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THE MODERN MOUNTAIN RIFLE

NOT JACK O'CONNOR'S "BIESEN NO. 2"

BY CRAIG BODDINGTON

The goat was steeply uphill; the rangefinder told me the hold was 410 yards. Given a choice, I'd rather get closer. But the billy was up on a shelf, no cover, and sunset was coming. Take the shot or try again tomorrow.

When I was young 400 yards was a far poke. Before rangefinders, we never knew *exactly* how far we were shooting...we just did the best we could! Despite all the *stuff* we hear, 400 yards is still far. I love to ring steel, but I am *not* an extreme-range shooter on game. However, I prepare for the worst and hope for the best.

Regardless of self-imposed range limits, with today's equipment we *can* shoot farther with confidence.

Compact rangefinders give us perfect knowledge of range. We have powerful and wonderfully clear scopes that enable precise holds. Our cartridges don't shoot much flatter than they did a generation ago, but we have better bullets and, on average, more accurate rifles.

This particular circumstance was a Montana mountain goat, southeast of Livingston. There wasn't pressure on the shot; it was a nice billy but no giant, and I've shot other Rocky

Mountain goats. But this was an acceptable shot; there was no reason to back off.

I was shooting one of the new AllTerra rifles, chambered to 6.5mm SST. The rifle produced ridiculously tight groups with 143-grain ELD-X at about 3,000 feet per second, and I knew the drop. The Zeiss 3-18X scope gave me the choice of dialing the turret or holding with a stadia line. Forty years ago, this shot would have been practical, but more difficult, and requiring more study. In 2020, it still wasn't a no-brainer, but I took it with confidence.



Jack O'Connor with one of his last rams, taken with his famous Biesen No. 2. Stocked in good walnut, this rifle went up a lot of mountains. The scope is fixed 4X, almost certainly the most powerful scope O'Connor ever used for sheep hunting.



John Batten with his last Alberta bighorn, taken with the laminated-stock .30-.338 he described as his "favorite mountain rifle." The rifle wears a 2.75X Redfield, much different from the scopes most mountain hunters use today!

TWO CLASSICS FROM THE GOOD OLD DAYS

English professor by trade and sheep hunter by passion, Jack O'Connor is as responsible as anyone for the modern culture of mountain hunting. O'Connor is also known as the champion of the .270 Winchester. He hunted his sheep between 1935 and 1974, so let's expend a few lines on his favorite sheep rifle.

O'Connor *did not* take "all" his sheep with the .270. His first rams, in Sonora, were taken with an aperture-sighted 7x57. In the 1940s he turned to a scoped .270. Later, he *mostly* used his famous Biesen No. 2 .270, based on a Winchester M70 Featherweight action and factory barrel that was exceptionally accurate for the day.

There are two things about this rifle I want to point out: stock and scope. Al Biesen stocked it in gorgeous walnut to O'Connor's specifications. Synthetic stocks were unknown, so this beautiful piece of hand-crafted walnut went up a lot of mountains. The rifle was scoped, but variable-power scopes weren't

perfected until the 1970s. O'Connor did most of his latter sheep hunting with a fixed 4X, never more.

John Batten was a friend of O'Connor's, and a mentor to me. A serious and well-traveled mountain hunter, he also hunted sheep and goats from the 1930s through the 1970s. He started with bighorns in Alberta using an aperture-sighted Griffin & Howe Springfield in



O'Connor's Biesen No. 2 *did not* have auxiliary iron sights, but Batten's favorite sheep rifle had a base for an aperture sight on the rear receiver ring, with the actual aperture sight housed in a trap in the butt.

.30-06. Later, he used a Holland & Holland .300 H&H. I have his last mountain rifle, described in his hand as his favorite. It's a plain rifle, but well-considered: Mauser action, chambered to the wildcat .30-.338, which dates it to about 1960 and is similar in performance to the .300 Winchester Magnum. The rifle was built by his hometown Racine gunsmith R.A. Wells, described as a crusty old Marine who knew his stuff. As with O'Connor's rifle, let me comment on sights and stock.

The base for an aperture sight is on the rear receiver ring; the actual sight rests in a trap in the butt. The scope, in a Griffin & Howe side mount, is a fixed power Redfield 2.75X, used for mountain game on several continents. The stock is *laminated*, unheard of 60 years ago. Batten preferred walnut. He also tried synthetic, but missed the "soul" of good wood. Both Batten and Wells apparently accepted that a traditional walnut gunstock wasn't the ultimate answer!



John Batten's .30-.338, made by R.A. Wells in about 1960, is stocked in large-slice laminate, almost unheard of back then. Laminated wood is probably the strongest of all gunstock material, but also heavier than solid wood or synthetic.

STOCK, LOCK, AND BARREL

I love the look and feel of good walnut, but I hate the inevitable dings and scratches up in the rocks. Worse is the risk of warpage, and on a hunt that turns really wet a good walnut gunstock can be completely ruined. Some of us still haul nice wood into bad places, but the modern mountain rifle is most likely to be stocked in synthetic or laminate.

Weight savings isn't automatic; it depends on material and construction. A slim walnut stock can weigh the same as synthetic. It also isn't automatic that synthetic stocks are stronger than wood; again, it depends on material and construction. However, *most* synthetic stocks are stronger than walnut. Unlike solid wood, synthetics are impervious to moisture, and although the surface finish scratches easily, synthetics are more resistant to deep abrasions and cannot crack.

Laminated stocks are the strongest



The muzzle crown is the last thing the bullet touches, and is often the culprit in accuracy problems. Diagnosing a sloppy or damaged crown is easy, and re-cutting a crown is a simple job.



of all, and although they can take on water, are unlikely to warp or crack. Laminated wood, however, is generally the heaviest. I don't know what Professor O'Connor would have thought about synthetic stocks, but since his friend John Batten had a laminated stock 60 years ago, I suspect he'd be hunting with a synthetic-stocked rifle. Carbon fiber, strong and light, is the new watch word; most top-grade mountain rifles made today probably wear carbon fiber stocks.

Actions have changed little in my lifetime, although recent innovations include the highly-modular straight-pull Blaser and similar systems. When I was young, stainless steel barrels were new, but now both actions and barrels are readily available in stainless, and there are extra-light titanium actions. Ideally, a mountain rifle needs weatherproofing, but different metal isn't the only answer. Cerakote and other rustproof finishes have really changed the world. Except: If the outer surfaces are protected but everything inside is still carbon steel, rust will form, so cleaning chores aren't obsolete.

One of the big changes today

is the magic of modern CNC machining, which give us the most precise manufacturing tolerances ever possible. In my opinion, this is a primary reason why today's rifles really are, on average, more accurate than the rifles I grew up with... and also why so many inexpensive production rifles shoot so darned well.

Precise manufacturing also contributes to better barrels. The barrel remains a rifle's heart and soul... and a *good* barrel is the primary factor in accuracy. Carbon-fiber-reinforcing reduces barrel weight, as does fluting, and both retard heating. However, what the mountain hunter cares about is two or three accurate shots. Quality of rifling comes first, followed by concentric action-to-barrel matting, sound bedding, and a perfectly-cut crown. This last is often overlooked, but when I encounter accuracy problems (especially in a rifle that suddenly loses accuracy), the crown is the first thing I look at. All too many crowns are cut sloppy in the first place, and it's amazing how easily a crown can be damaged. Debris in a saddle scabbard or on vehicle floorboards are murder on muzzle crowns!



Donna Boddington with a wonderful old desert bighorn, taken in January 2021 with her MGA .270 Winchester. Topped with a Leupold 3.5-10x42mm scope with one-inch tube, the rifle weighs just 5.7 pounds, comfortable for her to carry, and with all the capability she needs.

OPTICS

Fixed 4X scopes were still the gold standard when I started hunting! I took my first rams with low-magnification scopes, but never with open sights or apertures. Though variable-power scopes were around, they were widely distrusted. Since then, optics have made tremendous strides: Better lenses and coatings, greater “zoom” range, and both reticles and turrets that enable adjustment for bullet drop. Compact, affordable laser rangefinders have only existed since the mid-90s. They, too, are an important part of the complete mountain rifle, essentially eliminating range as a variable.

The trend in scopes is toward five

and six times zoom, with maximum magnification well into the upper 20X range and beyond. I don’t hunt with that much magnification, in part because mirage often precludes its use. Large objective lenses are also “in,” increasing light management...but I generally don’t use the largest objectives because, like magnification, they add scope bulk and weight...and few shots in the mountains are taken at last light because, after all, towards dark you need to get off the mountain safely!

Today’s riflescopes have marvelous capability, but “big” scopes are more expensive as well as heavier, so, it depends somewhat on how far you’re really comfortable shooting. In both

rifle and scope, it’s wise to have more capability than you’re likely to use, but silly to lug more of either than necessary.

More than anything else, improved optics have increased hunting rifle capability. With today’s optics, we can see better and place our shots with more precision, assisted by certain knowledge of range. However, enhanced capability doesn’t mean that shots have gotten longer! My own “average” shot distances at sheep and goats hasn’t changed much in the last 50 years. The difference: I can now take with confidence shots that I might have questioned with “small” scopes and without a rangefinder.



CARTRIDGES

We have many fast, new “modern” cartridges with short, fat, and efficient case designs. However, actual velocities have increased little since Roy Weatherby burst onto the scene in the 1940s. And, so long as we are using nitrocellulose propellants, there will be no significant advancements in velocities or trajectories. O’Connor believed in his .270, and Batten believed in his fast .30-calibers. Both are good choices

and, to this day, probably define the sensible range of ideal cartridges for mountain hunting.

For the first time in North America the 6.5mm is “hot,” and is aided by the new “low drag” bullets designed for maximum aerodynamics. With a range of 6.5mm cartridges to pick from, we can drop below .270 and include the faster 6.5mms as excellent choices. A 140-grain 6.5mm bullet started at around 3,000

fps or better is adequate for any sheep or goat hunting! But so are .270 and 7mm bullets at similar velocity and weight.

My comfort zone runs toward John Batten’s: For most of my mountain hunting in the last 25 years I’ve defaulted to a fast .30-caliber because it gives me confidence! However, .30-caliber power and recoil aren’t really essential for sheep and goats!



Left to right: 6.5mm PRC, 26 Nosler, .270 Winchester, .270 WSM, 7mm Ackley Improved, 7mm Remington Magnum, .300 Winchester Magnum, .30-.378 Weatherby Magnum. The sensible range of ideal mountain cartridges probably runs from fast 6.5mms up through the fastest .30s. Although Boddington often uses fast .30s because they give him confidence, he doesn’t believe .30-caliber power and recoil are truly necessary for mountain game.



With full-size scope, stock, and a longer and/or stiffer barrel, it's difficult to make a really light mountain rifle. These two rifles probably define sensible weight range: The AllTerra (left), large scope and 25-inch medium-weight barrel weighs nine pounds; the MGA .270 (right), with slim 22-inch barrel, slender stock, and one-inch-tube scope weighs 5.7 pounds. Big difference, but it depends on what you like.

THE PACKAGE

There are many great choices, and many firms capable of building super-accurate rifles. Names we hear frequently today include Bansner, Best of the West, Christensen, Gunwerks, Nosler, and the fairly new AllTerra rifle I used in Montana. Realistically, many production rifles also provide full capability, but you might need to fiddle with the loads more than with a custom or semi-custom rifle. The main thing: *Your* mountain rifle needs to be a complete package that gives you confidence... not only to shoot, but also to lug up the mountain. What's best for you depends on how you hunt (backpack or horseback), how far you are comfortable shooting, and how much gun weight you are willing to carry. Remember, your scope will probably be a major factor in overall gun weight, certainly bigger and heavier than O'Connor's 4X or Batten's 2.75X!

I don't pretend to have experience with a wide variety of the great new rifles, nor with all brands of optics. Most mountain hunters tend to find a combination that works and gives confidence...and they stick with it!

Donna is shorter and smaller than I am; she needs a shorter, lighter rifle. She is not comfortable shooting as far as I might, so she has no utility for a large, heavy scope. Her MGA .270 wears a one-inch tube 3.5-10x42 Leupold with B&C reticle. All done, her rifle weighs 5.7 pounds, and does all she needs it to do.

As a younger hunter, I carried heavy rifles (up to 11 pounds!) up a lot of mountains. I don't do that anymore, but I am also not comfortable with extremely light rifles, finding them harder to steady when I'm out of breath. I like the capabilities of today's larger scopes and the stability of heavier barrels... but, with them, it's difficult to get full-size rifles down to eight pounds, let alone under six. It depends on what you are comfortable with!

A long-time favorite has been a Rifles, Inc. in .300 Weatherby Magnum, stainless steel long M70 action, trim and light synthetic stock, with fluted medium-contour 26-inch stainless barrel. Weight with a full-size 30mm scope is nine pounds. The AllTerra 6.5mm SST I used on my Montana goat hunt is a good example of a very modern mountain

rifle. It has a short action (lighter), a carbon fiber stock (lighter), 25-inch fluted medium-contour barrel plus muzzle brake (tossup), but the Zeiss 3-18x50mm scope is heavier than what I usually use. Interestingly, with minor differences and compromises, ready-to-go weight is the same nine pounds! I can still carry that, but I wouldn't want a mountain rifle any heavier.

In recent years I've done a lot of mountain hunting with a Blaser R8 with 24-inch .300 Weatherby Magnum barrel. Mine has a walnut stock that I've destroyed, and blued metal that rusts overnight. I love the Blaser system, but if I had it to do over, I'd go synthetic with rustproof metal. Recently I've been carrying a Jarrett "Ridge Walker" in .300 Winchester Magnum with medium-contour 24-inch barrel, synthetic stock, and rustproof metal finish. Although the Blaser and Jarrett are as different as night and day, both weigh exactly 8.5 pounds with Leupold VX6 3-18x44mm scope (CDS turret). So, ready to go, I'm happy with anything between 8.5 and nine pounds...but, on the mountain, ounces make a difference!



Boddington and Kaan Karakaya with a good Altai argali taken with Blaser R8 with .300 Weatherby Magnum barrel. In use for 20 years, the wooden stock is a mess, but the rifle still shoots well. Total weight with a full-size scope is 8.5 pounds.

IT'S THE WIND...

Know the range, know the drop, have the accuracy, and the shooting solution is right there. Not always, and that's a fallacy with extreme-range shooting. Especially at sheep and goats, when there's so much at stake. *Wind* remains the great limiting factor, and wind in the mountains can be unreadable.

When I shot that Montana goat the wind had been gusty all day. As we closed for a shot, it seemed to slack—as often happens in late

afternoon. Outfitter Ryan Counts and I were rested over a boulder, glassing up at the goat. It was dead calm where we were, and the goat was up in sheer rocks, no bushes or grass to stir; in shadow so we couldn't see his coat rippling. We could only conclude the wind had nearly died, so I took the shot with no adjustment.

The goat was 1,200 feet away, mostly vertical, and somewhere up there the wind hadn't gotten the message. My first shot hit nearly a foot too far back. I corrected

and we got the goat. If he'd been much farther, I would have missed completely! On the way up to recover him, as soon as we hit the base of the rocks we struggled against a near gale, invisible from below. There are times and places for long shots, and the modern mountain rifle gives capability our predecessors didn't have...but just because it's there doesn't mean it can always be used! **WS**