



Talbot on target! Lever Action

Communications Officer Sam Talbot has been back at the range to continue his mission to shoot the SSAA disciplines. This month: Lever Action.



Offhand stance doesn't look too bad despite what the scores might say.

Not only is lever action a way to load fresh cartridges into the chamber of a barrel, it's also a fun SSAA discipline. And like many disciplines the name tells you just about all you need to know - at least that's what I thought. It turns out this challenging style of shooting is more than meets the eye and can throw up lots of surprises.

How does it work?

This discipline caters exclusively for lever action rifles. Competitions are in two categories: Classic Calibre for as-issued rifles in any centrefire cartridge produced up to 1938 and Open Calibre for all other rifles split between rimfire and centrefire. So if you want to compete in all categories you'll need three different firearms.

Matches require a variety of shooting positions and distances and courses of fire can vary from 15 seconds to five minutes for five shots. Lever Action competitions use animal targets which have score zones marked on vital areas, starting at 10 and going down to five, target animals including small bear, buffalo head, pig, rabbit, feral cat and goat.

Each competition consists of several rounds of five shots over 100, 50 or 25m, each round assigned a specific type of shooting position, reflective of field positions. Each competition is different and competitors can be assigned just about any combination of shooting position, distance, target type and time allowed, enough to keep you on your toes.

Where to go

After learning that some of the best Lever Action shooters in the country shoot at SSAA Para, I set out to try it for myself. Could it be a South Australian thing? Lever Action captain at Para is Steve Nicholas who also happens to be the third person inducted into the Lever Action Hall of



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Fame, and apart from myself there were a few other newcomers at the competition along with plenty of experience.

In fact ages ranged from eight to 88. At the upper end was Doug Turly who was showing a first-time shooter the ropes while sporting the most patches I've ever seen on a piece of clothing. He explained the patches came from National Championships so it was no surprise to learn Doug was the fourth person inducted into the Hall of Fame. Clearly I was in good hands and Steve was more than happy to show me the way and lend me a rimfire rifle to use, something which pleased me as lower recoil would make the short time limits much easier.

At Para you can use whatever class of rifle you like which results in a smorgasbord of unique firearms and cartridges, including one competitor with a .219 Zipper in .224 calibre. As you can imagine, all these rifles and cartridges being used alongside each other leads to plenty of friendly banter and competition and you'll find clubs can be quite lenient with rules and almost everyone there is competing with themselves.

Peeping Talbot

Peep sights are commonly used in Lever Action as optical sights are not allowed. This was my first time using peep sights and I found them pretty comfortable and effective - all you do is look through the holes and just like that your eye naturally takes over. It's surprising how much clearer they can make a target appear given there's no actual magnification.

As the distance of targets or weather conditions change, peep sights can easily



Competitors make good use of the post.



Figuring out the best way to hit the 10-zone on the pig target.



Sam was stuck on unlucky number 13.

be adjusted by replacing the ring with a smaller or larger one - further-away targets will be smaller so require a smaller ring to look through. For one target we used a clear

yellowish ring ideal for overcast conditions, though I found it useful for being able to more quickly identify targets which I really liked as you could still see a blurry area outside the ring.

Competitors can't wear special shooting jackets in this discipline so any sort of lever action rifle is all you really need to get started. After all, you can just shoot with iron sights.

Round 1 - pigs

In the first round we were given five minutes to shoot the pig target from 100m in a standing-post position, meaning



Sam switches to the .38-50.

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we could lean on a post to better steady ourselves. I was sure to study the pig target before we started as scoring zones on the animals are not uniform, instead reflecting vital areas. For the pig, scoring zones are wider and flatter circles with the 10-point zone shaped like a big sausage right where you'd expect the heart to be.

I was sharing my rifle with Michael Nicholas, SSAA Para secretary, who'd also be coaching me for the day and explained you can use the curvature of the peep sight against the natural curve in the pig because at 100m you can't see the scoring zones, only the black blob of a pig-shaped target.

Round 2 - bears

This was also at 100m with the pig replaced by a bear. The bear is similar in size to the pig but instead of horizontal circles, vertical ones are used. Luckily Michael had a plan for this too and by lining up the natural curve at the top of the bear with the sight then leaving white either side of the black target, I should be right in the 10-score zone.

Unfortunately we were shooting from the sitting-post position which has always been my weakness and this was exacerbated by the 30-second time limit allowed. While using the post helped, I found with one hand on the post and the other on the lever I couldn't cycle the lever without taking the rifle off my shoulder which felt unstable and awkward. This led to me rushing my shots and I only managed to trouble the bear once, although it was a 9. Steve assured me I'd master the technique with practice which I tend to agree with.



Final rounds

With four rounds down we brought the targets in to 50m, rounds five and six requiring us to shoot offhand in five minutes then just 15 seconds. The focus was the Precision Slow Fire Pistol target which is more friendly than the animals as it has scoring zones all the way from 10 to one, as opposed to animals which only score from 10 to five. The pistol target is used for conferring proficiency awards, doubtful in my case.

For the final two rounds (10 for the day) we brought the targets in again, this time to 25m and in round nine I again faced the sitting-post position but this time had five

minutes as well as a secret weapon - a new rifle.

Steve lent me his centrefire .38-50 and despite the iron sights I felt very comfortable with it, so comfortable in fact I shot my best score of the day of 49.1. If you haven't guessed by now, with five shots each round is scored out of 50.

The final round saw me return to the rimfire as we had just 10 seconds to fire five shots. For the five-minute rounds we loaded one shot at a time but in the faster rounds used the tube, loading all five shots at once. This is a fairly simple process of unscrewing a rod from the end of the tube under the barrel and inserting five cartridges before re-inserting the rod. Cycling the lever for the rapid-fire rounds is a lot of fun and satisfying to do and I find my accuracy isn't that much worse on the shorter rounds, though I'm not sure if that's a good thing or bad.

Conclusion

After 10 rounds of action-packed shooting I ended the day with 294, not too bad but definitely bringing up the rear. I couldn't blame it on the rifle either as Michael, who I was sharing with, took out the competition with 444 out of 500.

Once again the sitting position proved my real weakness, in fact all the traditional rifle hunting positions are arguably a weakness which I think comes down to practice as they take a long time to learn and perfect. Oh well, more time at the range it is then.

Fortunately, Lever Action is a great discipline for honing these skills and much more as there's always something surprising and lever action rifles have a rich and fascinating history. Make sure you give it a try soon. ●

