a stage, the Practical Shooter records all the required scope clicks on a dope card, a small business card-sized piece of paper stuck to the side of the rifle. Given the tight time limits the dope card is invaluable and makes all the calculating beforehand worthwhile.

Another key tool for Practical Shooters is bags as all these calculations are useless if you're not stable. Since many stages require competitors to shoot off different surfaces and objects, bags can be used in a number of different ways to ensure a steady shot. The bags come in all shapes and sizes from small ones to rest under your rifle to bigger ones you can lay on or tuck under your arm when shooting from a squatting position. I think of bags as a blanket - they keep you comfortable and make you feel steady.

Shooting dry runs - competition

As mentioned previously in this column, arguably my greatest weakness is finding targets through the scope. Practical may be the most challenging for this as it involves lots of moving, repositioning and different targets. Luckily, I dealt with this by using a handy lever on top of my scope that dramatically changed the power, enabling me to quickly pull back, spot



Steve used a phone app called *Applied Ballistics* to calculate exactly how many scope clicks were needed to hit the targets.



Knowing bullet speed is vital.



Steve crunches the numbers as Sam pulls the trigger.

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the target and zoom in again while maintaining the settings for that target.

As it was a warm-up day and since I wasn't feeling particularly confident, instead of shooting I had some dry runs through a stage, the one I focused on consisting of shooting from a stack of three tyres. This called for two shots resting on the stack, removing a tyre and taking another two shots, removing another tyre and firing my final two shots from the single tyre.

And let me tell you there are lots of positions you can shoot from off a stack of tyres. It took me a while to steady and best put myself on the tyres and it was also my first time shooting with a bipod which is quite intuitive and didn't take long to get used to.

Of course pulling the trigger is the easy part - getting everything right up to that point is the real test. First you must understand the stage and work out how you'll shoot it, then calculate how you'll hit the targets then fill out your dope cards. With that done it's time to shoot which means finding stable positions, identifying the different targets and moving through the stage safely and quickly.

Despite not actually firing a shot I still managed to use up all the available time. I used to think getting into the 3P positions was a pain but Practical Shooting is

a different beast altogether. Ingenuity is required to identify the best positions and planning your movements is a key part of this discipline.

For example, another stage required competitors to shoot from a chair and I initially sat down as I normally would. Wrong! The best way is to lay the chair back, sit on the back rest and use its legs to steady the rifle on. Practical Shooting is full of that sort of thing and it makes for a fun, dynamic and challenging sport that requires wits and using your body and brain to the max.

Conclusion

Practical Shooting reminds me of sporting clays but with rifles. The stages challenge shooters in slightly different ways and always throw up something new. I certainly got more than I bargained for and have barely scratched the surface of this increasingly popular discipline. I highly recommend it and had a great time with the guys from SSAA Practical Shooting SA and look forward to trying out the handgun side in due course. ●



A dope card being stuck to the rifle, left column distance, right for clicks.




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