

CRAIG
BODDINGTON
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Photos Courtesy of Author

ACCURATE HUNTER

BACK TO THE BENCH


Not long ago I was in the Texas Hill Country with friend Adam Biondich and his young daughter, Lala. It was her hunt, purchased at an auction fundraiser on Record Buck Ranch. The first order of business was to check rifles, two Montana bolt-actions in 7mm Remington Magnum and .375 H&H.

Adam assured me Lala had done a lot of practice off sticks. Obviously, she had—the .375 was perfect; the 7mm needed two clicks down. I was impressed, especially when Adam told us that these were Lala's first-ever shots from a benchrest. All her practice, from air rifles up to these big rifles, had been from sticks and other field positions.

Good protocol for hunting; to this day Donna and my daughters do little shooting off the bench, focusing instead on field positions. There are no shooting benches in game country. So, if field shooting is a primary goal, shooting off the bench is of limited value. *Nothing* exagger-

ates felt recoil worse than shooting off the bench. It's easy to acquire a flinch, more difficult to cure one!

Obviously, the 7mm and .375 magnums are big guns for any 10-year-old! Recoil was mitigated. Both rifles are heavy and had effective muzzle brakes. We shot from a Caldwell Lead Sled, harnessing the rifle and adding gun weight. Actual recoil was thus reduced to minimal felt recoil. We limited Lala's exposure to the unfamiliar bench: One shot with the .375, three with the 7mm, all perfectly executed. We were ready to start hunting! Over the next three days, she shot like a machine; using sticks and natural rests, she took five animals with six well-placed shots.



Shooting groups with a .375 H&H, using a weighted Caldwell Lead Sled. Boddington uses the sled with heavy-recoiling rifles but recommends also checking zero from a conventional rest before going hunting.



At the beginning of Lala Biondich's hunt, we spent a half-hour at the bench checking zero. Turns out she had never before shot from a benchrest; all her practice had been from field positions, a very sound regimen for a young, small-statured shooter.



Lala Biondich, her dad, Adam, and Boddington with Lala's gorgeous axis buck, taken with a fine shot. At the start of the hunt, rifles were checked on a solid benchrest—a wise use of just a few minutes.

Despite limitations, shooting from a rock-steady bench serves two critical purposes. For both, there is no substitute for a steady rest and nothing better than a rock-solid bench.

First is to verify zero, a necessary starting point for any hunt, as we started Lala's hunt. The second primary purpose is to learn your rifle's accuracy and what loads it shoots best. There is no sound alternative to the bench, although it depends on the accuracy you need. If you shoot your annual deer at 60 yards with a shotgun slug, then a bench may not be needed. Put up a 10-inch paper plate at 50 yards and go to work: "Minute of plate" equals "minute of deer."

Millions of American deer hunters use short-range equipment, from archery tackle to shotguns, muzzle-loaders, handguns, and iron-sighted rifles. "Paper plate" accuracy is *always* essential, but benchrest-level accuracy is often not needed. Many American shooters are fixated on accuracy. Sometimes this is detrimental; too many of us do all our range work from the bench and call

it "practice," which it is not. Benchrest competition, where raw accuracy is a primary goal, is perhaps the most demanding of rifles and ammo. However, how much accuracy *you* need depends on what you intend to do. There's no such thing as too much accuracy for shooting small pests like prairie dogs!

Distance is a factor. Regardless of target size, the farther you wish to shoot, the more accuracy is needed. For shooting at game, I have reservations about the extreme-range shooting currently being done (or claimed). However, current interest in long-range shooting has definitely sparked a renewed thirst for extreme accuracy.

The bench remains the best way to determine accuracy, which dictates the maximum distances you might shoot. An upright prairie dog is less than 3 inches across. So, a rifle that produces a 1-inch group at 100 yards might be expected to produce 3-inch groups at 300 yards. That's not good enough! For deer-sized game, we can go back to my 10-inch paper plate. By today's standards, a

2-inch-group at 100 yards isn't great, but many good hunting rifles won't do better. Two inches at 100 yards disperses normally to 10 inches at 500 yards, barely "on" my 10-inch plate. It is more difficult to hold consistent groups as distance increases. Effects of slight wobbles, mirage, and wind are magnified. My simple math of a 2-inch 100-yard group allowing 500-yard shooting also assumes perfect shooting and ideal conditions!

So, back to the bench, where there are three primary components to benchrest shooting: a solid platform, steady rifle rests and good position.

THE BENCH: Larger ranges often use poured cement benches, hard to beat. On private ranges, we may not have that luxury, but it's important to start from a firm foundation. Our bench is built from cinder blocks; a heavy, old-fashioned picnic table also makes a pretty good bench. Most portable commercial benches are reasonably steady, but once you settle in, if you have any wobble, you must recognize

that you're starting with dispersion in your groups.

RIFLE RESTS: The steadier the better! Ransom's rests are the gold standard but are heavy and costly. Rests of polymer and plastic are light and inexpensive, but it's difficult to get steady from a very light rest. Good old sandbags offer a sound alternative! Caldwell's Lead Sled is a marvelous device, harnessing the rifle and adding the weighted sled to the rifle. With heavy-recoiling rifles, I often shoot groups off the sled. However, before a hunt I verify zero off sandbags. Since the sled adds weight and reduces rifle movement during recoil, the zero may be different off the sled than over a conventional rest.

POSITION: All-important! The whole idea behind bench shooting is to remove the human element, so the rifle shoots as well as it can without shooter interference! Height is critical. You need to sit upright, leaning just slightly into the rifle. At our



Three sub-half-inch groups fired with a Ruger No. One in .204 Ruger. Light-recoiling rifles are much easier to shoot at the bench, and three-shot groups are easier to hold than five-shot groups.



A portable bench from RCBS. Portable benches like this are extremely useful, but it's very difficult to replicate the rock-steady stability of a heavy, permanent bench weighing several hundred pounds.



Actual shooting practice is limited at the bench, but nothing is better for working on breath control and smooth, consistent trigger press.

range, we use a height-adjustable shop stool, but it also works fine to build up height with pillows.

Typically, the fore end (*never* the barrel) is rested over the barrel, then the butt is similarly snugged with sandbags under the toe of the stock. I set the rifle in the rest, sit to it, snug the butt firmly into my shoulder, adjusting the height so I am sitting comfortably with the rifle “on target” with no pressure. Better commercial rests offer elevation adjustment at the fore end for fine-tuning. Absent this feature, you need to mess with the sandbags, but it's essential for the rifle to be steady and on target with no “muscling” required.

What to do with the supporting hand? Some grasp the fore end; others hold the scope. Preferred method is to curl the supporting hand under the toe of the stock, using it to scrunch the rear sandbag to make fine up-and-down adjustments.

A good check for position with an empty rifle, focus on your aiming point, take a couple of breaths, let the last one partway out, check sight alignment, complete the trigger press. *Click!* Close your eyes and then open them. The crosshair should still be on

target. If not, check position and repeat.

While bench shooting has little to do with shooting from field positions, it is excellent training for shooting basics such as breath control and smooth trigger press. Focus on holding that last breath, and maintain a smooth, consistent trigger press so the shot goes with the crosshair dead steady on the aiming point. If you run out of air before you get the shot off, relax and start over! Follow-through is important: The trigger squeeze doesn't end until the bullet exits the barrel, so maintain trigger pressure throughout the shot.

LITTLE THINGS: Three-shot or five-shot groups? It is much more difficult to fire five consistent shots! Also, typical hunting rifles with slender barrels heat up quickly, and many simply

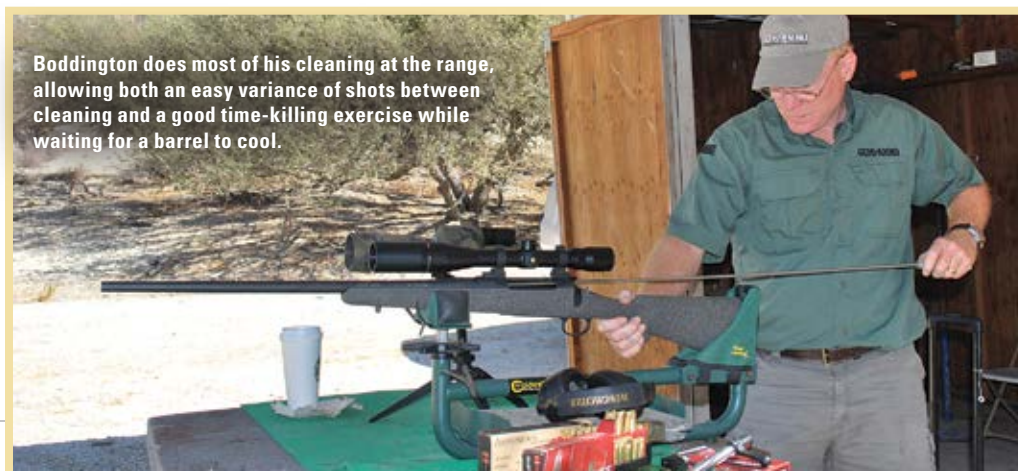
will not withstand five shots without barrel heat opening groups (usually vertically). So, with hunting rifles, consider five three-shot groups versus three five-shot groups. The point is to determine how well the rifle shoots, so if you *know* you wobbled and threw a shot, discount it.

Targets matter. For shooting groups, I prefer squares and diamonds to the traditional “bullseye” target. Especially with higher magnification scopes, you might find it better to hold on the corner of a square or the point of a diamond rather than the center.

Recoil is an enemy to good bench shooting. It's much easier to shoot groups with a .22 centerfire than with a .300 magnum. Two rules: Don't overdo it. Recognize when you've had enough! And, don't hesitate to be a sissy. I have

PAST® recoil shields in my gun bag, and I use them. An alternative is to drape a folded towel over your shoulder!

Take your time! Barrel heat is a constant problem, especially with sporter-weight barrels. On summer days I spend more time waiting for barrels to cool than actually shooting. We all have different cleaning disciplines and there's no right or wrong answer. During barrel break-in, I clean frequently, but with a seasoned barrel I usually clean after 15-20 shots. Here's the point for this discussion: I clean at the range, which expedites barrel cooling and saves time. However, zero often changes with a freshly-cleaned barrel. So, if I'm taking a rifle on a hunt, I clean at the end of the last shooting session, then fire a couple of fouling shots. After the barrel cools, I check zero one last time. ■



Boddington does most of his cleaning at the range, allowing both an easy variance of shots between cleaning and a good time-killing exercise while waiting for a barrel to cool.