



Talbot on target! Single Action

Off-centre Sam - or Communications Officer Sam Talbot - looks West on his latest mission to shoot the SSAA disciplines

photos by Jennifer Martens



Howdy y'all. This month I travelled back in time to the Old West, an era where single action firearms reigned supreme. When cowboys kept their six shooters and lead plums on their hip and too much bellyaching or a leaky mouth could land you an 'invitation to a dance'. These were days when any shooter worth their salt went by an alias so, like any other good cowboy, you can call me Off-centre Sam. While the name may not sound intimidating, what I lack in Single Action experience I make up for with my ability to yarn the hours away.

Single Action

Single Action (sometimes called Cowboy or Western Action) is a fast-paced discipline that employs original or replica firearms commonly used between 1800 and 1899. These include single-action revolvers, lever-action and slide-action rifles, lever-action and pump-action shotguns as well as other shotguns without automatic ejectors.

Competitions consist of various stages which play out as scenarios and are explained beforehand, often involving elements of the Old West. Targets are generally reactive and vary in shape and dimension, sometimes placed in a complicated order requiring shooters to think on the move. Navigating courses and having the cunning to find the most efficient route can be just as important as technical firearm speed and accuracy.

In addition to shooting, Single Action participants also preserve, promote and respect the skills, traditions and pioneering spirit of the historic American Old West, often assuming a shooting alias appropriate to the era. Aliases represent a character or profession from the Old West or Western film genre, the social and historical aspects of Single Action considered as important as the actual shooting, with competitors more than happy to join in the spirit.



Costumes and classes

Even those only vaguely familiar with Single Action have no doubt seen the striking costumes that accompany the discipline. Single Action has some serious costume requirements and failing to abide by them can be grounds for disqualification - I didn't dress up as a cowboy for nothing.

An example of general costuming rules is everyone is required to wear a hat at all times. Additionally, there's a specific list of items competitors must wear at least five of, including chaps, spurs, pocket watch with full length chain, botas, sleeve garters or a knife. Many competitors wear more and I'm yet to see an experienced Single Action shooter who doesn't look the part.

My costume

The costuming rules span more than four pages in the rule book though beginners

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are not expected to be up to standard straight away, although making the effort will earn you respect from the posse. My outfit mostly came from a costume store, rented for about \$40, including a shirt, hat, neckerchief and vest along with my own jeans.

My footwear was an old pair of work boots which may have looked the part to the casual observer but are actually against the rules. All shoes in Single Action should be lug-less, flat and with no grip, just as they were in the 1800s.

And of course some of the categories in Single Action affect the specific firearms used. For example, the Frontier Cartridge category requires shooters to use black powder rather than smokeless powder in all firearms. Another example is the Gunfighter category, as shot by Miss Scarlett, whereby gunfighters use two revolvers at once when the stage allows, otherwise they shoot right-side revolver with right hand only and left-side revolver with left hand only.

Ace McKenzie and Miss Scarlett

As this was my first time using Single Action firearms I enlisted the help of Ace McKenzie and his partner, Miss Scarlett, to help get my quick draws up to speed ahead of the competition held by the SSAA Southern Drifters. For both warm-up and competition I used Ace's firearms which included two Bisley pistols, a lever-action rifle and side-by-side shotgun. Our ammunition was .38 special 125g loads, making recoil minimal and allowing for more speed while still powerful enough to register a satisfying 'ting' on the targets.

Most targets range from five to 10 metres



No automatic ejectors here!



Miss Scarlett, one of Australia's few female gunfighters.

and are roughly the size of an A4 paper. After my first few shots it became clear the challenge of Single Action isn't hitting the targets, rather doing it very quickly. Scoring is simple and comes down to the fastest time winning while missing a target or committing a procedural error adds five seconds to your time.

My warm-up shots went smoothly and I hit every target. Ace's shotgun had two triggers which felt antiquated but such is the discipline and I became used to it after a few shots. Also, I barely noticed the costume and if anything adapting more into character and the Old West spirit proved an asset.

I didn't holster the pistols (the club requires a special licence for this), >



Shooting targets with 'finger guns'.



How firearms are used

Duellist: Shooter uses only one hand to fire revolver; **Gunfighter:** Uses two revolvers at once when the stage allows, otherwise shoots right-side revolver with right hand only and left-side revolver with left hand only.

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instead they were placed on the bench and I simply picked them up as necessary. My warm-up stage consisted of knocking over two targets with the shotgun, hitting two alternating targets twice with the rifle then two alternating targets twice with the pistols (five shots with each pistol). I completed the 22 shots in 51.18 seconds with no misses so Off-centre Sam was ready. Cue Western whistle!

The competition

The format separates shooters into small groups or posses, each posse heading to a stage where it's explained what targets in what order and with what firearms will be shot, along with any other instructions. The only real limit to a stage is the organisers' imagination and what equipment is available. As hosts of the 2016 and 2017 SSAA Single Action National Championships, the Southern Drifters have an impressive array of buildings and targets to choose from, the entire range a sight to behold with everything themed around the Old West.

While a standard weekend competition might consist of four or five stages, a championship competition can span as many as 12. My competition was four stages but I chose to focus on two in particular: Zee's Mine and El Vaquero Cantina.

Stage 1: Zee's Mine

To start the clock on this stage shooters had to declare 'This mine is mine!' Then they were required to hit two different targets, alternating every two shots for 10 shots with their rifle. They then had to run to the front of the mine and hit two targets with their shotgun, causing a separate target to start swinging. To finish, competitors had to use their pistols to alternatively hit the swinging target twice and another target twice for 10 total shots.

My final time for Zee's Mine was a respectable 55.17 seconds plus two missed shots (65.17 seconds). I found the swinging target particularly enjoyable, squeezing in a second shot before it swung out of view again and racing against the clock to take my shot was a highlight.

The one mistake I made was pushing down the hammer on the pistol after my fifth shot. This meant I had to pull the trigger again before putting it down and picking up the next pistol. Having just found the rhythm of 'hammer, trigger, hammer, trigger' I'd fired my five shots and was focused on speed rather than the fact I didn't need to hammer again. While not the most heinous safety crime it's important the hammer be left back when not being used. Overall it didn't waste much time as I

realised the mistake immediately.

Shooting a lever-action rifle as quickly as possible is similar to shooting rapid fire in Field Rifle. With one arm you secure the butt of the rifle against your shoulder, leaving your other hand free to cycle the action and pull the trigger. After trying it out I can see the appeal to Lever Action over the more cumbersome Bolt Action.

Another interesting thing about Single Action is it arguably has the most people keeping an eye on safety I've ever seen. While many disciplines will have several shooters firing with one Range Officer, Single Action only has one active competitor and at least three or four if not more people keeping an eye on safety. Firearms are also always meticulously placed facing towards the gun range when in use and the safety standards in general are truly superb.

Having survived Zee's Mine it was time to saddle up and head for the Cantina.

Stage 2: El Vaquero Cantina (The Cowboy Canteen)

Before the clock started on this stage shooters had to roll a dice with black and red sides. Then with hands on hat we had to declare the colour we'd rolled to start the time. The Cantina began with 10 rifle shots at red, black and yellow targets, the colour of your dice was shot at first followed by the colour you didn't roll, before finishing with the yellow targets. This was followed by four shotgun shots at targets on the ground and 10 pistol shots at a closer version of the rifle targets.

Perhaps the most awkward task in all shooting disciplines is attempting to remove shells from a shotgun (without ejectors) at speed. A sort of lurching back



motion finishing with a jerk forward is required to displace the cartridges and I'm sure I could learn the movement over time, but after performing something similar to the Heimlich manoeuvre I found it usually best to just shamefully pull the spent cartridges out with my fingers. This time-wasting procedure was magnified due to the four shots required at the Cantina.

Despite some awkward movements Single Action is very shooter-friendly. If there's any uncertainty about a target being hit the benefit of the doubt goes to the shooter, which I took as an invitation to try and go even faster in the hope of landing a spotter who wasn't paying attention - a common strategy (whisper it).

My total time was 69.12 seconds including a missed target with my final shot. The miss surprised me given how close I was and the size of the target but on reflection I realised I'd stopped properly aiming and took for granted I'd hit the target. No matter how easy the target it can always be missed and a five-second penalty quickly outweighs time spent making >



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sure the target is hit. It's a balancing act between accuracy and speed but also highly rewarding and enjoyable.

Conclusion

As someone who seems to prefer speed over accuracy, Single Action is right up my alley. There's part of me enjoys shooting for precision but it quickly turns to impatience

and I find myself tending to just hit any part of the target after a while.

Regular participants revel in the Old West elements but I can see why some may see this as a barrier. After telling my parents how much fun I had trying Single Action and how much fun I thought they'd have, they told me they "don't do dress-ups" which led me to think their reluctance could make them even better cowboys than they realise.

Single Action participants are extremely welcoming of beginners and go out of

their way to let new shooters join in while helping them bring their attire and equipment up to standard as soon as practical. During the competition I had more offers to try out someone's firearms than time would allow, which tells you everything you need to know about the camaraderie and social aspect. All of this and more makes Single Action one of the fastest-growing and most enjoyable disciplines presently available.

Well that's all she wrote so it's Off-centre Sam saying "so long partners" and happy shootin'. ●



Firearm-based categories

Frontiersman: Shooters use cap and ball revolvers shot duellist style and side-by-side double-barrel or lever-action shotguns; **Wild Bunch:** Based on popular Western movie, shooters use Colt 1911 pistols instead of revolvers, lever-action rifles and Winchester Model 1897 shotgun instead of double-barrelled shotgun; **Frontier Cartridge:** Using black powder rather than smokeless powder in all guns.



El Vaquero Cantina (The Cowboy Canteen).



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