

2004 Big Game RIFLES

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B&C Professional Member

It's fair to say that the bolt-action rifle is in fact more than a century old, and that modern versions differ from the 1898 Mauser only in their refinements. But fielding new products has long been a requisite of companies marketing expensive hardware, be it rifles or automobiles. New models generate press, and press is advertising. Common sense tells us that manufacturers cannot improve every year on a mechanism that's been tended by generations of engineers. Some years, "different" is all that's possible within budget. So I'm including in the following list of new big game rifles some announced before 2004. Truly brilliant innovations, like classic designs, belong in any hunting rifle review!

BROWNING'S BAR: A 2004 overhaul

The Browning Automatic Rifle of WW I earned fame as a light selective-fire gun to support troops using bolt-action .30-06s. Browning's BAR sporting rifle mimics the military version only in that it too is gas operated. Initially chambered for the .30-06, .308 and related cartridges, the sporting BAR also offered magnum punch from the 7mm Remington and .300 and .338 Winchester. Now the rifle has a new look. Its alloy receiver still features a seven-lug rotating bolt, but the walnut buttstock is shim-adjustable, and the forend has a more rakish profile. Shorttrac and Longtrac versions are defined by action length. Shorttrac BARs come in .243 and .308 (22-inch barrels), plus the three WSMs: .270, 7mm, and .300 (23-inch barrels). Longtracs come in .270 and .30-06 (22-inch), 7mm Remington, and .300 Winchester Magnums (24-inch).

If you want the traditional BAR, you can still buy a Lightweight Stalker with a synthetic stock of the earlier profile. Or pick a Safari model with steel receiver and walnut stock. Both rifles are available in all chamberings for the Longtrac and Shorttrac, plus .338 Winchester Magnum. The Lightweight Stalker comes with open sights; all other BARs have clean barrels. The Safari can be had with BOSS (an acronym for Ballistic Optimizing Shooting System, an adjustable muzzle brake/weight).

Other news at Browning is the A-Bolt Mountain Ti. Chambered in .270, 7mm, and .300 WSM, it features a titanium receiver that keeps weight to a feathery 5 1/2 pounds. The slender bolt has a composite sleeve. Mossy Oak camouflage on a Bell & Carlson synthetic stock sports a Dura-Touch finish that acts like armor to protect the stock while enhancing your grip. Incidentally, the A-Bolt Composite Stalker now comes in .25 WSSM.



You probably expected that. You might not have assumed Browning would install laminated thumbhole stocks on Short Magnum rifles, but it offers the option on stainless and chrome-moly versions of the A-Bolt. For a complete list of Browning firearms, phone 800-333-3288 or log onto browning.com.

KIMBER'S 84M MONTANA: No better bantamweight!

Most shooters know Kimber for its high-quality Model 82 rimfire rifles that appeared during the 1980s. Based then in Clackamas, Oregon, Kimber followed with the Model 89 centerfire rifle, patterned after early M70 Winchester. Chapter 7 bankruptcy in 1989 left Kimber's future in doubt. Les Edelman became majority stakeholder in a new firearms company that would build pistols in Yonkers, New York. But Kimber was not to abandon its rifles. In 1998 Kimber announced a new .22 and brought a centerfire Model 770 to prototype stage. Designed by Jack Warne and Pete Grisel, the rifle was never sold. But a successor, the short-action Model 84M, fared better. Custom stockmaker Darwin Hensley helped shape the rifle's stock, which is glassed and pillar-bedded to an action proportioned to minimize weight. The 84M looks trim but not cheap. It has a Mauser-style extractor and an M70-style three-position safety. The steel floorplate features a release button in the guard. Steel scope mount bases are satin-blued to match and can be interchanged on the Kimber 22. The barrel floats. A 1-inch Pachmayr Decelerator pad is standard.

At 5 3/4 pounds with a 22-inch barrel, the Kimber 84M is beautifully balanced and has the simple elegance rifle enthusiasts crave when they grow up. Walnut-stocked versions are joined this year by the Montana, a stainless, synthetic-stocked 84M listed at 5 1/4 pounds. Truth is, the rifle weighs less. Figure just under 5 pounds. If that isn't light enough for you, consider hunting with a spear. The Montana's stock of Kevlar and carbon fiber owes its design to Mel Forbes, who consults for Kimber. Both it and the walnut stock are produced in-house. Like other 84Ms, the Montana comes in .243, .260, 7mm-08 and .308. The Short Magnum 8400 is also available Montana-style, but with a broader magazine well to accommodate the .270, 7mm and .300 WSM cartridges. A 24-inch barrel helps boost weight to 6 1/4 pounds.

I carried an 8400 Classic in .300 WSM across the Namibian desert last year,

TOP TO BOTTOM: A 6-pound New Ultra Light rifle in 6.5/284 printed this tight group; This Canadian black bear fell to Wayne's Ultra Light rifle in .308; Kimber's 84M and 8400 combine economy of line with light weight and classic profile.

often crawling to sneak up to eland and kudu. The rifle was easy to pack in one hand, and though dust and sand got into anything with a crack, the action functioned without a hitch all week. The adjustable trigger maintained its clean 2-pound pull. Accuracy: a touch under 1 1/2 inches at the bench, monotonous one-shot kills in the field. If I must level one criticism it would be that I couldn't close the bolt with three rounds on the follower. To my mind, there's no magic in a magazine that holds almost three; better one with a bit less depth that holds two comfortably. Trimmer lines result. A note to shooters who single-load: The 8400's claw is apparently not made to jump the rim of a chambered cartridge, as can be done with a 98 Mauser or M70 Winchester.

At about \$1200, the 84M and 8400 cost much less than custom rifles of like quality. They're on my short list of rifles for hunting in steep, remote places. By the way, 150 Model 8400s in .300 WSM and 100 in .270 WSM will show up soon in French walnut, at a \$150 premium. Due to the scarcity of French, this offering may be a one-time event. Contact Kimber at 888-243-4522 or log on at kimberamerica.com.

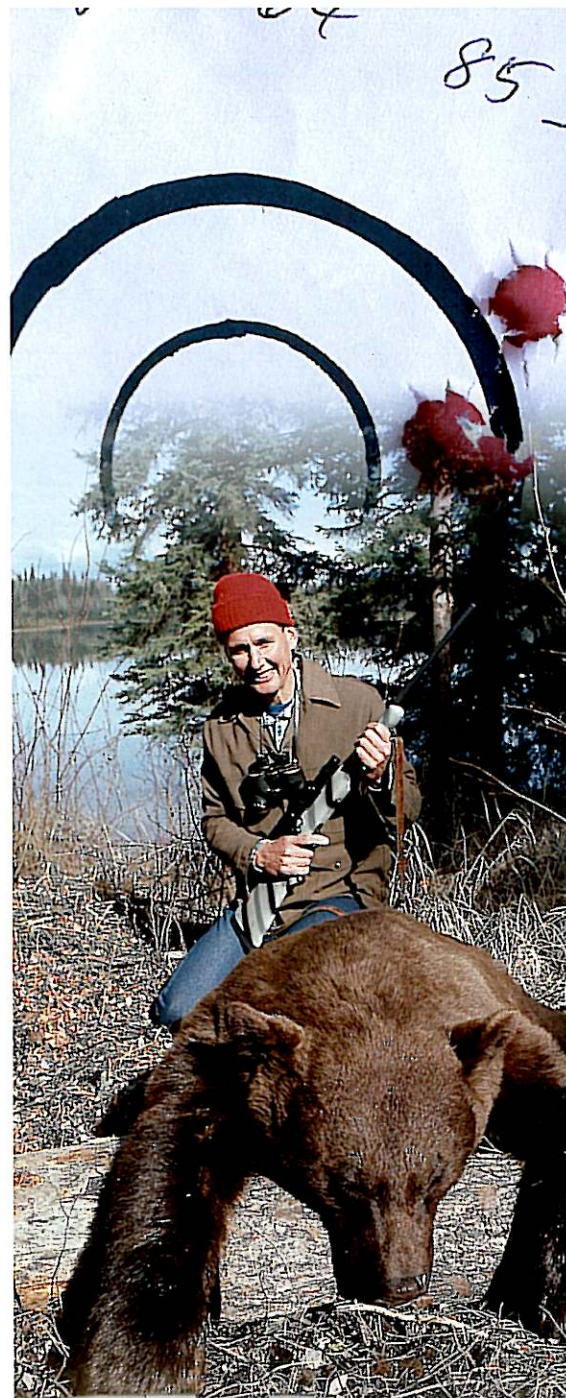
NEW ULTRA LIGHT ARMS M20: Superior engineering


Chiseling a lightweight rifle from one of standard dimensions isn't like building one

Kimber 84M Montana

from scratch. You don't fashion a sports car on a truck chassis. Paring ounces from rifles without compromising their feel and function is an art that Mel Forbes has cultivated since his M20 Ultra Light rifle appeared in 1984.

"Efficient use of steel is the key to light weight," says Melvin. "My rifle's receiver has standard wall thickness, but because the bolt is very slender, there's less wall." The Model 20 was also designed for the 7x57 cartridge family. Melvin trimmed the extra steel needed in actions that host a range of cartridges. He made the magazine 3 inches long, not the 2.85 inches





TOP TO BOTTOM: The inexpensive Remington 710 now comes in 7mm Remington and .300 Winchester Magnums; Wayne took this Colorado buck with a Remington Titanium 700 in .300 SUM.

common in short-action rifles. "The 7x57 and derivatives, the .257 Roberts and 6mm Remington, have longer cases than the .308. When you stuff these, or the .284 Winchester, in short magazines, the bullets eat powder space. Then you sacrifice performance."

Melvin didn't skeletonize anything. The Ultra Light is traditional in line and detail. Barrel length is to order, but you can still slide under the 6-pound mark with a 24-inch barrel. That's partly because the Model 20's Kevlar/carbon fiber stock is so light: 16 ounces. "But," he says, "it's stiffer than the Douglas Premium barrels I use. Melvin followed the Model 20 with the 24. It has a longer magazine (3 3/8 inches) for the .30-06 and weighs 5 3/4 pounds with 24-inch barrel. A 3-inch Model 28 is larger in diameter for short magnums. The 3 3/8-inch version accepts traditional belted magnums, the M40 Rigby-size rounds.



Savage Model 110 - Hunter Series



Remington Model 700 CDL Classic

A deal with Colt to produce Ultra Light rifles ended when Colt incurred debts from lawsuits aimed at gunmakers by the gun control lobby and city governments. Melvin got the company back. Now it's New Ultra Light Arms. The rifles are the same as before, with Timney trigger, Sako-style extractor and a clever thumb safety you push down to cycle the bolt without taking the rifle off safe. Melvin also offers his own 1 1/2-ounce scope rings that mate to the receiver. I used those rings with my 6.5/284 Ultra Light, a rifle that all but leaped into my hands when I opened the box. At the range 120-grain Nosler Ballistic Tips delivered 3/4-inch groups. Contact New Ultra Light Arms at 304-292-0600 or look to the web at newultralight.com.

**REMINGTON'S 700 AND 710:
Better rifles for the masses**

When Remington announced its Model 700

in 1963, Winchester's Model 70 held sway as the best bolt rifle on the market. A year later, the 70 had been horribly disfigured by New Haven accountants, and the 700 was climbing sales charts at full throttle, helped hugely by the 7mm Remington Magnum cartridge introduced at the same time. Since then many variations of the 700 have appeared. This year it's the CDL, a classy rifle for conservative tastes. The metal and wood are satin-finished; the checkered walnut stock is classic in profile, with black grip cap and forend tip. The CDL comes in .243, 7mm-08, .270, .30-06, 7mm Remington Magnum, .300 Winchester Magnum and 7mm, and .300 Ultra Mag.

Remington has also added the 7mm Remington and .300 Winchester Magnums to its 710 rifle, the economy-class rifle with nylon-reinforced receiver, 60-degree bolt lift and eye-blink lock time. The four-round detachable magazine in .270 and .30-06 becomes a three-round box for magnums, which, oddly, are stuck with standard 22-inch barrels. The 710 magnum will be sold with a Bushnell 3-9x40 scope mounted.

Before suggesting that you phone Remington at 800-243-9700 or visit remington.com, I'll urge a second look at the company's titanium 700. Tipping the scale at just 5 1/2 pounds in .30-06, this rifle also comes in short-action and magnum chamberings. It's beautifully shaped and balanced, a delight to shoot and not too expensive. Those I've tested (in .30-06 and .300 WSM) have poked minute-of-angle groups.

**SAVAGE'S ALL-NEW ARSENAL:
A trigger makes the difference**

Every bolt-action centerfire rifle in the 2004 Savage catalog is marked "new." They're not, really. Since the company came out with its Model 110 in 1958, the rifle has undergone incremental changes but no overhaul. It hasn't needed one. The 110 and its long- and short-action derivatives are sturdy, if not comely, the mechanism reliable if not slick. Off-the-shelf accuracy is impressive. The only real criticism of the 110 was its trigger. The parts are stamped, and while I've successfully tuned Savage triggers, they're not made to adjust. Company attorneys break out in a cold sweat just thinking somebody might try.

So some shooters were surprised that Savage CEO Ron Coburn announced AccuTrigger. I'm not, because Ron is a practical guy who knows a rifle isn't any good until you can shoot it well. And you can't shoot it well until its trigger gives you

crisp, easy, consistent breaks. Many corporate chiefs in this industry either haven't figured that out or have been cowed by the legal ramifications of making rifles once again shootable. But even the incompetent needn't worry about Savage's trigger, now standard on the firm's big game rifles. AccuTrigger is safe – a fact that Ron once proved by cocking a loaded rifle and throwing it on a cement floor. It's adjustable from 2 1/2 to 6 pounds. A unique lever blocks sear release until your finger is on the trigger, but it requires no added pressure. Result: a better shot.

Rifle accuracy matters little on a hunt. A manageable trigger improves your marksmanship, which matters a great deal. For more on Savage rifles, phone 413-568-7001, or find savagearms.com.

**STURM, RUGER 77:
Short Magnum additions**

The Ruger 77 has fetching lines, thanks to the influence of crack stockmaker Leonard Brownell, who helped design the first M77 stocks 35 years ago. Investment-cast receivers with integral scope mount bases distinguish this rifle from most others. Fourteen M77s appear in the 2004 Ruger catalog, all from years past.. But the .350 Remington Magnum has been added to the chamberings in standard and stainless/laminate rifles. And the .270 and 7mm WSM join the .300 WSM in standard and All-Weather (stainless/synthetic) versions. The big news at Ruger this year is the .204 cartridge, loaded by Hornady. But a 32-grain, 20-caliber bullet at 4,220 fps won't excel in the 'pole patches.' For more on Ruger, punch 520-541-8820, or ruger-firearms.com.

**WEATHERBY .257 VANGUARD:
Retro rocket**

While the six-lug Mark V Ultra Lightweight is my first pick from Weatherby's line, the company has just outdone itself to offer sizzling performance in a truly affordable rifle. The Vanguard, in and out of production during the last decade, is now available in WSM chamberings – and .257 Weatherby Magnum. Roy himself favored this hot .25, which appeared in the 1940s with the .270, 7mm, and .300 as a proprietary round available only in Weatherby rifles. Booting 100-grain spitzers at over 3,600 fps, it combines long reach with light recoil. The Vanguard, with its Howa action and injection-molded stock, is your cheapest route to a .257: just \$476 to start. Available in stainless and chrome-moly versions, it weighs 7 3/4 pounds. A lighter stock of hand-laminated compos-

TOP TO BOTTOM: Winchester's Super Short Magnums and the innovative "Shadow" stock are what's new in Model 70s; The Weatherby Vanguard offers magnum performance for less than \$500.

ites is available at extra charge from the custom shop. Reach the Weatherby folks at 800-227-2216 or weatherby.com.

**WINCHESTER'S MODEL 70:
New stocks, new bolt**

The Winchester 70, hatched in 1937, ravaged by company accountants in 1964 and resurrected with a Mauser extractor in 1980, has since earned back much of the

Winchester Ultimate Shadow Blued



Winchester Model 94 Trails End



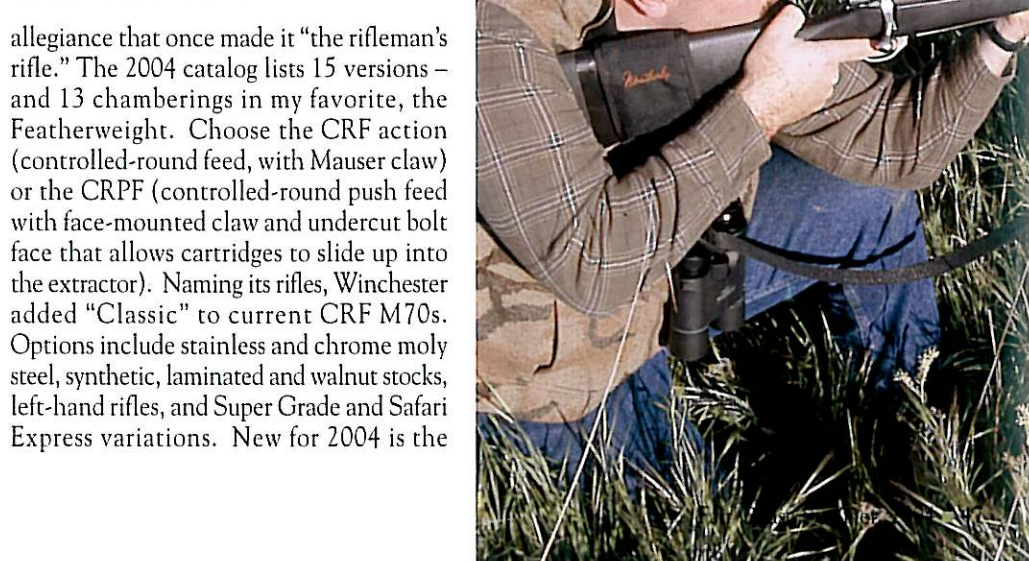
Winchester Safari Express



Winchester Featherweight




Ruger M77 All-Weather



allegiance that once made it "the rifleman's rifle." The 2004 catalog lists 15 versions – and 13 chamberings in my favorite, the Featherweight. Choose the CRF action (controlled-round feed, with Mauser claw) or the CRPF (controlled-round push feed with face-mounted claw and undercut bolt face that allows cartridges to slide up into the extractor). Naming its rifles, Winchester added "Classic" to current CRF M70s. Options include stainless and chrome moly steel, synthetic, laminated and walnut stocks, left-hand rifles, and Super Grade and Safari Express variations. New for 2004 is the





TOP TO BOTTOM: The Tikka T3 is among Wayne's favorite production-class hunting rifle, beautifully engineered, eminently shootable; The H-S Precision varmint rifle shoots groups tight enough to worry even distant prairie dogs; Wayne shot this Wyoming buck with a Dakota M97 Hunter in .300 Dakota.

Sporter LT and LT left-hand in .270, 7mm and .300 WSM, also a Super Grade. Southpaws now have a Featherweight.

Shadow synthetic stocks are popping up afield, along with M70s in .25 WSSM (Winchester Super Short Magnum). The Ultimate Shadow stock has contouring that may strike traditionalists as space-

agey, with rubber overmoldings where checking would be. The rubber has oval bumps to hold your hand in place. The Super Shadow stock lacks the overmolding. A Mossy Oak camo version wears Dura-Touch armor coating that hugs your palms. More effective recoil pads grace most 2004 stocks. Prices for M70s start at \$554.

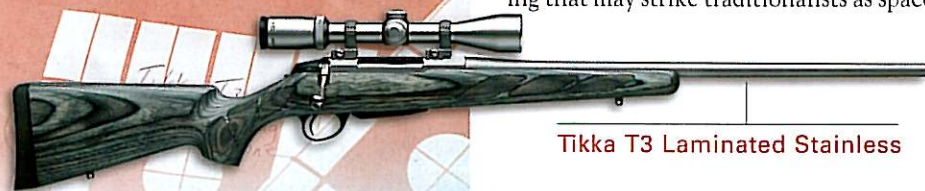
On the lever-action front, Winchester has added a muscular 94. The "Timber" features a pistol-grip stock, ported 18-inch barrel and XS sights. Chambered in .450 Marlin, it's a shameless bid to pull market share from the Marlin 1895 carbine series initiated by the .45-70 Guide Gun. While the receiver sight and two-thirds magazine enhance the 94's appearance (and speed your aim), the rifle lacks the integrity of the M71 and 1886 rifles that shooters still covet. The tang safety and forward-jutting trigger may not keep you from killing deer, but neither do they add class. Ditto the short comb, which denies stock-crawlers cheek support. The Timber is nonetheless a potent, fast-pointing rifle. It lists for \$610. For more details, phone Winchester at 801-876-3440 or key up winchester-guns.com.

Dakota Hunters feature barrels by Lothar Walther. They're of medium contour on Long Range rifles, 24 or 26 inches, depending on chambering. The Lightweight has a slimmer barrel 22 or 24 inches long. Rifle weights: 7.7 and 6.3 pounds. The chrome-moly steel wears a satin-blued finish that stretches smoother than polished marble from tang to muzzle. A deep, neat crown protects the muzzle. The bolt release pivots silently, as if on an axle, and fits almost seamlessly into its slot. The stock hugs the action. Barrel channel relief is absolutely even and minimal, as it should be. The classic profile of the black composite stock includes a long grip that's a bit thick up front for my taste.

The first chance I had to shoot game with a Dakota Model 97 came years ago on the last day of an elk hunt in Arizona. A bull broke from his bed below me and dashed across a cedar flat. I slinged up, sat and caught him quartering away at about 170 yards. Brush swallowed the bull right after the shot, but the 140-grain Nosler Ballistic Tip, kicked out at over 3,300 fps from the rimless 7mm Dakota hull, struck mid-cage. It sailed through the near lung and exited the brisket, cutting the aorta.

More recently, I spent some time on the bench with a Long Range Hunter in .300 Dakota, another in the Dakota line of cartridges based on the .404 Jeffery case. Scoped with a Zeiss Conquest 3-9x40, the .300 shot 180-grain Swift Sciroccos well, averaging just over 1 inch for six three-shot groups. The trigger broke cleanly at 3 1/2 pounds; cycling was smooth and positive.

At \$2,150, the Dakota Model 97 isn't the cheapest of hunting rifles. But it



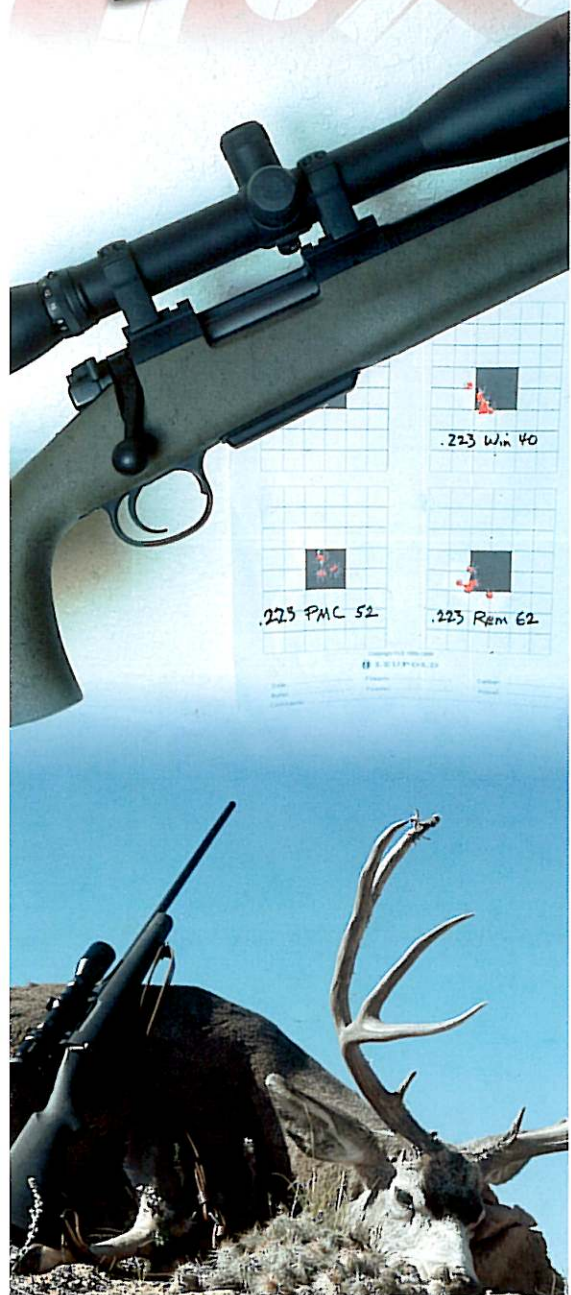
Tikka T3 Laminated Stainless

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DAKOTA'S M97 HUNTER: **Affordable class**

The Model 97 Hunter is not new at Dakota, but it might as well be. It gets little attention. When the late Don Allen was a stockmaker, he indulged a passion for beautiful wood. He and wife Norma built Dakota Arms around M76 rifles stocked in fine walnut. But the exquisite 76, fashioned after



shows the machining and finish of more costly guns. It balances nicely in the hand, shoots well and offers discerning rifle- men the tang, trigger, safety, and extractor of early Winchester M70s. Specify standard chamberings, belted magnums, or Dakota's own rounds. Phone 605-347-4686 or go to dakotaarms.com.

H-S PRECISION: Sniper rifles for hunters

A chemistry degree gives you choices. You can don a lab coat and get lost in a company like DuPont, "or build guns," says Tom Houghton, who took that path in 1978. "We couldn't compete with Winchester or Remington, of course; and we had no desire to make pretty rifles for people who couldn't afford custom work. So at H-S Precision we focused on semi-custom, synthetic-stocked hunting guns that shoot exceptionally well."

This seems a naive approach. How many hunters care enough about accuracy to pay double or triple for a rifle to trim group sizes an inch? Tom found lots of them. Like Kenny Jarrett, he found demand quickly strained his production capacity – especially when law enforcement agencies tested his tactical models.

Founded in Prescott, Arizona, H-S Precision came to Rapid City, South Dakota in 1990. A year later, it moved into a 15,000-square-foot plant that's since grown. Houghton sees shrinking markets for traditional hardware store rifles, but thinks bold new ideas and an emphasis on superior performance will ensure growth at H-S Precision. "We build our actions and make our barrels and fabricate our synthetic stocks," Tom says. "We must be doing something right because the Marine Corps favors our cut-rifled barrels on M-40A1 sniper rifles, and the Army installs our stocks with aluminum bedding blocks on its M-24 SWS. Remington and Winchester use our Pro-Series stocks on their rifles too." H-S Precision also supplies the industry with ballistic test barrels.

Among the most intriguing of company products is a take-down rifle. Its two-piece stock comes apart in front of the receiver, so barrel and forend stay together. To assemble, you turn barrel and forend 90 degrees, insert the barrel in the receiver, then give it a twist to seat its interrupted threads and align a camming device on the stock's underside. When you press the cam lever into its groove, everything is lined up and locked up. The Pro-Hunter 2000 takedown isn't cheap (\$3,600), but with additional bolts and barrels you get a veritable arsenal in a hard case. Tom has

tested this rifle by firing five-shot groups one shot at a time, taking the gun apart after each pull of the trigger. Groups routinely stay under half an inch! "That's our requirement for any 2000-series rifle up to 30 caliber," he reminds me.

The newest 2000 is the ProHunter Lightweight, a short-action rifle that weighs just 5 1/2 pounds. It's available in WSM chamberings as well as those based on the .308 case. Like other variations of the 2000, it has a detachable box magazine and black Teflon metal finish. The fluted barrel (20 or 22 inches) is cut-rifled and of stainless steel, complementing a three-position side safety, fully enclosed bolt face, 8-40 scope mount holes.

An adjustable trigger, designed and manufactured in-house, offers icicle-like let-off down to 2 1/2 pounds. The Pro-Series Lightweight – and heavier companion models – have the features important to shooters focused on performance. And that's just who Tom and his company want as customers.

Order a ProHunter Lightweight for \$2,450 by phoning 605-341-3006, or explore H-S Precision's other rifles at hsprecision.com.

TIKKA'S T3: A sleeper from Finland's forests

Sako and Tikka rifles hail from Riihimaki, almost small enough to be rural. The Sako rifle line is known world-wide, but Tikka has until recently remained an unknown outside Finland. A gun parts maker for 80 years, Tikka was older than Sako when the two came under one roof in 1983. During the second world war Tikka built sewing machines and sub-machine guns, then went on to develop, and produce its Models 55 and 65 rifles and 17 shotgun. The 77 shotgun followed. Sako's acquisition of Tikka, along with Valmet, a shotgun manufacturer since 1925, consolidated sporting arms manufacturing in Finland. By 1989, Tikka's production at its Tikkakoski Works had been moved to the Riihimaki plant.

The Tikka Whitetail rifle received some press in the U.S. during the early 1990s, but it wasn't until the firm announced its T3 that sales jumped. Built in the Sako plant and to the same tolerances as the more expensive Sako 75, the T3 looks sleeker than the Whitetail. Paavo Tammisto, press relations manager for all things Sako and Tikka, told me that Tikka had studied the North American market to produce a rifle that would sell well here. The third-generation Tikka includes the two-lug bolt

of earlier models, but with the 70-degree lift of a three-lug Sako 75. The recessed bolt face has a plunger ejector and Sako extractor. The receiver is slimmer than the Whitetail's, but just as stiff, partly because the ejection port is smaller. Rails machined into the receiver's roof accept 17mm clamp rings, but the rifle is also drilled and tapped.

There's only one T3 action, with two bolt stops for different cartridge lengths. Single-stack three-shot magazines are of quiet, lightweight polymer. You can buy deep boxes that hold five or six rounds, depending on the cartridge. The magazine latch lies flush. The stock (walnut or synthetic) has a long grip and correct pitch, with spacer to lengthen the butt. Raised rubber-like panels on grip and forend keep your palms from slipping. Deep fluting at the comb nose accommodates the heel of your hand.

The T3 trigger adjusts from 2 to 4 pounds pull with a hex key you can insert through the magazine well without removing the stock. The trigger guard is the only alloy part on a T3 action; all other parts are of steel, save the polymer magazine and bolt shroud. A red cocking indicator protrudes. The two-position safety locks bolt and trigger. The bolt handle is just the right length, its hollow knob easy to grasp. A steel stock insert engages a slot in the receiver to act as recoil lug. Barrels do not contact the forend. Hammer-forged rifling is the same as on Sako 75s. Rifle weight depends on style; the T3 Lite weighs 6 1/4 pounds.

This is a high-quality rifle. It points naturally and nimbly. The bolt glides. Cartridges cycle without bumps, and the trigger breaks like glass. My only complaint: the safety button is hard to feel or move with a slippery thumb or a thick mitten. And I'd like the option of longer barrels.

I've killed a couple of moose with T3s in .300 WSM, one of 13 chamberings from .223 to .338 Winchester Magnum. A 22-inch barrel comes with standard chamberings, a 24-inch with magnums. The .300s shot very close to a minute of angle, as did T3s I fired in 7mm Remington Magnum and .30-06. At its debut, the chrome-moly synthetic-stocked Tikka T3 listed for \$549. The stainless synthetic rifle and walnut-stocked chrome-moly Hunter cost \$618, magnums more. Since then, a weak dollar has boosted prices. Still, the T3 is a bargain, one of the best-built hunting rifles on the market. Contact the importer, Beretta USA, at 301-283-2191, or key up berettausa.com. ■