

Professor O'Connor
was right...

The .270 Winchester

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Photos courtesy of Author

Thanks to its popularity, load development continues for the .270. This is an early Hornady Superformance 130-grain GMX load, velocity over 3,100 fps, shown with a tight group and a bullet recovered from a red stag taken at 400 yards.

The .270 Winchester was introduced in 1925 in the Winchester Model 54, a Mauser clone that preceded, and was very similar to, the long-beloved Model 70. Among the many things I wish I knew is exactly why the Winchester engineers chose the .277-inch bullet diameter. The .270 Winchester achieved rapid and lasting success, but the bullet diameter is oddball, and in the last 87 years only three other commercial cartridges have used it: .270 Weatherby Magnum (1944); .270 Winchester Short Magnum (2001); and 6.8mm SPC Remington (2002).

Why oddball? Well, from the early 1890s the 6.5mm, caliber .264; and the 7mm, caliber .284, were well-established. The .277-inch bullet Winchester chose is just .013-inch larger than the 6.5mm and a miniscule .007-inch smaller than the 7mm. Charles Newton's long-forgotten .256 Newton, actually a 6.5mm, was similar. The 7x57 Mauser, though not as fast, was fairly popular in the U.S. The .270 Winchester was created by a simple necking down of the .30-06 case to take the .277-inch bullet, but obviously they could just as easily have created a 6.5-06 or a 7mm-06 and used existing bullets without reinventing the wheel. Also similar was the .276 Pedersen, a 1923 military development with a slightly shorter case that used a .284-inch bullet.

Exactly why Winchester created a .277-inch bullet and cartridge seems lost in the sands of time, but they picked a winner! In 1925 the lever action was probably still the predominant action type among American hunters, but the bolt action was coming on strong, and the .30-06 was the gold standard cartridge. At that time .30-06 loadings were much milder than today. There was a bit of lingering confusion between the .30-06 and its predecessor, the .30-03, and it was known that there were a lot of Springfield actions out there with heat-treating issues.

Designed for and introduced in a strong commercial action, the .270 Winchester was loaded to the gills right out of the starting gate, with a 130-grain bullet at over 3,100 feet per second (fps). Only a decade had passed since Charles Newton designed the .250-3000 for Arthur Savage, so this was still new and exciting velocity. The heavier 150-grain bullet didn't exactly loaf along at 2,900 fps. Today's 150-grain load in the .30-06 is actually faster (shorter bullet, less friction), but in 1925 the .270 Winchester's 150-grain load was considerably faster than that bullet weight in the .30-06. So the new cartridge was fast, flat-shooting, and promised plenty of power for most North American big game.

There might have been a bit of optimism in those original ballistics. For many years now the 130-grain bullet has been "standard" at about 3,060 fps; the 150-grain loads running about 2,830 fps. An older 100-grain varmint load has pretty much vanished, but today all the major manufacturers and bullet makers offer a "compromise" 140-grain load that runs about 2,950 fps. Because of the great popularity of the cartridge there is a rich array of factory loads in all three bullet weights. Handloaders have a much wider bullet selection, and there are

some “extra fast” factory loads like Hornady’s Superformance that increase velocity by nearly 150 fps.

The .270 Winchester took off like a rocket and quickly became an American standard cartridge, never (to this day) quite as popular as the .30-06, but not far behind. A bespectacled English teacher and fledgling writer in Arizona is given much credit for the success of the .270. Jack O’Connor was an early convert to the .270 Winchester; he loved it, used it, and wrote about it for the next 50 years. Without question he did much to popularize the cartridge, and although he used and wrote about many other cartridges during his long career, it was unquestionably his favorite and his personal talisman.

However, no disrespect intended, I think the .270 Winchester would have been successful even without his help! This is proven by the simple fact that O’Connor has been gone for nearly 35 years, and the .270’s popularity continues. And further proven: The 6.5-06, though a fairly common wildcat, has never made it into factory form. The 7mm-06 (aka .280 Remington and 7mm Express Remington) may actually be more versatile because of the heavier 7mm bullets available—but it has never touched the .270 Winchester’s popularity. The .270 Weatherby Magnum is probably the second-most popular of Roy Weatherby’s cartridges (after his signature .300 Weatherby Magnum). It is faster, flatter, and delivers more energy, but now in its 68th year it remains uncommon by comparison. The .270 WSM is also faster, flatter, and delivers more energy. It appears to be one of the few new “short” and “super-short” magnums that will survive—but its popularity doesn’t approach that of the .270 Winchester.

Hey, I’m a gun writer. I use and write about a lot of cartridges. I like and have used both the .270 Weatherby and .270 WSM, and if this column runs long enough, it may feature either of them. I’ve used the .280 Remington quite a bit—what a great cartridge! I’ve also used and admire both the .264 Winchester Magnum and the 7mm Remington Magnum, also great cartridges. O’Connor damned them both with faint praise by acknowledging they would do just about everything—and not much more—than his .270 Winchester would do!

The professor was probably right about this. There are many good cartridges that are so similar that no self-respecting deer, sheep, or even elk is likely to notice the difference. But, with so many other great cartridges out there—and so many newer cartridges with introductions accompanied by massive media hype—how has the .270 Winchester maintained its popularity?

In my humble opinion, because it’s really that good. I first used it back in the early 1970s. Of course it worked great, but Jack O’Connor was still alive and I was trying to write, so it would have been foolish to try to write about O’Connor’s cartridge. Although I used it a bit off and on, it wasn’t until the 90s that I returned to the .270. I’ve used it a lot in the last 20 years, and here is what I’ve learned: It shoots flat enough, and its .277-inch bullets carry in the wind well enough for almost all shooting any of us need to do. As O’Connor long espoused, in power and performance it’s a superb choice for wild sheep and goats. It is a deer cartridge without parallel, well-suited to all North American deer hunting. This I have learned from my wife, Donna, who has taken the majority of her game on all six continents with the .270: It is powerful, effective, and does its work with minimal recoil and muzzle blast. And while its .30-06-length case cannot be housed in a short-action, it performs very well in a 22-inch barrel, so it can be housed in a fairly compact rifle.

We can all agree that the .270 is a poor choice for big bears, but the biggest controversy surrounds its suitability for elk. This was the major point of contention in the 50-year war of words between Elmer Keith and Jack O’Connor. O’Connor took most of his (many) elk with his pet .270s. Elmer hated “.270 Jack” and, in print, called the .270 a “damned adequate coyote rifle.” Elmer was pretty serious about his animosity, while letters I’ve seen suggest that O’Connor was primarily amused. It has long been accepted that controversy sells magazines, so the editors did nothing to quell the flames. However, in private they weren’t that far apart. In a letter (never in print to my knowledge) O’Connor admitted that the .30-06 was more versatile, especially for larger game. And Keith, also in a letter, conceded that, in careful hands, the .270 Winchester with a 150-grain Nosler Partition (the premium game bullet of his day) would be just fine for elk.

But is it really? I’d be a pretty happy guy if, for just one story, I could write as well as O’Connor did during his entire career. But in rifles and cartridges I lean more toward the Keith school. So, for many years, I questioned the .270’s use on game larger than deer. I answered the question by using it myself, and I had been wrong. The .270 is not a big cartridge for elk, and it probably suggests more careful bullet selection than a .30-caliber or larger. But with responsible shooting and good shot



TOP: Nobody ever said the .270 was ideal for big bears, but in a pinch it can do the job. Boddington’s Marine Corps buddy, Mike Satran (right) used his .270 to take this grizzly on the charge while on a Yukon sheep hunt.

MIDDLE: Donna Boddington used her MGA .270 to take her first mule deer in south-central Wyoming. The .270 is suitable for virtually all North American deer hunting, under all conditions.

BOTTOM: The first animal Boddington took with the .270 Winchester was also his first whitetail buck, taken in North Carolina in 1974.

placement, it’s plenty of gun. Especially with the much better hunting bullets we have available today. The longest shot I’ve ever made on an elk was with a .270 and a 150-grain Nosler Partition. He made two steps and fell over. Donna, unhindered by a lifetime of reading gun magazines, has used her .270 for elk and elk-sized game with no hesitation and no problems. Absent the big bears, the .270 Winchester is probably the lightest caliber that should be considered for all North American big game. As such, it is the lightest-recoiling and the easiest to shoot well. No wonder it has remained so popular for so long!