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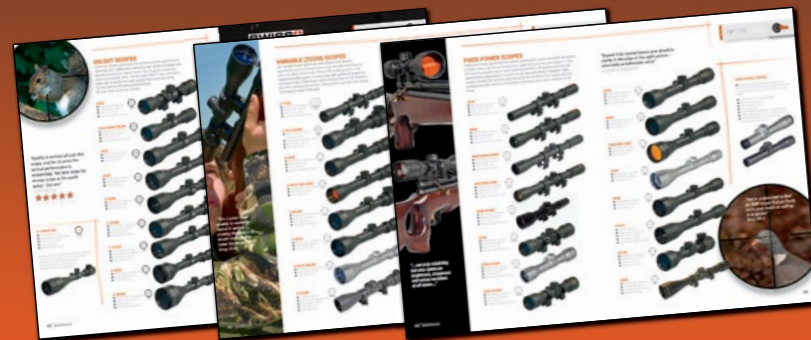


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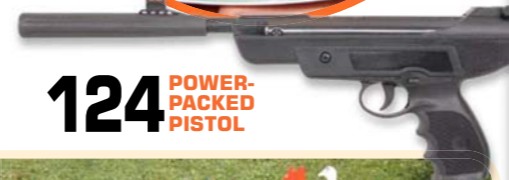
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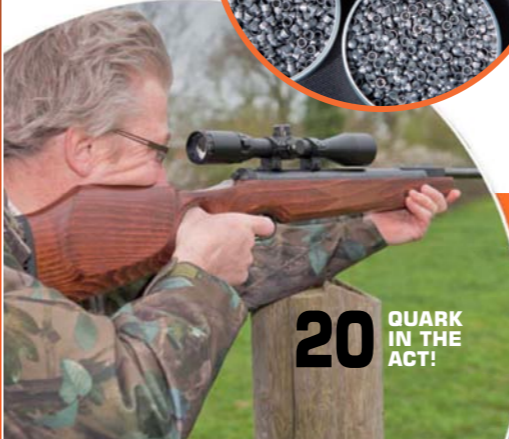
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44 IMPORTED BEEF

Best in CLASS

TEST: SMK CUSTOM B2

A million-seller worldwide, UK gun shops have moved more of this gun over the past two decades than any other break-barrel. **The editor** aims to find out what makes SMK's B2 such an amazing air rifle...

As a lover of all things airgun, I make no excuses for the amount of money I spend on top-end kit, like my state-of-the-art Daystate AirWolf, Theoben Elan and Air Arms EV2. Equally, though, I'm as happy as Larry plinking away with cheaper airguns – and I'll never forget my airgunning roots which, like so many other airgunners, began with the 'humble' Gat air pistol. The gun I've got here, however, is effectively the rifle equivalent of the Gat in that it's probably introduced more people into the sport than any other air rifle – and with a current price tag of under 70 quid, it's not going to stop doing that any time soon, either!

It's SMK's B2 – this one being the 'more expensive' Custom Model. At £69.95, it's the same price as the Custom B2 Carbine (which loses 120mm of barrel length), and £30 more than the standard B2 and B2 Carbine, which trades price for slightly less posh woodwork and metal finish. Yes, even in 2013, you can buy an air rifle for under £40!

Of course, I'll state right from the outset that, at these prices, you have to be realistic in your expectations. But by the same token, £40 (or £70) may be a lot of money to someone who can't afford any more – so in that respect, the rifle has got to give a good account of itself to be a worthy investment. Just because a rifle is cheap isn't an excuse for it to be rubbish.

Many airgunners will never entertain the cheaper end of the market on the grounds that cheap equals nasty – but, actually, such a view is extremely blinkered (if not a little arrogant). I take my hat off to the importers of the Chinese-made B2 model, Sportsmarketing, for making such guns available – and I applaud the company's ethos of 'making the sport comfortably affordable'. Without their help, the higher-end of the market would probably not be as popular as it is – let no-one forget that you need grass roots shooters in order to cultivate the bigger scene.

So, to the gun itself – a mid-powered break-barrel available in .177 or, as I've got here, .22. This being the Custom B2, the sporting stock is 'deluxe', and it carries the full-length barrel – which, at 480mm, is certainly a long one as far as springers go. I'd probably plump for the 360mm carbine model if I was choosing this gun. It would take a little weight from the front and still pose no problems to cock, given this is a half-power plinker's rifle.

When it comes to expectations, I'll openly admit that mine were exceeded. Not by a bit... but by a lot. A helluva lot. For the money, the standard of finish to both wood and metal is really quite astounding and while 'finish' might not be where you want the money to be spent when you're in the market for a budget airgun, it comes as a welcome bonus all the same.



FORESIGHT 'NOSTALGIA'

When adjusting the foresight for windage, you need to move it in the direction *opposite* from that you wish to move the downrange point of impact. For instance, if the gun's shooting to the left and you therefore need to move the shots to the right to hit dead-on, then tap the foresight blade to the left (as viewed by the shooter).

Time was, airguns from China had metal surfaces roughly equivalent to the face of a metal file – but my Custom B2 exuded a smooth polish that had been evenly blued to present a very decent action indeed. It's certainly on a par with any £200-plus springer I can think of.

And the Custom's woodwork is quite impressive – a reddish-brown stained hardwood that sports a solid rubber butt pad, Monte Carlo cheekpiece with raised comb, a well-angled grip and laser-etched chequer panels for both hands. These aren't conventional 'diamonds', merely cuts into the wood – but the visual effect works well, even if it's not quite as practical as pressed or hand-cut chequering.

The length of pull – the distance between butt and trigger – is slightly shorter than average, at 345mm, but it didn't feel too cramped for me and will certainly assist younger or smaller shooters. Given its price point, it may very well appeal to the teenage market – so it's a sensible dimension for this rifle.

As for the trigger itself, I had expected it to be pretty rough – that's par for the course of a sub-£100 airgun. But, as with the overall finish, it surpassed my preconceived notions – and by a country mile. It may not offer any form of adjustment, but my gun's unit boasted a two-stage let-off, with the short first stage giving way to a very crisp second-stage break-point. If I was splitting hairs, I'd say there was a modicum of 'creep' through the second stage, but it's really quite minimal and not at all a hindrance to accurate shooting. If you were learning by way of this gun, it wouldn't teach you any bad habits, that's for sure.

What I particularly liked, too, was the shape of the blade itself. Although it's made from pressed metal (and probably the cheapest-looking component on the whole gun), it's got a perfect 'hook' for your finger pad, and comes with a raised section on the very tip. The tactility of this, I found, made a really good reference point as I slipped through the release.

Although the rifle's main cylinder has been dovetailed with 11mm grooves for standard telescopic sight mounts – which extend a healthy 135mm, too – I chose to shoot the Custom B2 using only the open sights which are fitted as standard. If you're on a budget, my guess is you buy a rifle minus any optional sighting set-up until your finances allow – and at least this break-barrel comes complete with rather nifty opens.

Again, these impressed me. The rearsight utilises a sliding ramp system to raise or lower the U-notch leaf, and although there's also a vernier marked in five-step intervals between 10 and 35, I wouldn't take it as gospel that they're accurate yardages! That said, my .22 sample could just about take out tin cans at 30 yards with the setting on '35'.

There's no windage adjustment on the rearsight, but the B2's foresight *does* allow side-to-side adjustment of the impact point. It's a little old fashioned – though some might call it 'nostalgic' given it was the 'norm' on many airguns 50 years ago – in that you have to drift the foresight unit in its lateral dovetail (see panel above).



Pellets push comfortably into the breech courtesy of a well-chamfered entry port



The two-stage trigger unit features a nicely hooked blade



The B2's rearsight has a sliding ramp system to raise or lower the POI



Above: The Custom B2 punches above its weight in terms of price

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

MODEL: Custom B2
DISTRIBUTOR: Sportsmarketing • www.sportsmk.co.uk
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: China
CALIBRE: .177 and .22 (tested)
ACTION: Spring-and-piston
COCKING: Break-barrel
OVERALL LENGTH: 1,095mm
BARREL LENGTH: 480mm
WEIGHT: 2.95kg
STOCK: Hardwood, right-hand sporter
SIGHTS: Height-adjustable rearsight; windage adjustable foresight
TRIGGER: Two-stage, non-adjustable
SAFETY: None. (Can be decocked)
POWER: 575fps with 13.25-grain Spitfires
PRICE: £69.95



The breech pivots around a bolt, complete with locking screw



Note the unusual configuration of the breech's sprung plunger

For me, the rifle's sights were spot-on for windage straight out of the box, but a shooting mate of mine found the Custom B2 shot to the left for him. That was probably due to our different shooting styles – but it wasn't too difficult to drift the foresight unit to the left to counter this discrepancy using an engineer's punch and a light hammer. I noticed a vernier on the unit itself – though no mark on the barrel with which to align it – and the sight is all-metal, including a solid metal shroud to protect the rounded post inside it.

As my test rifle was the full-length barrel model, the sighting base of 440mm made for some very accurate shooting and I frequently grouped shots inside an inch at 20 yards with the Spitfires that I was sent with the test gun. Not bad at all for a rifle in this price bracket – and the predictable trigger certainly helped.

There are other ingredients in this rifle's accuracy mix, though – and the barrel lock-up is certainly one of them. Pivoting around a bolt (complete with locking grub screw), the B2's breech is quite unusual in that its sprung plunger is situated at the end of the main cylinder, rather than within the breech block. It's the block which has the detent into which the plunger engages and although seemingly in reverse, the lock-up is very positive, with no hint of movement once the barrel is 'shut'.

To release the barrel ready for cocking, you don't have to do the usual 'hand slap' at the end of the barrel, either. The B2 sports a very user-friendly barrel release catch, which is actuated by the lever at the left of the breech area. Pushing this forward with your thumb effectively pulls back the plunger, allowing the barrel to fall open under its own weight, after which you can pull it the 120 degrees to full-cock. Not being a full-powered springer, cocking effort is very manageable for any teenager.

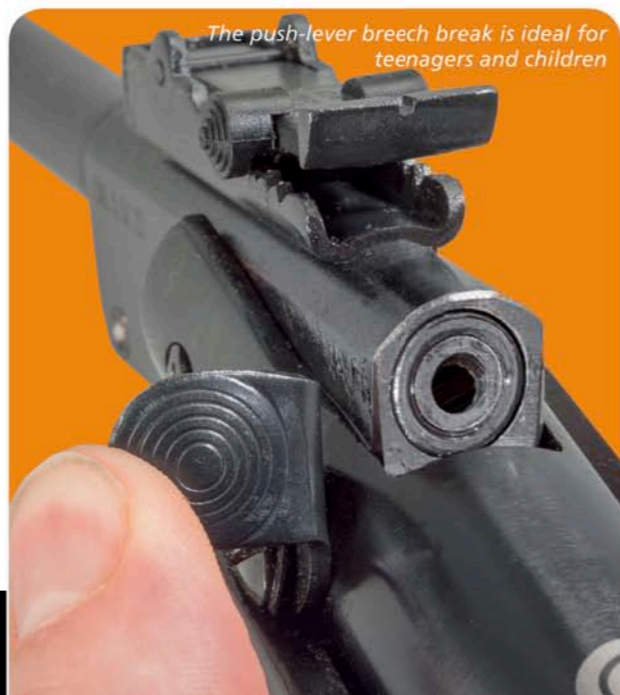
Although the leather breech seal looked decidedly rough – as leather ones always do! – my Spitfires pressed neatly in to the rifling courtesy of a well chamfered breech entry and the chrono readings proved there were no consistency issues as shots were always within +/- 10fps of the average. On many airguns at this end of the price spectrum, the breech area lacks this kind of attention – and I was equally as impressed at the muzzle, which was very neatly machined at the crown.

While Sportsmarketing claim 450fps in .22 and 600fps in .177, my test rifle – surprise, surprise! – beat that... and by a considerable margin. With 13.25-grain .22 Spitfires – and after 50 or so shots to burn the excessive manufacturer's oil – it averaged 125fps more than the quoted figures.

In power terms, 575fps translates to a tickle under 10ft/lb, making my Custom B2 more than capable of close- to mid-range hunting.

And the B2's firing cycle was surprisingly quick, albeit with a little bit of twang on discharge that could easily be remedied by some Abbey LT2 grease on the mainspring. Recoil was less of a kick and more of a quick slap in your shoulder, and certainly nothing to fight against in the quest for accuracy. As I used only opens in my testing, I can't attest to the rifle's ability to hold a scope firmly in place – but although the receiver's lacking any form of arrestor plate, I can't see a scope 'creeping' along the dovetails with this amount of recoil. Use good mounts and a scope to match the rifle's dimensions and you should be okay.

The more I shot with the Custom B2 on my garden range, the more I had to keep reminding myself of how affordable this gun is, because it's easy to think you've got something costing upwards of £150 in your shoulder! It's well balanced, comfortable and really enjoyable to while away a few hours plinking with – and the deluxe Custom model is certainly a rifle I'd be happy to display on the wall. Whether you see the B2 as an entry into air rifle shooting, or simply as a terrific value airgun, at this price point, I'm certain there is not a better air rifle out there. ●



The push-lever breech break is ideal for teenagers and children

Making the GRADE

The XS19 and XS20 Supergrade break-barrel springers are both best-sellers from the SMK stable – but which to choose? **Nigel Allen** takes them both into the field for comparative evaluation...



If there's one thing airgunners can smile about this recession, it's the fact that a little money can go a long way when it comes to selecting your hardware. This pair of break-barrel sporters I've got here have been beating budgets since well before the credit crunch sent Britain's economy into a downward spiral five years ago. Indeed, prior to the launch of the 208 series, these two Supergrade models were SMK's best-sellers for one very good reason – they returned a shedload of value for a meagre investment. If they weren't quite so well-engineered, you'd have every right to call them bargain basement guns. But both the XS19 and XS20 are far too impressive to carry such a label. They're called Supergrade for a reason.

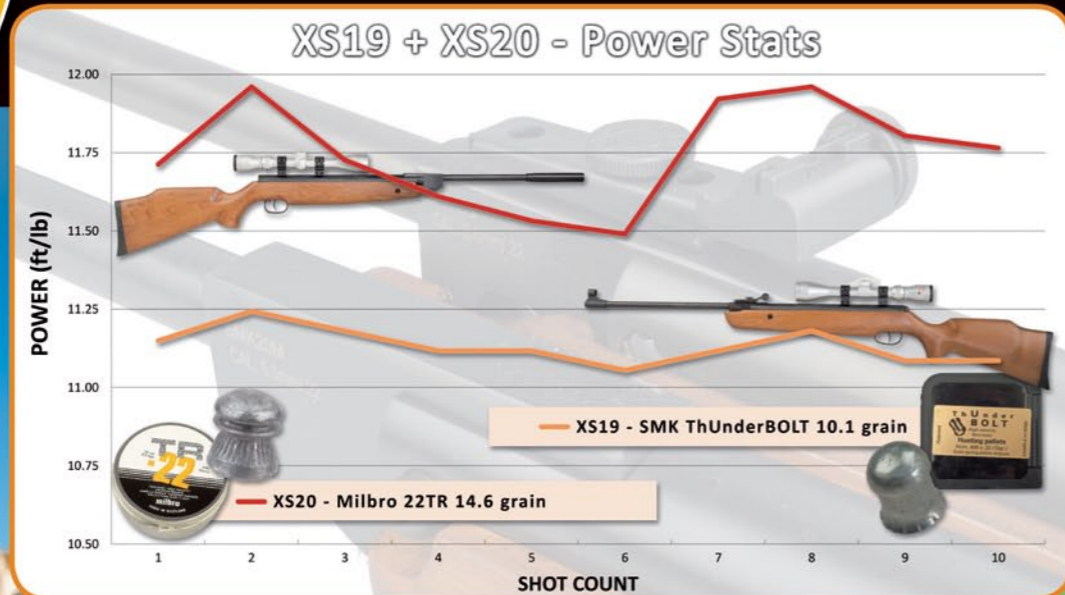
The XS19 and XS20 come in a variety of guises – from standard-stocked and sighted models to those with custom livery, fibre-optic sights or highly effective moderators. Owning an XS19 Custom Carbine Hunter myself for a number of years, I can vouch for both its high standard of finish and its excellent performance. In fact, I've been so impressed with my own CCH that I've invested in another XS19. The internals of this one have been professionally tuned-up, so I can use it on even more demanding field trips when I select spring-power over PCP. At 11.1ft/lb, it absolutely sings...

Now, if I liked my XS19 so much, you may wonder why I didn't 'upgrade' to an XS20 – after all, surely its very nametag suggests it's got to be one

better? The truth is, the Model 19 does everything I ask of it, which is quite a lot. The extra £50 or so that the XS20 commands is certainly easily justified, but by no means does it render its underling a less capable performer. Of that, I have around six years of personal proof!

Though I'm not debating which of these two Supergrades I'd choose, it's still worth pairing them up to consider their differences and similarities. For simplicity, I've chosen the base models of each Supergrade – the £139.95 XS19 and £189.95 XS20 – although I bolted on SMK's silver-finished 3-9x40 scopes to create a bit of a bling effect. Both test rifles were supplied in .22 at my request, as I prefer the more efficient larger calibre in spring guns, but the XS19 is also available in .177 calibre.

Though I'm familiar with the luxury of a tuned-up Model 19, straight out of the box the pairing provided high-end power (see page 18), with the XS20 just slightly ahead on muzzle energy, and good consistency, which proved to be outstanding with some ammo brands I tried. Consistency doesn't necessarily equate to accuracy downrange but, again, both test rifles gave a very good account of themselves. If you're prepared to pay for the better quality brands of pellet – and why not when you've made a killing on the rifle? – you'll get particularly good results with these SMKs. Neither has a barrel restriction at the muzzle, so consequently they can be a bit fussy with



Right: The consistency and power is impressive

Below: Like its stablemate, the XS19 gives a good account of itself downrange



Both Supergrades boast a well-engineered breech



The XS19's open sights are replaced by a muzzle weight on the X20

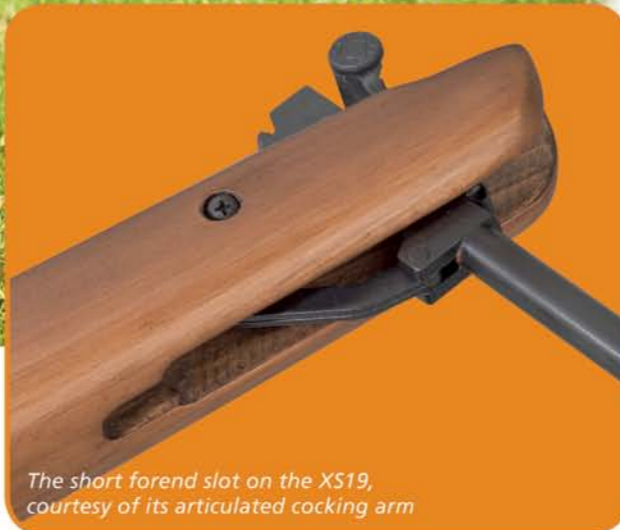
inconsistently made ammo. It's not the fault of the rifle or the shooter, but the pellet. I've established with my own XS19s that if you experience poor accuracy, try a different brand or tin of pellets – it's rarely a rifle issue. In these tests, the XS19 loved ThUnderBOLTs, while the XS20 did the business best with Daystate Rangemaster Lis.

What constitutes 'good' accuracy is down to what your target is, and the distance over which you shoot. If you limit yourself to 25 yards, as many spring gun shooters prefer to, then you'll find it hard to fault these rifles even with less expensive pellets. Find the correct diet of lead, though, and you can achieve 35mm diameter groups out to 35-plus paces with a scope. For these extreme spring gun hunting distances though, I'd probably recommend keeping the XS19, as the slightly less powerful of the two, for field ranges under 30 yards.

In the case of the XS20, an optic is mandatory since the adjustable opens of the XS19 – which can be standard notch-and-post as on my test sample, or fibre-optic on the XS19-18 model – have been swapped in favour of a steel muzzle weight. Finely blued and held in place by a couple of grub screws, the extra mass it brings to the front of the XS20 is very noticeable in a side-by-side comparison with the XS19. There's more stability when aiming with the XS20 for sure.

However, that's not to say that the XS19 is 'wobbly'. Despite being lighter than its stablemate by only 100g, it's surprisingly easy to hold steady, even from a standing stance. Even with identical scopes on board, the balance points of the rifles were a little different. The XS19's would suit someone who prefers a slightly butt-biased weight distribution, while the XS20's balance definitely suits someone who likes their rifle's muzzle to 'anchor' to the target. I'm more of a butt-heavy man, myself, so preferred the XS19, but I have to concede that I got better results out of the XS20 when testing both at extreme ranges.

While both guns look near enough identical twins, with air chambers of 30mm outer diameter, the XS19 feels sleeker overall as far as handling is concerned. The 19's barrel is 15mm diameter, while the 20's is 16mm, and the breech blocks 16 and 18mm wide in favour of the 20. Oddly, however, although both pistol grips are pretty much the same, it's the XS19's forestock that's 2mm wider. I'm sure this helps counter the lack of front-end weight that the thinner barrel offers – and though all these differences are just 1 or 2mm, they're enough to transform the handling, if not the looks, of the rifles when shouldered. If you're a slightly built shooter, you'd lean more toward the XS19 purely on its balance. The XS20 probably suits larger-framed airgunners who like to feel some mass in their



The short forend slot on the XS19, courtesy of its articulated cocking arm

leading hand, although it certainly isn't such a beast as to be a handful for a lady or junior.

Even though it has the longest piston stroke of the pair, the XS20's recoil feels less lively as much of the movement is absorbed in its weightier metalwork – although 100 shots or so into the test, my sample developed the old spring gun 'cough'. As this added a little too much vibration for my liking, I tamed, though not entirely eliminated it with a dollop of Abbey LT2 Grease on the mainspring.

Yet while it's a little snappier – partly because of its shorter stroke combined with a relatively light weight – the XS19's firing cycle can't exactly be described as a 'kick'. With a good shooting technique, it won't stop you achieving acceptable accuracy results. Both rifles' butts are tipped with solid rubber recoil pads which, while not the most absorbent

of rubber (they don't need to be), are fitted beautifully flush to the wood from which they extend.

In terms of woodwork, you've got a mixed bag on the basic models, as tested. They're hardwood, with a pleasant walnut finish that's extremely durable and practical – though not so practical is the fact that neither boasts chequering of any description. For that, you need to opt for the more expensive 'Custom' models. To be fair, the standard of finish of my test guns was exemplary, with the XS20 in particular displaying a very attractive grain pattern. Each rifle's butt sports a Monte Carlo cheekpiece for the right-handed shooter, with the comb raised high enough for comfortable scope use, while the pistol grip is ideally raked for a good trigger attack. The fact that thumb muscle cutaways are on both sides of the grip makes both stocks semi-ambidextrous – I'd say a Southpaw wouldn't have too much difficulty shooting off the other shoulder.

Their forestocks are both nicely curved and long, with the XS19's being straight-line tapered, while the XS20's is flatter at the belly before tapering up to the breech. Because of the slightly longer air chamber of the XS20, the forend finishes behind the breech block. On the XS19, it extends through it, giving this shorter-chambered model a slightly neater look overall – but there's no denying that each rifle gives plenty of hold options for your leading hand. When you're shooting under field conditions, this is certainly a big plus-point.

One thing that's also worth pointing out is the short length of the cocking slot, underneath the forend, that each rifle sports – even though it's only the XS19 which runs an articulated cocking linkage. Apart from minimising the risk of a split stock, it looks a lot more attractive to boot. That cocking linkage helps in the XS19's cocking effort, too. The first part of the stroke is decidedly effortless, with the main 'grunt' only required right at the end. Although it has a fixed cocking arm, the XS20 is no more effort due to the cocking stroke being slightly longer – plus, of course, its muzzle weight doubles as a handy cocking aid by increasing the mechanical advantage. As for decocking, the XS20 can be, but the XS19's anti-beartrap system requires you to discharge the shot.

Features-wise, there are other rifles in the sub-£200 price bracket which have more USPs to boast about than these Supergrades – but I'm quite reassured by the few that these twin SMKs offer. To me, it shows that the emphasis has been on sound engineering and quality components, instead of simply piling on superficial bling. Their barrels pivot around axis bolts, rather than pins, so you can nip them up to accommodate the inevitable wear over time which would otherwise lead to inaccuracy in a break-barrel. The XS20's domed-bolt is very Weihrauch-esque, while I'm mega impressed by the XS19's pivot, which sports a locking grub screw to ensure maximum 'squeeze' of the breech jaws.

The breech lock-up is A1 on both models, being a sprung-plunger affair that requires a fair old tap on the end of the barrel to get past. When shut, there's no 'play' whatsoever in the breech area.

TWIN TEST: SMK XS19 & XS20



The breech lock-up on both models is tight – this being the XS20's

Each rifle's cylinder is dovetailed with 11mm grooves for mounting a scope, with a very impressive 180mm of clamping space on the XS19, and only 10mm less on the XS20 which also boasts three arrester stud holes for anchoring down the scope's rear mount. There's no form of arresting device on the XS19, however, so you may want to choose a one-piece mount to alleviate the possibility of scope creep. However, given the rifle's relatively low recoil, it's not a necessity – and the lightweight SMK 3-9x40 I tested the rifle with, using two-piece mounts, didn't shift a millimetre.

If you like the hassle-free shooting afforded by open sights – and many airgunners do – then the XS19 is the rifle to go for, as the XS20 is sold sightless. The XS19's supplied offerings are well made, with a U-notch rear that's adjustable for windage and elevation via posi-click thumbwheels and a parallel foresight post that sits in a protective tunnel on a raised ramp. But if opens are really important to you, I'd recommend you go for the XS19-18 model which comes equipped with the more in-vogue fibre-optics for just a tenner more.

Having read everything so far, you're probably still thinking 'what's the difference?' Well, I've left till last the one thing that, for me, splits the rifles – their triggers. As an XS19 user myself, I have no qualms about its trigger, which has served me well for many, many thousands of rounds and dozens of heads of vermin. But when it comes to seeing where that extra £50 goes on the XS20, you can't help but notice its sublime trigger. Well, trigger and safety catch to be more precise – because it's not just the XS20's trigger that shades it, the safety's pretty impressive, too. Automatic, it's a button that pops out of the left-hand side of the cylinder on full-cock, and is easy to disengage with your thumb when you're ready for the shot.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS		
MODEL	SMK XS19 Supergrade	SMK XS20 Supergrade
DISTRIBUTOR	Sportsmarketing 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk	
ACTION	Break-barrel, spring and piston	
CALIBRE	.177 and .22 (tested)	.22 only
OVERALL LENGTH	1,070mm	1,090mm
BARREL LENGTH	425mm	415mm
WEIGHT (excl scope)	3.3kg	3.4kg
TRIGGER	Two-stage, adjustable	
SAFETY	Manual, in-guard resettable	Automatic, resettable via recock
SIGHTS	Post and notch opens, adjustable	None supplied
STOCK	Hardwood, sporter (right-hand)	
POWER	10-11.1ft/lb according to pellet	10.8-11.8ft/lb according to pellet
SRP	£139.95	£189.95

On the other hand, the XS19's is of the in-guard variety, and manual. While I like the latter facet – I rarely use a safety when hunting – if you need the security blanket of a safety catch, I'm afraid this one's really awkward. It sits too far back, toward the trigger blade itself, when in the 'on' position. On a positive note, though, you can dis- and re-engage it at your leisure. The XS20's can only be reset by recocking the gun – a pain in the proverbial...

Both models' triggers are adjustable, although the XS19's marketing literature doesn't dwell on it, largely because the amount of adjustment is quite limited. For the money this rifle costs, I've got no complaints, and I've certainly tugged on plenty that are worse. A two-stager, it's not at all heavy and it breaks consistently, although there's a tiny amount of what I'd call 'controlled creep' – that is, there's a bit of slip between the first stop and final break-point. It's not inconsistent, though, so you can manage it very easily. I've certainly got quite accustomed to it on my own XS19s.

But when your forefinger tickles the XS20's blade, you know you're on to something very good. I needed to adjust its second stage on my test sample, as it was a bit light and didn't always engage the safety, and I tweaked the first stage to suit my own preference. But once I'd got it to my liking, I found it to rank among the best of the sub-£200 springers I've ever shot. That translates to good accuracy too, and while I have no qualms about the XS19's trigger, when it's compared alongside the XS20's, there really is only one winner.

So does that mean I'm going to trade in one of my Model 19 Supergrades for a 20 model? Not really. Having put both to a side-by-side test, I think the XS20 is probably the better rifle by virtue of the extra fifty quid it costs, but the XS19 is no poor performer and has, for me, already proven itself as an extremely reliable workhorse. If the XS20 Supergrade is fantastic value for money, then the XS19 Supergrade is phenomenal. When it comes to power, accuracy, performance and reliability, both of these models easily make the grade. ●



Dovetailed cylinders with scope-mounting grooves are a convenient feature of both rifles



Triggers can be a deal-breaker, and neither of the Supergrades' can be argued with

According to George



I'm just in from a shooting session that has to rank as the best I've had for years – but not for anything I did. What made it great was watching my little grandson having the time of his life.

Jamie's just five years old and already loves shooting, fishing and spotting wildlife. He can name most British birds and animals too, and he's never happier than when he's outdoors with me or his dad.

Jamie's tried all sorts of toy and softair guns and they've been ideal as training aids to properly plant safe gun handling and the other shooting essentials.

When these are taught from the very beginning, it's so much easier to maintain and expand them when the 'proper' shooting starts. Well, for my grandson, that started when a pair of rifles from SMK arrived and his mum and dad brought him over to see the surprise granddad had for him....

Inside a huge carton Jamie found an SMK Super Grade XS20, for me to test, and a junior sized Super Grade XS15, just for him to put through its paces. As it turned out, there was no way that boy was ever going to let granddad send back the XS15, so that took care of my his next birthday present, which was handy. If the photos show anything of the sheer joy in that little boy's face, you'll know exactly why I had to buy him that airgun.

CHALLENGING TARGET

Also in the box was a sturdy metal box-target holding five knock-downs, the central one a re-set disc to flip up the other four silhouettes.

An angled entry deflects pellets safely toward the catch plate at the back of the box, creating a challenging and

completely safe target for Jamie, and me, to shoot at.

More rummaging in the SMK box, and a pair of scopes, mounts, a silencer - for the rifle I'd be testing - some paper targets and a stack of pellets emerged. Jamie thought Christmas had come again as he found each bit of kit, and I lost count of the times he yelled 'Look Granddad! What's this do?' And when I handed him the XS15, it was love at first sight, and it's stayed like that ever since.

The SMK Super Grade XS15 is a small-scale break-barrel sporter in .177 calibre with excellent open sights, scope grooves, a great 2-stage trigger, automatic safety and a lovely little hardwood stock that could pass for walnut at a push. Its barrel lock-up is as solid as a rock and the cocking link looks like it'll last for years.

Obviously, Jamie will be fully supervised at all times and it'll be a while before he's big enough to cock this rifle for himself, but it's already got enough going for it to provide unlimited fun and excitement.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Double guns!

A pair of budget-priced rifles arrive to keep the **Stevens** family happy



FOR THE MONEY, BOTH THESE BREAK BARREL SPRINGERS ADD THE WORD BONUS TO BUDGET IN THEIR JOB DESCRIPTION

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

The XS15 recorded a perfect 7ft.lb of power and plenty of accuracy to make the most of it. I zeroed using its open sights, and then the optional 4x32 Compact scope SMK had sent, and at 15 metres this rifle was easily grouping inside 20mm.

A BIT MORE TIME

Jamie found the scope to be a bit awkward though, so we went back to those traditional post-and-notch jobs, and within minutes he was knocking metal silhouettes over a treat. Give him a bit more time to get his eye in and I'll bet that little scope will be on again and the target shifted back to 20 metres, too.



Details above show well engineered breech assembly and a familiar-looking safety set-up on the XS20. Below left, the XS15 exhibits more of the same - though I'd say that trigger could be further back within the guard which would help junior fingers to cope



Meanwhile, I still had a gun to test and that began when my missus came out to see how her grandson was getting on. Straight away she puts her granny hat on, decides he's 'Absolutely freezing'. Grandad should have known better and carts a protesting Jamie away to warm up. Actually the lad was fine and didn't need mollycoddling - but at least I had the

chance to set up my own rifle.

I'd already had a look at the .22 Super Grade XS20 and fitted the 6x40 scope SMK offer as an optional extra, and I also added the silencer they'd included in the package. It has to be said, with a rifle-only price of just below £170, the XS20 was looking like a very promising package indeed.

POTENTIAL TO DELIVER

This is a full-power, full-size break-barrel, designed to provide top performance at an affordable price. Checking through the features and giving individual components the once-over, it's obvious that this rifle is well built and has the potential to deliver plenty for the money. The clincher, as always, is how well it shoots, so with Jamie out of the way, I was about to see what this budget-beater could do.

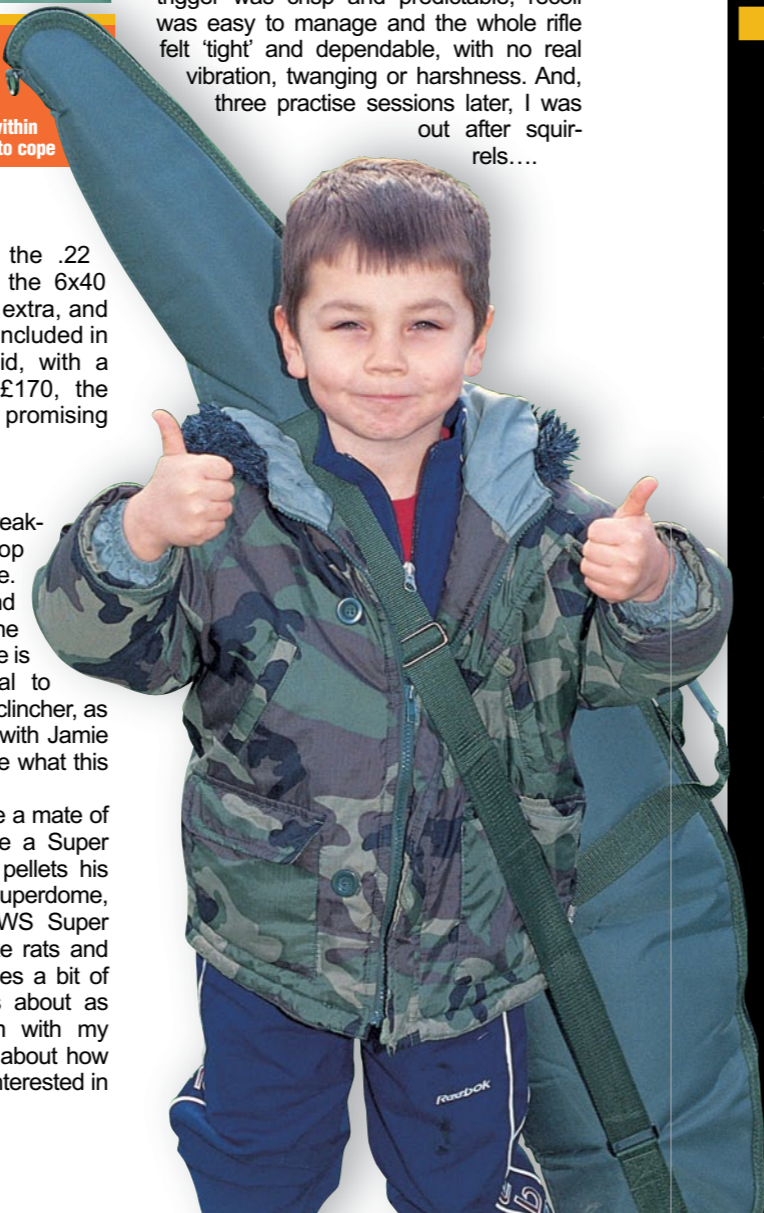
The first thing I did was phone a mate of mine who also happens to have a Super Grade XS20, to find out which pellets he prefers. He told me it liked RWS Superdome, and Crosman Accupell, with RWS Super H-Points for close range stuff like rats and feral pigeons. Now, my mate does a bit of professional pest control and is about as careful with his guns as I am with my hammers. It was his harping on about how good the XS20 was that got me interested in

testing one, because if my mate can't break it, there's something a bit special going on.

My first shots at the zeroing target produced a little smoke from the muzzle but this soon settled and the XS20 began to behave itself well. In fact it was so mild-mannered I broke out the chronograph early to check its power. No problem. A reading of 11.2 to 11.4 told me all I needed to know, and this was confirmed by the groups appearing on my 25-metre target card.

ABOVE ITS PRICE TAG

Apart from the silencer making the rifle a bit 'leggy' - I'd have it cut down to a carbine, personally - the test gun performed way above its pricetag. The adjustable 2-stage trigger was crisp and predictable, recoil was easy to manage and the whole rifle felt 'tight' and dependable, with no real vibration, twanging or harshness. And, three practise sessions later, I was out after squirrels....



That's one happy little lad on the left, and the one on the right had a bigger grin on his face too, after success in the hunting field with what proved to be a remarkably effective air rifle for the money

The main reason I went squirreling with the Super Grade XS20 was in response to a landowner's request to thin out his tree rat population. He'd seen some serious damage to young trees, but more to the point, he'd been seeing far too many of the little so and so's, lately.

It's still early in the year and many trees are bare, so squirrels tend to be easier to spot compared to when leaves cover the trees. Once a concerned landowner gets it in his mind that he's got a squirrel problem, every one he sees confirms his fears - even though it's likely to be the same one most times, 'cos they do get about, you know. Whatever, the whole thing can quickly get out of proportion. Luckily, someone like me culling a few

SMK SUPER GRADE XS20

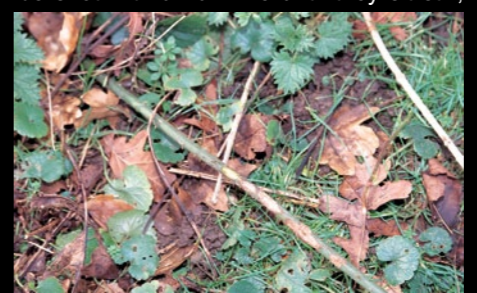
Model:	Super Grade XS20
Manufacturer:	SMK
Price:	£169.95
Type:	Spring-piston, single-shot sporter
Calibre:	.22
Cocking:	Break-barrel
Loading:	Manual, direct to barrel
Trigger:	Two-stage, adjustable
Sights:	Scope rail only
Stock Type:	Eastern hardwood sporter
Weight:	3.1kg (7.5lb) unscoped
Length:	1078mm (42.5in)
Barrel:	410mm (16.1in)

contact 01206 795333



usually calms any fears about being overrun with tree rats and life carries on as normal. So, that's what the SMK and I were aiming to do on our first morning's hunt together.

Bare trees may make squirrel potting easier but, for the squirrels, they make human spotting easier too. Squirrels can't be shot with an air rifle until they sit still,



I'd always put this sort of bark stripping damage down to rabbits, hares or deer - but actually watching the squirrel tucking in to the sugary fibres added that species firmly to the list

and they won't sit still unless they think its safe. Bare branches just don't give tree rats that sense of security - especially when they've sussed that we're about.

That was my long-winded way of telling you that I had a hard time on that first hunt. My usual mobile approach proved next to useless, resulting in me

running from tree to tree while the three squirrels I was chasing didn't stop until they'd left the boundaries of my shoot. I don't do 'running' if I can help it, so I gave up the mobile tactics and tried a bit of ambushing.

On this shoot, at this time of day, my experience is that the squirrels generally make their way toward the stand of large oaks in the southwest corner. Certainly the three that had evaded me so far were following that pattern, so I plotted up behind some natural cover to wait awhile and see what developed.

Typically, while my attention was trained on the treetops, I missed a rabbit loping along the grassy path to my left. I really wish these hunts would go according to plan at least sometimes, then I wouldn't look quite so daft, but we all make mistakes and that's what happened this time out.

I held my position but that rabbit didn't re-appear - although the squirrel that came along 10 minutes later made up for it. Curiously, this was feeding on bramble suckers - the

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ONCE A LANDOWNER BELIEVES HE'S GOT A SQUIRREL PROBLEM EVERY ONE HE SEES CONFIRMS HIS WORST FEARS

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lighter green shoots that the bramble sends out to spread its growth – and a close inspection showed that it was 'bark-stripping'. I'd seen similar stripped bramble before but assumed it was rabbit damage, which goes to prove that there's *always* something to learn out there.

SENSED ME WATCHING

Then, the squirrel either sensed me watching him or fancied a change from bramble peelings, and bolted toward the nearest tree. This time I didn't follow but allowed the squirrel to settle, which it did, bracing itself on a branch to consider its options. I shortened its options list by snicking off the auto-safety, resting the crosshairs on the squirrel's neck to allow hold-under, and squeezing the trigger.

Moving on to another of my shoot's well-known squirrel rendezvous, I re-cocked the XS20 and went into 'stalk' mode in case another rabbit put in an appearance. One didn't but another squirrel did, so it was game on again. I'd definitely been spotted this time so I had to chase my quarry again, like some sort of Realtree'd bloodhound, until I had the squirrel bayed-up in a solitary oak.

Now, this should have been the easy part, but in the real world squirrels don't read scripts any more than rabbits do so he just vanished. Perhaps it had a hidey-hole up there, or maybe it had blind-sided me and escaped to the ground on the other side of the trunk, or it may have just been crouched in a shadowy bit of tree,



At some points during the time I was out with the XS20, I found myself sprinting from tree to tree. This, believe me, is not 'me' at all!

I don't know. What I do know is, I couldn't see it.

Hiding behind the smallest, skinniest, saplings on the shoot, I put my faith in my ammo and kept absolutely still. Would the squirrel come out again, or had it gone? I was sure it was still on offer so I decided to

wait. Not five minutes later, out came the squirrel and my chance was there for the taking.

Confidence counts in these situations. As the squirrel paused at the tip of a branch, my finger increased pressure on the trigger and I held aim as the rifle fired. The squirrel dropped like a stone, though with a thread-bare tail he didn't look too appetising, so I left it for foxy.

SO THAT WAS THAT

Whether I'd have found any will never be known. My mobile rang and there was Jamie saying he'd warmed up and asking when I was coming back to do some more shooting. He told me 'Nanny says it's OK, Granddad' so that was that, hunt over.

For the money, I don't see what there is to criticise about this SMK Super Grade XS20, or its junior stablemate. Both perform so far above their price brackets that there's no room to pick fault, really. OK, some chequering would be nice on the XS20 and as I've said I'd definitely cut down its barrel, but for 140 quid I'm looking at amazing value for money, here.

Over the three weeks that I've used the XS20, it's never let me down. Nothing has broken, shaken loose or reduced its performance level. In fact, now that it's properly run-in, it's looking like an even better investment for not much money by today's standards.

As for the XS15, Jamie's over at my place shooting the little .177 every chance he gets, and what he's getting from that £70 air-gun is priceless. It's a huge pleasure just to watch him learning and enjoying himself. That's our sport for you, though, isn't it? Pure fun for all the family n

FOR THE MONEY THERE'S LITTLE TO CRITICISE ABOUT THE SMK SUPER GRADE XS20, OR ITS JUNIOR XS15 STABLE-MATE. BOTH PERFORM FAR ABOVE THEIR PRICES



SPRINGING *into action*

KRAL CHAMPION: SMK SYNSG

CHAMPION V SYNSG



Above: The Kral offers a satisfactory design, the SMK a super-sleek stock

Spring rifles are the lifeblood of airgunning – so **Mark Camoccio** takes a brace of low-price models and pits them together in a head-to-head shoot-out...

Full-power airguns are the tool of choice for despatching quarry cleanly and humanely – and these days, with a plethora of precharged pneumatics available, the hunting fraternity is spoiled for choice. But not everyone wants the hassle of charging gear like a diver's scuba tank or pump. Many airgunners still swear by the standalone format of the traditional spring-piston rifle.

On test here are two springers offering legal-limit output at the lower end of the price spectrum. Both come fitted with black synthetic stocks, which are practical and help keep down costs. On the face of it, both offer good value for money, so let's see how they compare...

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Synthetic stocks, while not to everyone's taste, are undeniably trendy – not to mention immensely practical – and both test models here feature the 'black stuff', configured for adult shooters.

The Kral Champion from Range-Right is a relatively new model, and its radical styling is certainly eye-catching. It faces off against Sportsmarketing's SYNSG, which has super-sleek stock dimensions – though it's surprisingly heavy.

Placed alongside each other, these look like two serious airguns designed to do a job. Though the SMK's butt is slightly the plainer, first impressions reveal plenty of features on both rifles.

Kral Champion ★★★★★★☆☆
SMK SYNSG ★★★★★★☆☆

TAKING STOCK

The Kral's stock includes stylish moulding and a thumbhole cut-out that affords a comfortable grip, even if it has a 'plasticky' feel. While it looked a little low, the cheekpiece actually set my head in exactly the right position – and a comfortable forend grip completes a highly satisfactory design.

Each rifle's stock has a unique profile





The Kral Champion's green fibre-optic rearsight element



The SYN SG's cocking stroke is the smoother of the two guns



The SMK SYN SG – like its Kral rival – also has a fibre-optic rearsight, and thumbwheels for windage and elevation adjustment



The Champion's breech lock-up system...



The Kral incorporates a manual safety catch forward of the curved blade



...and the SYN SG's



The SYN SG's plastic trigger blade is almost straight, and its pull-weight is lighter

Top left: The thumbhole stock and thin grip make the Kral a sleek handler

Top right: A plam-filling forend gives the SYN SG a very 'pointable' feel

The SMK's moulding is equally well presented, with exceptionally sharp chequering on show. Near parallel edges form a subtle taper to the forend to give a sleek and purposeful profile. A solid rubber recoil pad makes this a functional butt, though given this is clearly a purposeful sporter, I'm curious why it lacks a raised cheekpiece.

Kral Champion ★★★★★☆☆☆
SMK SYN SG ★★★★★☆☆☆

OPEN SIGHTS

Open sights give younger shooters and novices the chance to master the art of basic marksmanship – and both airguns come fitted with fibre-optics opens that are very good in this respect. The Champion's fluorescent foresight element is incorporated into what appears to be a large silencer at the barrel end. The fully-adjustable rearsight, complete with finger wheels for windage and elevation, is particularly neat and functional. The SMK comes equally well appointed, too – with both rifles effectively

offering a sight picture formed from a red bead that sits within a notch flanked by green dots. Top marks!

Kral Champion ★★★★★★★★★★
SMK SYN SG ★★★★★★★★★★

SCOPING UP

Fitting a scope to a break-barrel airgun can throw up problems, as any glassware fitted must be compact enough to avoid fouling the break-open breech area – but as each model sports a long compression cylinder, no such issues will arise. As for the thorny subject of scope creep, the SYN SG has an arrestor plate fitted at the rear of the 11mm dovetail rails, against which you can butt the rear scope mount to stop it sliding backwards under the influence of recoil. The Kral lacked such a detail, meaning you really need to invest in a more expensive one-piece mount when fitting a telly.

Kral Champion ★★★★★★★☆☆☆
SMK SYN SG ★★★★★★★★★★

COCKING CYCLE

The required cocking effort is an important factor with any spring gun – especially where full power output is concerned. With both my test rifles capable of generating energy levels nudging the 12ft/lb limit almost too closely, it's no surprise that it takes some effort to prime their actions!

What the Kral concedes in respect of barrel length it should make up for with its muzzle fitment – and while that pseudo silencer improves leverage, the cocking stroke needs to be made in one concerted movement because spring resistance certainly increases toward the end of the stroke. Indeed, it felt more like cocking a gas-ram than a coiled mainspring – and I found gripping the top bar of the thumbhole during the cocking process gave the best grip for mastering the Kral's cocking technique. As far as smoothness goes, breaking open the barrel was fairly easy, and the lock-up was wonderfully positive – though the stroke revealed some spring graunch.

The SYN SG's cocking experience was totally different. The breech is quite stiff to open – always a good sign on a break-barrel! – and required a small

jolt over the knee. The cocking stroke was then a little easier than its rival's – and much smoother. Both guns' breeches locked-up nicely on closure; neither gun falls short here.

Kral Champion ★★★★★★★☆☆☆
SMK SYN SG ★★★★★★★★★★

TRIGGER & SAFETY

In this price bracket, triggers are frequently 'acceptable', but rarely any better – and the Kral's is par for the course. The blade itself is slightly too curved, with plenty of creep in the heavyish pull (although the ultimate release pressure reduces as the creep is taken up). The safety catch, just forward of the trigger, is manual – and there's an anti-beartrap to protect your fingers during the loading process, the downside of which is that the action can't be de-cocked.

By comparison, the SYN SG comes with a near-straight plastic blade, and though it's a fairly unsophisticated unit, there's very little creep and its pull

is notably lighter than its rival. Its resettable safety is automatic and takes the form of a pop-out tab at the end of the cylinder.

Kral Champion ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
SMK SYNSG ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

HANDLING

Both of these rifles handle well and hold a different appeal. The Kral feels good on aim and the added benefit of the thumbhole stock is noticeable. The ultra-thin, raked-back grip gives great control, and the thin bar at the top of the cut-out not only feels good, but doubles as a 'handle' by which to pick up the rifle!

My first impression of the SMK, with its ultra-sleek forend, was that it may be left wanting in the handling stakes – but, in use, the SYNSG has an ultra-pointable feel that's really appealing. The palm-filling forend is very nice, and if the comb was just a little higher for use with a scope, I'd have scored it an extra point.

Kral Champion ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
SMK SYNSG ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

OVERALL BUILD

Given the price sector here, it would be unrealistic to expect faultless engineering and finish – but I was impressed with both rifles. The Turkish-made Kral looks well made and certainly has a quality feel, save for the final finish applied to the metalwork, where a slightly rough surface and rather dull blueing just about give away the price tag. The most disappointing detail on my test gun was the sloppy engineering around the inside of the breech face, although this, of course, is unlikely to be a feature of every Champion – and it didn't affect the performance.



Both these springers demonstrate that affordability and quality aren't always mutually exclusive.

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS		
MODEL	Kral Champion	SMK SYNSG
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	Turkey	China
CALIBRE	.22 only	.177 and .22 (tested)
TYPE	Spring-and-piston	Spring-and-piston
COCKING	Break-barrel	Break-barrel
OVERALL LENGTH	1,168mm	1,143mm
BARREL LENGTH	400mm	483mm
WEIGHT (UNSCOPED)	2.8kg	3.3kg
STOCK	Synthetic sporter	Synthetic sporter
TRIGGER	Two-stage, adjustable	Two-stage, adjustable
SAFETY	Manual, with anti-beartrap	Automatic, resettable
POWER (WITH AADF)	11.8ft/lb	11.9ft/lb
SRP	£129.95	£139.95

As for the SYNSG, this has to be one of very best-finished rifles of Chinese origin that I've had from Sportsmarketing. Even the blueing, so often the downfall of Far Eastern-made fare, was smooth, deep and even. Indeed my only real criticism, quality-wise, is that the trigger blade is plastic.

Kral Champion ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
SMK SYNSG ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

ACCURACY & PERFORMANCE

On test, the Kral was settled from the off – albeit that the cocking stroke is more akin to a gas-ram in the progressive nature of the effort required. Get a routine going, though, and it's perfectly manageable. My test rifle did exhibit quite a bit of spring twang and resonance on firing, yet accuracy over 25 yards was excellent, once I'd mastered its trigger creep. Actually, with high-quality ammo – Air Arms Diabolo Field – sub-12mm groups were the norm, when I fought that trigger.

After an initial running-in period to get rid of the excessive dieselling, the SMK was hot on the Kral's heels in the accuracy stakes with decent ammo, too. Once things had settled down, it was capable of 19mm groups at 25 yards with AADFs which, for a rifle in this price category, is extremely impressive.

Kral Champion ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
SMK SYNSG ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

VALUE FOR MONEY

These are two very appealing guns, with their own character. Rarely have I been so surprised over the course of a gun test as I was with both rifles here. Retailing for similar asking prices and well under £150, they represent excellent value for money for the high standard of performance on offer, and their presentation overall. I have no hesitation in awarding each top marks – again.

Kral Champion ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
SMK SYNSG ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

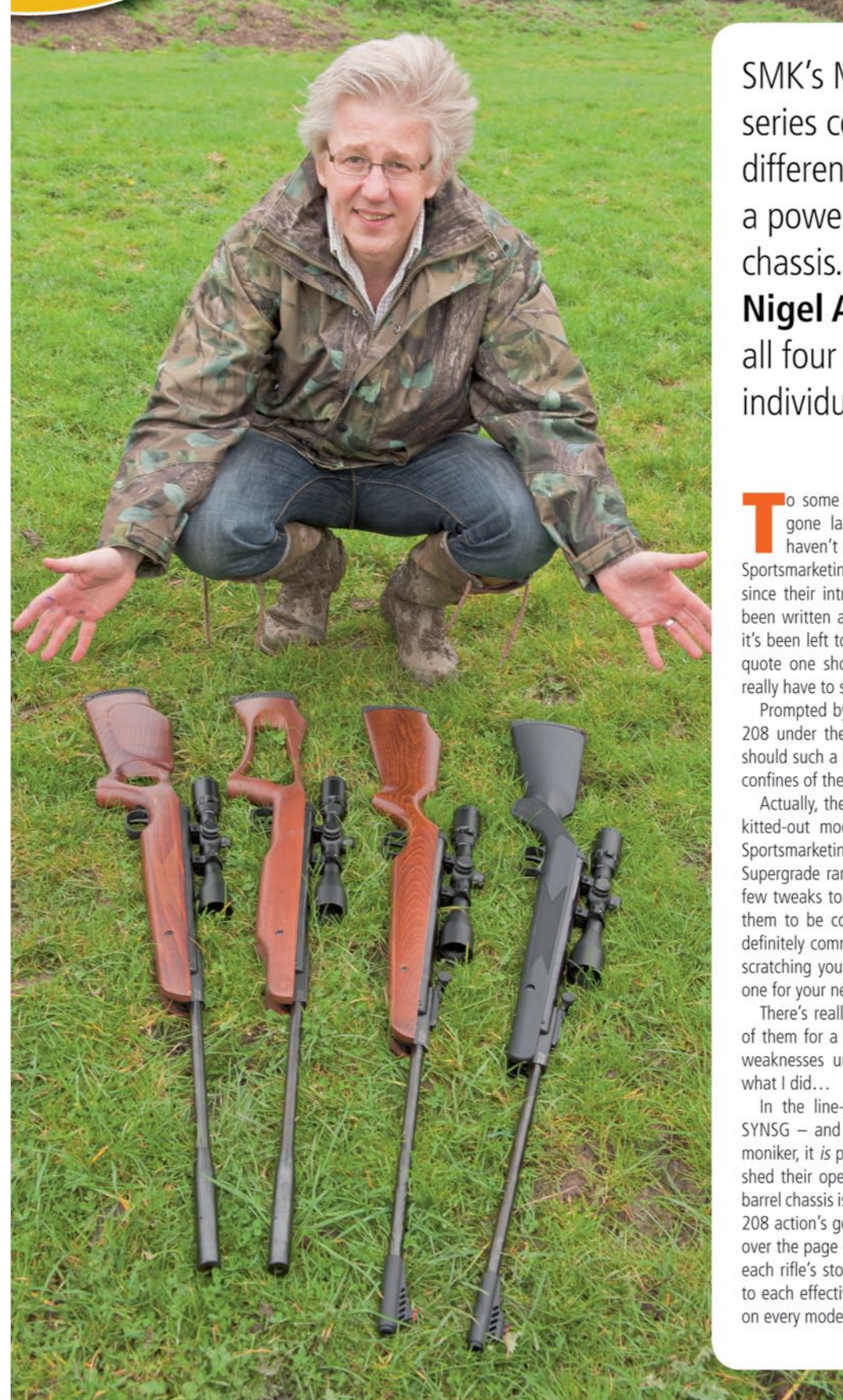
Kral Champion	78/100
SMK SYNSG	80/100

FINAL VERDICT

Okay, synthetic stocks are not to everyone's taste, but these two springers really have made a case for themselves and demonstrated the increasing quality to be found at the lower end of the price spectrum.

Both displayed a level of accuracy that could only impress, and both handled well enough to make the final choice tricky to say the least. The points system I use decides on a technical winner – and for me, victory goes to SMK's SYNSG by a whisker. Suffice to say, though, either of this pair represents a great buy – whether you're considering it as a starter pack or as a budget-priced hunting rifle.

Quart in the
ACT!



SMK's Model 208 Supergrade series consists of four, very different rifles built around a powerful, break-barrel chassis. But which to choose? **Nigel Allen** spent time with all four to assess their individual merits...

To some extent, SMK's 208 series of sporters has gone largely un-noticed. That's not to say they haven't sold – quite the opposite; they're one of Sportsmarketing's most successful lines. But it's just that since their introduction a few years ago, very little has been written about these outstanding break-barrels and it's been left to the gun shops to 'do the talking'. Yet, to quote one shop owner I spoke to recently: "We don't really have to say much, the 208s sell themselves!"

Prompted by that, I thought it high time to shove the 208 under the shooting public's noses – after all, why should such a highly respected line-up be reserved to the confines of the shop-floor?

Actually, there are no fewer than four, very differently kitted-out models in the 208 series. And don't think Sportsmarketing – the UK's sole distributors of the Supergrade range – has just taken a gun and given it a few tweaks to make four, cloned rifles. They've designed them to be completely different animals – and while I definitely commend them for doing so, it does leave you scratching your head over which 208 model is the right one for your needs?

There's really only one way to find out: shoot all four of them for a few months to assess their strengths and weaknesses under everyday field conditions. So, that's what I did...

In the line-up are the XS208, TH208, SKL208 and SYNSG – and even though the latter's lost its numeric moniker, it is part of the 208 family! Though two models shed their opens in lieu of a muzzle weight, the break-barrel chassis is the same on all four. I've gone through the 208 action's general anatomy in a more detailed manner over the page – but while the only apparent difference is each rifle's stock, the handling characteristics this brings to each effectively stamps a huge degree of individuality on every model.



BARREL LENGTHS (in proportion)
XS208 / SYN SG (top) TH208 / SKL208 (bottom)

THE MODEL 208 SUPERGRADE CHASSIS

As in the world of motorsport, the success – or failure – of the end product of any air rifle relies on the chassis, the foundation around which the rest of the gun is built. When SMK dubbed their 208 series ‘Supergrade’, it was for a reason – it really is a superb base action.

Aside of the stocks – which are what differentiate the handling qualities of the 208 quartet – the only real difference in the action is the sighting set-up. Unlike the TH and SKL variants, the XS and SYN SG come ready to shoot out of the box, courtesy of their open sights; the thumbhole and skeleton models make a scope a mandatory requirement – but you do get a steel muzzle weight cum cocking grip-aid in lieu of them. Many shooters will take that as a fair trade – especially all models have 11mm dovetailed receivers and a built-in scope arrestor plate.

The metal/plastic opens are top-of-the-range, boasting fibre-optic inserts – a red bead as the foresight and a pair of green dots either side of the rearsight’s square-cut notch. Between them, they gather up light and make for a hi-vis sight picture that speeds up target acquisition and lets you concentrate on the mark (rather than the sights themselves). If you can shoot ‘subliminally’ with opens, you’ll be a pretty decent shot, and these sights certainly help in that respect. The rearsight’s also fully-adjustable for elevation and windage courtesy of two, numbered thumbwheels.

Many good guns have been spoiled by a poor trigger – thankfully, the 208 isn’t one of them. A straight blade is, probably, a compromise on a couple of the models, but it breaks very cleanly, with the right amounts of first-stage travel and second-stage pull. The pull-weight can be adjusted via a small screw that’s accessible through the guard – so you don’t have to split wood and metal to get at it. It’s backed up by a resettable auto safety.

On all four test samples, it didn’t take long for the spring to get ‘twangy’ – but it was easily remedied with a few dabs of moly grease through the cocking slot. Compression was very good – the sign of a healthy piston seal – though while I was pleased to see an articulated cocking linkage, it still requires a fair old slot along the base of the forestock.

The barrel pivots around a bolt, so can be nipped up to ensure accuracy doesn’t suffer through wear in this area, and though not my favourite arrangement, the ball-catch lock-up was certainly very sturdily engineered and didn’t show any signs of sloppiness.

The steel, rifled .22 barrels on my four test guns were all very well finished, with the open-sighted models showing a slight muzzle constriction – though not a ‘true’ choke. The breech is slightly angled and has a good radius, while the muzzle looks well crowned. The latter is actually protected by both the foresight unit and muzzle weight – a good design point.



Open sights, fitted on the XS and SYN SG, offer shooting straight from the box – and, with fibre-optic inserts, may entice some to forego a telly



Adjustment of the trigger’s pull weight is easy – and recommended



The front, red fibre-optic bead sits on an elevated ramp, but lacks a protective hood



A well positioned arrestor-plate, like the 208’s, helps keep your scope in zero



The impressive finish on the XS and TH’s ambi stock



All the 208s feature extended forends



If looks are important, then the stocks on the XS and flagship TH models are definitely going to impress you. Their silky sheen and chestnut lacquer really brings out the under-grain, and my XS sample had a particularly striking grain pattern. I’d hang both on my wall – but, if you’re buying a gun for practical reasons, then the synthetic sporter style of the SYN SG is probably the one to go for.

Right- and left-handers are catered for as all models are ambi, with the XS’s cheek being raised and the TH’s sporting a very deep, Monte Carlo profile on both sides of the butt. The SKL’s is dished for a really comfortable head position, and both it and the TH are fitted with thick, ventilated rubber butt pads, although the solid rubber ends of the XS and SYN SG are every bit as practical.

All the models feature extended forends which, besides neatening up the look around the breech area, serve a very practical purpose; in the field, you will need this with your leading hand, particularly for elevated shots.

The only chequering to be seen on the three wood-stocked models is on the forend of the TH, and it’s there more for looks;

the cuts are really only surface deep and don’t add much grip value – unlike the moulded-in diamond chequering panels on the SYN SG, which adorn both the forestock and pistol grip. Added to the roughened finish of the black composite ‘woodwork’, this would definitely make me choose the SYN SG in slippery conditions. It’s also a good choice if you dish out a fair amount of abuse to your rifles in the field – synthetic takes knocks much better than wood.

As the XS and SYN SG 208s come with opens, I spent some time shooting them. It’s good to see rifles ready to shoot straight out of the box as not everybody can afford – or even wants – a scope immediately. Their fibre-optic inserts – red foresight aligned between two green dots – represent the new breed of ‘irons’, giving you a practical advantage when it comes to aiming and speedy target acquisition.

A healthy adjustment range – via the

windage and elevation thumbscrews – allowed me to sight-in on targets from six to 20 metres. As with all things synthetic, take care not to knock the rearsight, which is predominantly plastic, else you might find you lose more than just your zero – and it’s a shame there’s no protective hood over the foresight. Despite its obvious benefit, that red fibre-optic bead looks quite vulnerable to damage.

For the majority of the test, I rigged up each rifle with an identical SMK 3-9x40 telly, positioning all of them on the receiver in as common a position as was practical so as to assess the rifles’ handling. Ironically, this brought the balance point back toward the shoulder, thereby improving feel – and, as you can see from the specs table (see *overleaf*), all four combos possessed different centres of gravity.



Above: Deep-cut chequering on the SYN SG’s synthetic forend is both functional and attractive – this is the grippiest of the bunch

Far left: The neutral feel of the sleek XS, and its stock geometry, make it a great point-and-shoot rifle

CHOOSE THE...

XS208 for:
General shooting
Its looks
Its pointability
Its open sights



Average Velocity: 713 fps (11.4ft/lb) with ThUnderBOLT .22 pellets

SYNSG for:
'Rough' shooting
Its grippiness
Its pointability
Its open sights



Average Velocity: 710 fps (11.3ft/lb) with ThUnderBOLT .22 pellets

TH208 for:
Long-range work
Prone shooting
Its looks
Its extra control



Average Velocity: 722 fps (11.7ft/lb) with ThUnderBOLT .22 pellets

SKL208 for:
Its anti-flip firing cycle
Super long-range work
Metal knock-downs



Average Velocity: 719 fps (11.6ft/lb) with ThUnderBOLT .22 pellets



Rotating on an axis bolt and securing with a ball-catch/détente system, the 208's breech is solid – even after thousands of shots

The XS felt the most 'neutral', and the sleek sporter lines certainly helped in that respect, with the stock's geometry making for a very quick point-and-shoot rig. For hunting wood pigeons from the trees or hide, or tracking scurrying rats and squirrels, this would be a phenomenal set-up.

Surprisingly, the lighter butt of the synthetic SYNSG made it feel more forward-heavy than it looked, but the perfectly angled rake of the pistol grip negated this effect; the rifle was every bit as pointable as the XS, despite a balance point 30mm further forward.

The trigger hand area of the TH also worked to improve its balance, despite the pivot point being even more muzzle-biased than the SG. To some extent, it was helped by its longer pull-length, which added a lot of wood at the butt to counterbalance things. Indeed, I wouldn't have said the TH was the heaviest of the group had I not physically proved it so on the weighing scales. A caveat, however: as delightful as this model looks, I think its reach makes it more suited to a larger-framed person, or for shooting from the prone position, when a long butt is favourable.

And while the skeletonised butt of the SKL gives it the appearance of a real lightweight, it feels quite a lump at the shoulder due to its very muzzle-heavy balance, a sensation further accentuated by the addition of that blued steel barrel weight. However, many shooters like a forward-biased springer; it stops the barrel flipping on firing and makes for a very accurate rifle at long ranges.

Actually, despite its 'Skeleton Hunter' mantle, I think the SKL208 is rather adept for the metal and paper stuff – especially as its forend features a bulbous 'hamster', which is ideal for resting across your forearm when shooting from the field target shooter's favoured sitting position. At 40 yards – the limit to which I took all four Supergrades – the SKL definitely scored the tightest groups, and I'd feel confident using this combo for static hunting on long-range rabbits.

Thanks to the built-in arrestor plate – which has been thoughtfully placed at the far end of the dovetails to maximise clamping space (other manufacturers, please take note!) – all the test rigs' scopes held perfect zero. Even though the SKL edged it at the longer ranges, accuracy stats were pretty comparable, with groups sizes around 25mm at 25 yards, and never more than 35mm at 30 yards. Beyond 30 yards, the weighted



SMK SUPERGRADE MODEL 208 SERIES – SPECIFICATIONS				
MODEL	XS208	SYNSG	TH208	SKL208
Action	Break-barrel, spring and piston			
Calibre availability	.177 (4.5mm) and .22 (5.5mm) (tested)			
Overall length	1134mm		1147mm	1136mm
Barrel length	478mm		480mm incl. weight	
Weight	3.52kg (unscoped)	3.38kg (unscoped)	4.42kg (incl 3-9x40 scope)	4.08kg (incl 3-9x40 scope)
Sights	Fibre-optic opens, fully-adjustable rearsight. Dovetailed receiver with scope arrestor plate		Dovetailed receiver with scope arrestor plate	
Trigger	Two-stage, adjustable			
Safety	Automatic, resettable. (Barrel can be decocked)			
Stock material	Hardwood	Synthetic	Hardwood	
Stock style	Deluxe sporter	Sporter, with chequer panels at grip and forend	Deluxe thumbhole, with chequered forend and ventilated butt pad	Skeletal butt with ventilated butt pad and drop-belly forend
Length of pull	361mm	358mm	371mm	360mm
Muzzle weight	No		Yes	
Balance point*	+515mm	+545mm	+550mm	+565mm
Power	12ft/lb (maximum). See opposite for test samples' actual velocity stats			
SRP	£139.95	£139.95	£199.95 (excl scope)	£199.95 (excl scope)
Contact	Sportsmarketing, T: 01206 795 333 W: www.sportsmk.co.uk (Free catalogue on request)			

* Taken with 3-9x40 scope fitted in identical position, shown as distance from butt pad

muzzles of the TH and SKL clearly showed the advantage they bring, but muzzle flip was perfectly manageable on the XS and SYNSG.

Break-barrel breeches can loosen-up in time, with accuracy suffering as a result. But the 208's barrel pivots around an axis bolt, not a pin, so can easily be nipped up when required to maintain accuracy. The breech face keeps a tight air seal courtesy of an O-ring squeezed hard by a ball-catch/détente system that's not so strong as to make 'breaking open' the barrel a painful, palm-slapping affair – and after many thousands of rounds between them, none of my test rifles showed any loss of compression.

They did need some heavy-duty grease applying to the main pivot points – the breech jaws and cocking linkage – as the rifles were surprisingly 'dry' out of the box, but the upside was that there was very little dieseling to be seen and the rifle's didn't need much running in. (Many guns need a good tin's worth of shots to clear the excess lubricant.) I also needed to put a healthy dollop of grease on the spring itself to quieten and smooth-out the firing cycle. This required wood and metal to be split; the two forend screws and the trigger guard front bolt.

But I didn't need to remove anything to tweak the trigger – there's a hole in the guard that lets you easily get at the pull weight adjustment screw. And I did alter the triggers to get the right handling balance. To make the most of extra range afforded by the TH and SKL models, they needed a lighter let-off, while the quicker-handling XS and SYNSG worked better (for me, at any rate) with a slightly heavier break-point.

Regardless of their respective settings, the triggers all performed with the sort of consistency that you want in a field or target rifle, and the blade's lengthy shape certainly helped in getting a good fulcrum; all felt very predictive. I thought the straight blade was a little more suited to the SKL than its three stablemates, though. To me, the position of the quite enclosed thumbhole on the TH, coupled with the girth of its grip area, was crying out for a set-back blade on the flagship – although I in no way felt hamstrung.

Indeed, while there were situations which suited one particular rifle over the others, none of them put in a poor account of themselves, and all would make mighty fine additions to your armoury. They're powerful, yet easy to cock, and don't require a lot of skill to get the best out of them, downrange.

If I had to pick a personal favourite, I'd be in... well, four minds about it! The XS was a real stunner and with a stock to die for; the SKL frighteningly accurate for a springer at long distance; and the TH a true, all-round man's rifle – highly deserving of its flagship status.

That just leaves the SYNSG. Its black, composite handle might be the most understated of the four, but its gunfit, the many practical advantages synthetic stocks have over wood, plus the superb manner in which this sleek sporter obeys your every shooting command, makes it the rifle for me. And, at £139.95, it's simply too good for me *not* to buy... ●



Bottom left: The flagship TH is the most versatile of the 208 models

Below: The forward biased balance and 'hamster' makes the SKL ideal for long-range work – it scored best at 40 yards

how to beat the WIND & RANGE

JOHN DARLING explains

It would be nice to think that all you have to do with an air rifle is zero on the scope, put the cross-hairs on the target, then squeeze the trigger for a guaranteed bullseye.

Thankfully, there's a lot more accuracy than that, or airgunning would be rather a dull sport!

Other factors need to be considered, like gravity and the wind, which together cause the pellet to curve in flight — what we call trajectory.

Take the wind, for example. It curls the pellet away from the point of zero, so this gap between the zero point and actual impact point needs to be assessed and allowed for — before squeezing the trigger.

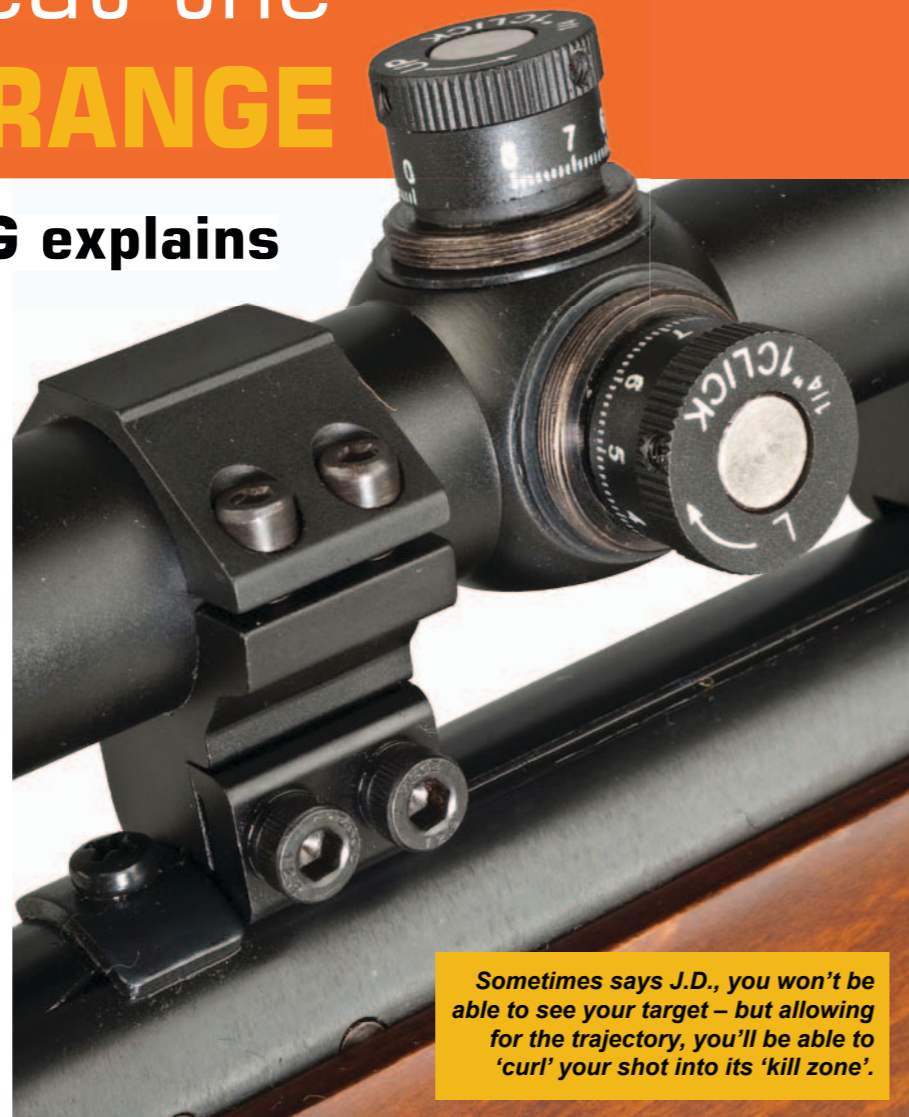
The breeze may be non-existent down on the ground, or in a hedgerow. But once the pellet gets up among the top-most branches, or out into the field, it's liable to be 'pushed' by the breeze.

And then there's gravity, which has a greater effect at longer ranges, when the pellet is slowing down. At ranges of 15 to 20 yards, the pellet is travelling so fast that it (almost) beats both the wind and gravity.

These influences aren't such a disadvantage as some people believe. They can be used to secure a kill. I often 'curl' pellets over or around branches, knowing that they will impact a crow's or magpie's head that I can barely see from my hiding place.

Even in gale force winds, the distance that needs to be allowed for can be worked out by experimentation.

Problems arise when shooting downhill, when gravity has less effect on the pellet. In effect, gravity and the pellet are both travelling in the same

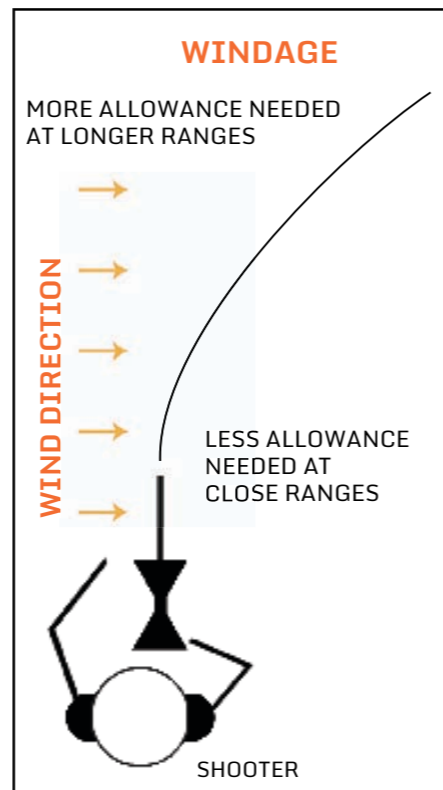
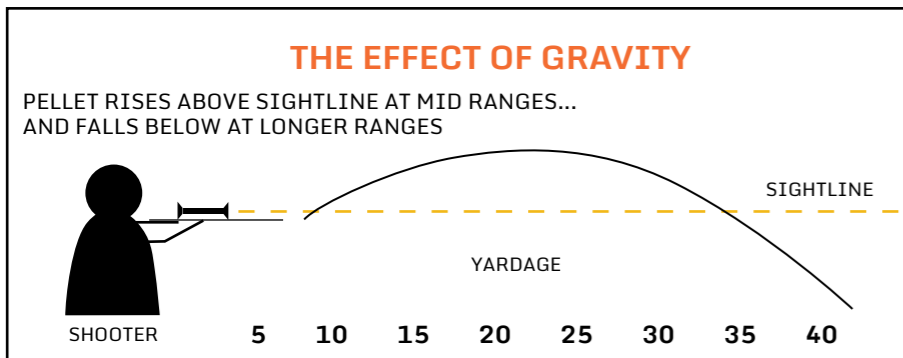


Sometimes says J.D., you won't be able to see your target — but allowing for the trajectory, you'll be able to 'curl' your shot into its 'kill zone'.

direction, so the pellet tends to overshoot its target. Here, you have to aim a bit lower.

The trickiest situation comes when shooting vertically into trees. This negates the scope's settings and the pellet flies 'high' — by several inches, on some rigs.

You can only assess how much to allow for this by practising on dead branches — no, not living wood. This assessment is vital or you risk missing 'sitting ducks' right above your head, which is both frustrating and embarrassing!



Eastern PROMISES

SMK DB5: SMK XS36-1

Affordable spring-rifles made in the Far East have never really captured Mark Camoccio's imagination... but he's giving them another chance courtesy of this sub-£100 brace from SMK



It's true. In the past, I've been less than enthusiastic about the entry-level, budget end of the airgun market, which consists of rifles that tend to be manufactured in the Far East. They've always left me wanting in the quality stakes, although I concede that quality control has improved considerably in recent years. So the editor's asked me to look at two Chinese-made offerings — both from Sportsmarketing — to see if they can raise my enthusiasm. SMK is a leading player in the budget sector of the market, and here we have the brand new SMK Custom DB5 and the more established SMK XS36-1 — both underlever springers.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Side by side, both of these airguns appear well made. The new Custom DB5 is smart and purposeful with a deep-coloured stock. Its profile, with the relatively short woodwork and protruding underlever, echoes the classic Webley Mk3.

However, its rival, the XS36-1, takes things up a notch. Its chunky, well-shaped woodwork displays some beautiful graining through the finish, while its flattened-off, elongated trigger guard is a definite throwback to the ill-fated, but beautifully made, Parker-Hale Dragon. With solid features on show wherever you look, this rifle is a real beauty.

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★☆☆☆
 SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★★★★☆☆

TAKING STOCK

Woodwork is the most eye-catching feature of any air rifle, and both SMK models come well appointed. The DB5, based largely on the no-frills DB4 underlever, is housed in a new timber — an attractive, Italian-crafted European hardwood with a smart, sleek finish. Complete with a rich walnut varnish and some super-fine, if shallow, chequering, it's a definite improvement over its predecessor. I would, however, have preferred to see an ambidextrous cheekpiece, instead of the right-handed design on offer.

But despite the DB5's attributes, the XS36-1 outshines its new stablemate in the woodwork department. The subtle matt finish and wonderful graining on display makes this the best quality stock I have ever encountered on a Chinese-made rifle — with the excessively hard ventilated butt pad being the only minor let-down.

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★☆☆☆
 SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★★★★☆☆





The DB5's rear sight is fully adjustable, with finger-wheels for windage and elevation



SMK has opted for a classic black design on the XS36-1's open sights



A sliding breech system is fitted to both rifles

SMK DB5: SMK XS36-1

TRIGGER

Regular readers will know I always place great emphasis on the need for a good trigger when it comes to accurate performance. However, where standard spring-powered rifles are concerned, the bar is so often lowered.

Both rifles come with single-stage triggers that felt a little vague in use. That said, my DB5's factory setting was actually very acceptable. Once the initial creep had been taken up, the final let-off point released after no great effort, leaving any criticism centred on the blade itself, which is narrow and set slightly too far forward for many shooters.

As for the XS36-1, the trigger was far cruder, and easily the weakest feature on an otherwise great rifle. Again, pulling through the initial creep helped a little, but I was always battling against the trigger in my attempts to register some accurate shots.

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★☆☆☆
SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★☆☆☆

HANDLING

Weight plays a big part when handling these rifles – though it's worth bearing in mind that every shooter has their own preferences in



Though it does creep slightly, the DB5's factory-set trigger is very acceptable



The XS36-1's trigger incorporates both a safety catch (front lever) and cocking arm lock

OPEN SIGHTS

In-keeping with current market trends, both rifles come fitted with open sights. The XS36-1 adopts the more traditional approach of the two, offering a notch and bead design in black. The rear sight is fully adjustable, and the foresight actually allows for interchangeable elements, which can be fitted by unscrewing the rear of the hood. While I admire the attention to detail, I'm not convinced that many people will bother changing the elements, given the intended market for this rifle. Looks-wise, though, the front hood assembly is particularly impressive.

The DB5, meanwhile, offers a fixed foresight element and a fully adjustable rear sight, again featuring finger-wheels for windage and elevation. It manages to edge this category, courtesy of its fluorescent, fibre-optic elements, which really bring the sight picture alive in low-light situations.

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★☆☆☆
SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★☆☆☆

SCOPING UP

With both rifles costing less than £100, many shooters will opt to add an affordable scope to the mix to extract maximum accuracy. Dovetail scope rails are machined into the top of both rifles' receivers, with the DB5 offering a fractionally longer useable length of 100mm. This may sound prohibitively short, but it's fine for a small, budget scope. With a small, built-in arrestor block provided on each gun, scope creep should be no problem, too.

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★☆☆☆
SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★☆☆☆

COCKING AND SAFETY

Both rifles surprised me with the efficiency of their cocking mechanisms. The DB5 requires only modest effort to cock – though my example was fairly 'graunchy'. The cycle involves pulling the lever all the way back until the action is cocked. A pellet is then pushed into the breech and

the lever returned to close the action. Loading the DB5 is a fiddly affair, as the lip of the barrel is set back. No safety catch is present, either – though an internal anti-beartrap system is fitted for peace of mind.

Cocking the XS36-1, by comparison, is incredibly easy and smooth. Chambering a pellet is simpler, too, as the barrel protrudes further. To return the lever, you depress a small button just inside the rear of the trigger guard. Finally, you pull back the rather crude safety catch, situated just inside the front of the guard, to ready the trigger for the shot. It's generally a more reassuring design.

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★☆☆☆
SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★☆☆☆



As the heavier of the two SMKs, the XS36-1 is a solid, reassuring handler



Dovetails feature on both offerings, with a slightly longer rail on the DB5...



... while arrestor plates are also in place on each gun to prevent scope creep

The relatively lightweight DB5 is slimline and comfortable in the shoulder

HEAD *to* HEAD!

this area. The more slimline DB5 tips the scales at a manageable 3kg, where its rival comes in a full 0.5kg heavier. Where juniors are concerned, the weight differential could be a factor – though I don't consider the sliding breech on this style of rifle to be well suited to novices and juniors anyway, given its fiddly nature.

The DB5 certainly handles well, and feels good in the shoulder; it would particularly suit shooters in search of a lighter gun. At 3.6kg, unscoped, the XS36-1 could be a handful to some – but the balance and overall configuration is spot-on. The sheer quality of the stock, and the solidity of the action give this rifle a mature feel, though, which has great appeal to me.

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★★☆☆

SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★★☆☆

OVERALL BUILD

These rifles have definitely made me reconsider my views on airguns manufactured in the Orient, with the XS36-1, in particular, coming as a revelation – for that, I have to thank the editor!

The DB5 loses a point or two for its rather crude barrel clamp, which is one let-down on a generally attractive rifle. Otherwise, both guns sport reasonably well-engineered components. In the past, I would have expected to see sharp edges around the breech cut-out on Chinese-made airguns – but the overall improvement in machining quality is plain to see.

However, this class of rifle still lags behind in the final metal preparation and bluing process. A slightly abrasive, non-polished surface is indicative of lower-cost manufacturing – and, I know, won't trouble everyone. And what lies beneath is now definitely in a higher league than in the past.

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★★☆☆

SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★★☆☆

In terms of bang for your buck, there's little to separate this duo



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS		
MODEL	CUSTOM DB5	XS36-1
MANUFACTURER	BAM, for SMK	SAC, for SMK
UK IMPORTER	Sportsmarketing	Sportsmarketing
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	China	China
TYPE	Underlever springer	Underlever springer
CALIBRE	.177 (on test) and .22	.22 only
WEIGHT (UNSCOPED)	3kg	3.6kg
OVERALL LENGTH	1,029mm	1,041mm
BARREL LENGTH	445mm	438mm
STOCK	European hardwood	Hardwood
TRIGGER	Single-stage	Single-stage
SAFETY	None (but anti-beartrap system)	Auto safety
POWER	9.9ft/lb	9.9ft/lb
SRP	£99.95	£99.95
CONTACT	Sportsmarketing ● 01206 795333 ● www.sportsmk.co.uk	

ACCURACY AND PERFORMANCE

Technical improvements have apparently been made to the DB5, with the air transfer arrangement featuring a cone-shaped breech, which dovetails into a conically-shaped cylinder-end, complete with a conical seal. A shorter transfer port improves air flow, giving more power for less recoil. Firing the DB5 revealed a quick snap that, strangely, seemed a little noisy, due to something other than spring resonance – but it's still more civilized than a few supposedly superior rivals.

If anything, the XS36-1's action felt a little more muted, with just that fairly heavy trigger to contend with. Over the chronoscope, both rifles displayed stunning consistency, with the DB5 managing a total spread of 7fps across 10 shots, and the XS36-1 just 6fps. For 'budget' guns, that's impressive to say the least.

Surprisingly, accuracy at 30 yards was initially average to poor with the DB5, using SMK's own Black Dome pellets. However, switching to JSB-made pellets slashed the groups down to around 12mm. The XS36-1, on the other hand, fared well with the SMK ammo, posting sub-20mm groups at 30 yards, and then superb 8mm clusters with the more expensive JSBs.

With these price tags, I wasn't expecting blistering accuracy downrange – but I was pleasantly surprised, if not a little shocked: these are easily the two most accurate SMK rifles I have ever shot!

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★★☆☆

SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★★☆☆

VALUE FOR MONEY

While they have some superb flagships in their range, the SMK brand is primarily built its reputation around value for money airguns – and it'll come as no surprise that both models excel in this department.

The sub-£100 price bracket is fiercely contested these days, but many options in this sector are seriously made down to a price, and subsequently come up short. Both the DB5 and the XS36-1 seem to fly in the face of that reckoning – and given the performance of these guns on test, they represent truly astounding value for money.

SMK Custom DB5 ★★★★★★☆☆

SMK XS36-1 ★★★★★★☆☆

FINAL VERDICT

SMK Custom DB5	76/100
SMK XS36-1	79/100

The attraction of self-contained spring power means that traditional designs such as these will continue to enjoy huge popularity in the face of increasing competition from the PCP world – especially when it comes to entry-level products.

While the DB5 is the new kid on the block – and a highly capable rifle – I just couldn't help falling for the more mature design of the XS36-1. For me, given my own preferences in terms of weight, the final choice was an easy one, even if the scores suggest it was a closer-run contest.



Underlever springers have an inherent accuracy that rivals PCPs – **Stephen Keeler** proves it with a pair from BSA and SMK

POLARIS
V
XS38

"The XS38 is full powered...Hard nosed hunter"
Stephen Keller
★★★★★★★

One of the interesting effects of the recession we have experienced is the notion that shooters are making something of a return to 'the old faith'; they're going back to the more cost-effective sport of shooting spring-powered airguns in spite of the dominance of the PCP market for the past decade. And it's widely accepted that underlever rifles have the inherent accuracy top trump in rival to PCP guns, due to having fixed barrels and independent propulsion. The SMK XS38 Custom Deluxe and the new BSA Polaris bear testament to this...

FIRST SIGHT

Two things immediately struck me upon first seeing the guns. Firstly, the striking resemblance to under-and-over centrefire 'doubles rifles', which is no bad thing at all. Secondly, the attention to detail and quality of both guns is remarkable. Notably, the Beeza sports an embossed logo on the trigger guard, while the XS38 bears a hooded front-blade sight to allow extra protection in the field. Both feature sensible sporter stocks, too, though the BSA would benefit from a slight raising

of its cheekpiece, and the SMK could do with a little more attention to its forend grip.

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆

Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆

SAFETY FIRST

Both manufacturers have put an obvious effort in emphasising the safety of these rifles. The Beeza has a clever rotating breech system that eliminates the old bear-trap scenario of trapped fingers – and also avoids premature loading by not opening for business until the activation of the cocking lever. This is in addition to the classic BSA thumb safety (which, on the test model, would have benefited from tightening up a tad).

The SMK has an equally simple and effective safety net in the form of very positive,

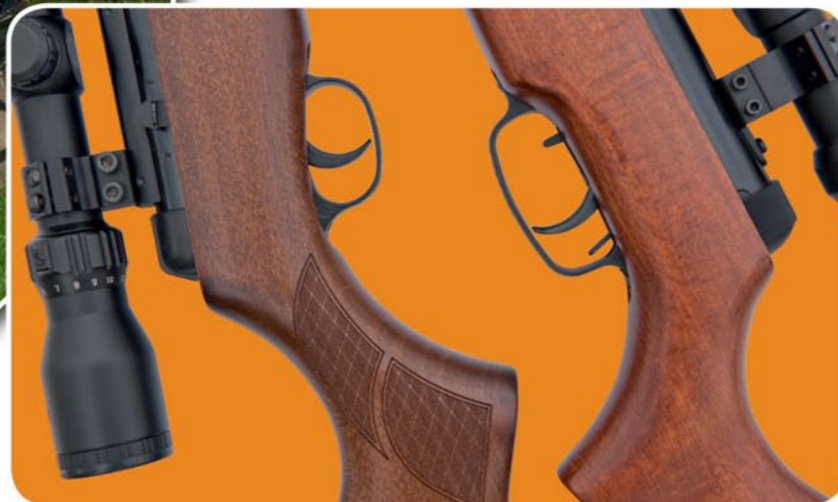


Above: The BSA's barrel shroud gives the option of a screw-on silencer for field work

Above right: The SMK's got an effective single-stage trigger (left) while the Beeza's is fully-adjustable

Below: Both rifles' underlevers clip securely beneath the barrel – and the Polaris has a fibre-optic foresight

Bottom right: The XS38 has a wide open breech (right) so it's easy to feed pellets into the unfussy barrel



self-mechanised safety catch in the trigger guard, plus an anti-beartrap lever behind the trigger which has to be operated by the 'other' hand when closing the breech. This prevents the nightmare scenario of guillotining your naked digits, and should be highly commended.

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆
Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆

MAKING THE RIGHT NOISES

Both of these beautifully-crafted rifles make a unique and satisfying cocking noise that induces confidence; the XS38 operates with a smooth 'hiss and click', suggesting healthy air compression and spring power, while the Polaris returns a clinical 'whoosh and tick' during cocking. At the other end of the firing cycle, the SMK has a softly-spoken muzzle report that affirms its full-powered, no-frills hunting nature. The Beeza is superb, too. Its impressive muzzle brake comes with a handy 1/2in UNF adapter to accept a quality sound moderator, although this would give the rifle a slightly unwieldy length and is, frankly, unnecessary.

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆
Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆

POWERFUL PLAYERS

As a shooter more experienced with the .177 school, I found shooting the harder-hitting .22 calibre impressive. The XS38, although not

quite as elaborate to look at as the nicely-crafted Polaris, punched weighted tin cans with noticeably more enthusiasm than the more dignified BSA. Having said that, both produced more than satisfying accuracy and would each be welcome on the toughest of hunting sessions. The SMK also has a recoil plate fitted to keep the scope firmly anchored for maximum accuracy.

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆
Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDLY

With the Polaris, you can't help but draw comparisons to their beautiful Martini action rifles that came into the spotlight in the legendary film Zulu. The similarity is based on the cocking lever action preceding the loading of a round into an opening breech – which rotates in the case of the airgun. In divergent polarity (excuse the pun), the XS38 is equally enjoyable to prime and fire, due in no small part to its solid feel and the assertive shooting action that follows.

While I'm drawing parallels, the XS38 could be compared to the accurate, powerful and successful Chinese Mosin Nagant carbine, a standard-issue rifle so accurate it made it as a sniper rifle. In many ways, the Chinese underlever is a wolf in sheep's clothing; it may not have the looks of a glamourpuss, but its secret is that it strikes like a tiger – quickly, powerfully and with clinical accuracy. Sportsmarketing has wisely opted for the sliding breech system that allows the pellet to be placed directly into the barrel. This is always good news for accuracy. BSA's revolving breech option, which is probably quicker, potentially risks accuracy issues if you don't tuck the pellet's skirt all the way into the breech face. (Skirt 'clippings' can impinge on downrange accuracy.)

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆
Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆

HAPPY TRIGGERS

The SMK makes good use of a single-stage trigger unit that's simple, effective and a viable hunting option for those who feel the second stage is unnecessary. Many do – they like to make the decision to fire mentally; thus, with a more decisive process, the shot is smoother. In the field, the trigger is responsive, and the factory weight setting feels right on the mark.

BSA has opted for a two-stage unit that HFT shooters would really appreciate. It's fully-adjustable, precise and sums up well the company's philosophy of 'over-engineering' in order to gain/maintain a broad and loyal client base. The factory setting feels safe and predictable, and the level of adjustment allows you to tailor the trigger to your own requirements in moments.

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆
Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆

PELLET FUSSY?

Being a tough Eastern player, the SMK gets the job done to a high standard without any complaints. Loading is simple, a process mastered rapidly, and pellet loading directly into the solid breech is satisfying. Of key significance, the XS38 simply isn't pellet fussy, and was happy spitting out a range of ammunition at what definitely felt like maximum power. The well-finished rearsight that shadows the sliding breech may look like it gets in the way of the loading process, but it's easy to put the slug where it belongs.

On the other hand, the BSA is slightly more demanding; pellets exceeding the optimum length will result in the rotating breech guillotining the edges of the skirt. When this happens, poor accuracy is inevitable – not good for any hunter.

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆
Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆

FIT FOR PURPOSE?

Although marketed by BSA as a 'medium-power hunter, trainer or superior informal target rifle', the Polaris feels a whole lot more grown-up and capable than a simple leisure sporter. In contrast, one gets the feeling that the XS38 was designed to compete with notable British and German springer firms from day one, which is no dry slap in my books.

At the ubiquitous 30-yard benchmark, the scoped-up Polaris produced groups under the inch, and gave equally encouraging results with its iron sights. Recoil was barely noticeable and the spectre of barrel flip all but eliminated by the clever and multi-tasking muzzle brake.

The Chinese contender was also very well mannered. It produced near identical results, but with slightly more downrange kick, the pellets seriously denting and threatening to penetrate the safety backstop behind the target! In many ways, as the name discretely suggests, if this gun was a fullbore centrefire in a parallel life, it would – without a doubt – be a .308 calibre stalking rifle!

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆
Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆

Above: For an all-out, hard-working hunter – Stephen's choice is the SMK

Bottom left: The BSA's chequering (top) helps to find a solid hold – but don't write off the solid furniture on the XS38

Below: Both rifles' cylinders are grooved to accept standard scope mounts, and the SMK has a recoil plate





Above: The long butt on SMK will suit shooters of a larger frame (top)

Below: Two versatile sporters – the Polariss slightly more-suited to HFT events, and the XS38 a hard-nosed hunter

TUNING POTENTIAL

For both of these springers, I feel that a quick tune-up would be the icing on the cake, as in my own experience one can take a really nice gun and make it even better. Although both shot very well straight out of the box with the quality iron sights, few would disagree with my view that all airguns, especially springers, respond a bit like the wife does after a day's pampering at the health spa – very well indeed!

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆

Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆

WELL STOCKED

Contrary to the somewhat dated opinion among some shooters that Chinese gun

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS		
RIFLE	POLARIS	XS38 CUSTOM DELUXE
Origin	Spain	China
Type	Underlever sporter	Underlever sporter
Action	Spring and piston	Spring and piston
Calibre	.177 (4.5mm) and (tested) .22 (5.5mm)	.22 (5.5mm)
Overall length	1,160mm	1,150mm
Barrel length	470mm	483mm
Weight	3kg (unscoped)	3.8kg (unscoped)
Sights	Fully-adjustable opens, raised scope ramp	Fully-adjustable opens, dovetailed cylinder and arrestor plate
Trigger	Two-stage, adjustable	Single-stage
Safety	Manual, rocker type, resettable	Manual, in-guard type, resettable, with anti-beartrap
Stock	Beech, chequered grip and forend, sporter	Hardwood, sporter
Power	11+ft/lb	11+ft/lb
Price	£280.00	£149.95
Manufacturer	BSA Guns	Sportsmarketing

carpentry is second rate, the stock on the XS38 Custom Deluxe is a simple pleasure – with amiable lines, a well-positioned cheekpiece and a smooth finish. Deluxe is very much the correct suffix to this Custom model, therefore.

I would add the caveat that SMK's rifle limits itself to shooters with a well-proportioned frame, due to its lengthy reach from grip to trigger; however on the other side of the coin, it may be unwise to give a gun of this power to less-experienced or younger shooters.

BSA honours its tradition of simple and functional stocks that are visually rewarding, and the grip and forend chequering are effective aids to a solid shooting position.

XS38 ★★★★★★☆☆

Polaris ★★★★★★☆☆



XS38 78/100
Polaris 74/100

This BSA continues the Birmingham manufacturer's reputation for solid, reliable and stylish rifles. The safety system is top notch and provides the hunter with double security to match its double-barrelled lines. Its add-on universal sound moderator converter is a nice touch, but the addition of a silencer makes the rifle a little too unwieldy as an all-out hunter. However, the good balance and assured accuracy make it a very good HFT contender for those looking to cut their teeth in the growing sport.

Like the rugged, no frills and widely manufactured Mosin Nagant carbines that were instrumental in helping the Chinese to become a world power, the XS38 would be my choice of hunting partner, though. Built for purpose (and with the power to match), this is a gun I feel would take the knocks, scratches and whacks in its stride – and, unlike the lovely Beesa, I feel a few battle scars would add to its tough, uncompromising character!



NIGEL ALLEN's take on the SMK Super Grade XS19

Sportsmarketing made its name supplying budget-beating airguns that have introduced countless shooters to our sport. With the launch of the Super Grade XS range, SMK raise the stakes in terms of pure performance, but the real trick is – the budget-beating element is very much still there!

The SMK Super Grade is a sturdily-made, break-barrel, spring-piston sporter that produces over 11 ft.lbs. of power in .22 calibre. This Chinese-made rifle echoes the design and sturdiness of its European counterparts and offers genuine field performance for an extremely realistic price.

'Walnut' stained hardwood is the stock material of choice and, considering the sub-£130 retail price of the XS19, it really does look the part. The raised cheekpiece has been designed as a working compromise between the head-alignment needed for scope use and open sights.

You'll find no panels of chequering to assist hand contact, although the contours of the SMK's woodwork do promote secure, positive handling and this rifle has already acquitted itself remarkably well in the UK's changeable climate. Despite its bargain pricing, the Super

Grade XS19 carries some decidedly up-market features.

Small but significant details abound, such as the rifle's tension-adjustable breech bolt which compensates for long-term wear, and its articulated cocking link that negates the need for an over-long, and potentially stock-weakening, slot in the fore end.

Then there's the automatic, 'anti-beartrap' mechanism, which guards against the rifle being fired during loading, plus that crisp, adjustable, two-stage trigger of course. There's plenty more to come from this gun, though!

Open sights may be ignored in favour of scopes by the vast majority of shooters, but a good set of 'irons' still have a role to play in short range situations. Provided there's sufficient light to allow both foresight and rearsight to be seen clearly, hunting standard accuracy is perfectly possible with open sights, – especially when they're as good as the ones fitted to this rifle!

Scope grooves are also provided, so both sighting options are covered, making the Sportsmarketing Super Grade XS19 a 'best of both worlds' rifle – and that tag applies in more ways than one!



The Supergrade XS19 sports hooded foresight... and a fully-adjustable rearsight.



The new SMK Super Grade XS 19 – a lot of gun for a little money!



The trigger/safety unit and anti-beartrap link which ensures the gun can't inadvertently go off whilst loading. Top security from SMK!

SHOOTING TIP
THE SUPER GRADE XS19's weight-to-power ratio means that it's a lively performer – so you'll need to adopt good 'recoil management' for best results. Use a 'forgiving' hold, letting the rifle roll naturally in your shoulder without undue interference. Grip the stock hard, or pull it into your shoulder too tightly will produce inconsistent results and accuracy well below what this hard-hitting sporter is capable of.

FACTS - XS19
ACTION: Spring and piston.
COCKING: Break-barrel.
LOADING: Direct to breech.
CALIBRE: .177 (4.5 mm.); .22 (5.5 mm.).
LENGTH: 1092 mm. (43 ins.).
BARREL LENGTH: 410 mm. (16.1 ins.).
WEIGHT: 2.83 kg. (6.2 lbs.).
SIGHTS: Fully-adjustable opens.
STOCKS: Hardwood (walnut stain).
TRIGGER: Two-stage, fully-adjustable.
SAFETY: Manual.
POWER: 11.+ ft. lbs.
PRICE: £129.95.

Spitfires do BATTLE!

With many tins of pellets costing over a tenner, SMK's Spitfires range is pleasantly affordable at around a third of the price. It's understandably one of the biggest-selling brands of airgun ammo, too – and **Phil Bulmer** sends a load of the .177s downrange to find out why...

That's a nice looking tin," said my youngest son as I unwrapped the Spitfire pellet samples I'd been sent to test – and there's no doubt the familiar RAF roundel is a striking design and a potent symbol for a tin of airgun pellets. It's also a nice, secure screwtop, and besides offering security while being deployed, I expect many tins will find secondary uses long after their contents have been spent downrange.

Spitfires are made in the UK for Sportsmarketing, and available in .177 and .22. They also come in the guise of roundheads and points, the latter having 'Pointed' printed above the 'Spitfires' name. Actually, the non-pointed version is more a semi-roundhead; it has a slight lip which helps it punch pretty clean holes in paper targets. As a .177 fan for most of my airgunning, my initial testing concentrated on the .177 (or 4.5mm) Spitfires.

Opening the tins reveals the pellets to have a slightly darker finish than many ammo brands, and an initial inspection showed Spitfires to be generally well formed with perhaps only a handful of specimens deformed in transit. By any standards, that's not a bad ratio at all. I've always maintained that a sign of how good pellets are... is what you find sitting at the bottom of the tin in terms of debris. I'm delighted to report that my tins were spotless!

The first job was to give the pellets a quick weight check – 7.95 grains for the Pointed and 7.9 for the standard roundhead. These vital statistics place both types in the light to medium weight category. Consistency was typical of a good all-rounder, with random samples of 10 falling within +/-0.1 grain. A good half of each sample was actually identical in weight, which is a sign of excellent quality control and machine set-up at the manufacturing stage.

Both types have ribbed, rather than smooth sidewalls. Ribbing serves two purposes: it helps to strengthen the skirt without adding too much weight aft of the centre of gravity and, in theory, should provide a little more drag stabilisation, which ultimately benefits accuracy.

The roundhead has a single, but very thick driving band around its head, whereas the Pointed Spitfire has a thin, twin-band arrangement. I must admit that this looked more precise than its round-headed



PELLET TEST: SMK SPITFIRES

SPITFIRE STATS		
RANGE	SPITFIRES	SPITFIRES POINTED
DISTRIBUTOR	Sportsmarketing • www.sportsmk.co.uk • 01206 795333	
CALIBRE TRIALLED	.177 (4.5mm)	.177 (4.5mm)
TYPE	Waisted ribbed diabolo	Waisted ribbed diabolo
HEAD	Semi-roundhead	Pointed
WEIGHT	7.9 grains	7.95 grains
VARIATION	+/- 0.1 grain	+/- 0.1 grain
CONTAINER	Screwtop tin, 500	Screwtop tin, 500
SRP	£3.49 per tin	£3.69 per tin

Left: Phil conducts his ballistics test shooting his old Daystate X2 off a makeshift bench

Inset Left: The famous roundel design used on these pellet lids is certainly eye-catching

sibling – and the thinner rings will, generally, make a good air seal and be more suited to conforming to the profile of the rifling.

I initially set out my targets up to 25 yards away from my benchrest table – a typical hunting distance – and chose my old (but trusty) Daystate X2 as the test gun. Being a recoilless PCP, it lends itself to accurate shooting – an important consideration when you're testing ammo! – and, unlike a springer, its more gentle air release doesn't inflate the skirts. Additionally, I know my Daystate's barrel isn't overly pellet fussy.

After letting the barrel settle in with the new ammo over a few dozen shots, I went straight to group-testing the roundheads on the 25-yard target cards. Out of my rifle, unfortunately some shots wandered away from the main group. Given their cost – which is a quarter the price of many of the Euro-made brands – I certainly wasn't expecting match-type accuracy from the Spitfires, and I'm sure SMK wouldn't claim it, either. However, I felt that pushing the pellet beyond 25 yards would be too much of a hunting 'ask' for this particular round – although Spitfires would be a good pellet of choice for economical plinking at tin cans and the like... as many tens of thousands of airgunners can attest to, of course.

I began my testing of the pointed derivative with a little trepidation. Ammo with a pointed head is notoriously difficult to manufacture from a ballistics point of view, and you only need the slightest flaw in the shape of the nose to turn a good pointed pellet into an abysmal one! However, I was enthused to see much tighter groups on 25-yard paper – although, again, I wouldn't want to push this distance any farther if I were using them for hunting.

No matter what pellet you shoot, hunting requires group sizes of 35mm or less, and to push any pointed pellet too far only calls into question the hunter's responsibility – though the extra penetration afforded by a pointed pellet is certainly a good reason for selecting it as a hunting pellet (within its capabilities). Talking of capabilities, at sub-25 yards, Pointed Spitfires landed in a group that could be covered by a two-pence coin – and I can see why SMK claim in their marketing literature that these are ideal for rat control. Indeed, I would say that Pointed would be the best choice of Spitfires for close-range hunting – feral pigeons or rats in the confines of a pig shed, for instance.

While I personally wouldn't select the round-headed Spitfires for general hunting work where longer shooting distances are normally required, I can, however, vouch after my testing that these are seriously good value leisure rounds. And given plinking is by far the biggest pastime practised by airgunners, it's no wonder SMK sell as many of them as they do – just about every gun shop in the land has these tins of Spitfires on the counter.

That's understandable – at just three-and-a-half quid a tin, you could spend considerable time shooting without worrying about your bank account. And time wasted – or should that be *waisted?* – enjoying yourself with your airgun is, actually, time very well spent in my book! ●



The roundhead Spitfire has a single, thick band around its head...



...while the Pointed version has a thin, twin-band arrangement. Both pellets feature ribbed sides

First LOOK



Latest offerings of SMK's Supergrade XS38 Custom Deluxe pack in a raft of new updates.

We grab a look at how this top-end underlever just got even better...



A synthetic pull-back system releases the cocking underlever



This glider catch controls the anti-beartrap mechanism



The articulated cocking linkage's slot extends well past the breech, leaving most holds unaffected

Main image above: SMK's changes to the Custom Deluxe variant of the XS38 are evolution rather than revolution, but each change improves the rifle



SMK has re-jigged the sighting set-up on the new XS38, introducing fibre-optic inserts

The rearsight is still fully adjustable, and sits in a re-designed base

Shooters who are serious about eking out every drop of accuracy potential from a spring-powered air rifle look toward fixed-barrel models. Unlike break-barrels, fixed-barrel rifles are by their very nature more accurate in the long run as there's no wear, tear and sloppiness to creep in to the all-important breech lock-up area. Granted, a well-engineered break-barrel will shoot with pinpoint precision straight out of the box... but after many thousands of rounds, there's every likelihood that the barrel closure will just be that little less effective.

The downside is that fixed-barrel springers will be a little weightier – because they need an additional lever with which to cock the rifle – but the upside is that this extra weight can also combat the recoil by dampening some of the movement, particularly in the case of those underlevers which mount their cocking lever directly under the barrel. In short, if you're man-sized enough to handle an underlever, you've got the potential to shoot with the kind of accuracy that would put many PCP users under pressure!

Sportsmarketing has for years brought a superb fixed-barrel underlever into the UK in the shape of the Supergrade XS38 – and it's sold in its thousands not just because of its incredibly affordable, sub-£150 price tag, but because it bears testimony to the superior performance that this type of springer possesses. The fact that it delivers a power bang on the legal limit, and is rather well presented – especially in the case of the Custom Deluxe model – only serves to help its cause.

Now, though, this nicely-priced underlever has had quite a makeover. In fact, some of the changes are radical enough to warrant it being a

whole new model – although SMK have decided it best not to confuse the market and has introduced their 'mark 2' version with the same, famous moniker upon which its reputation has been built.

As before, there's still a lesser-specced XS38 – the Deluxe – which (in less stylish woodwork) is £30 cheaper. But at just £149.95 for the flagship Custom Deluxe XS38, it's the top-of-the-line model that is set to steal the plaudits, especially in the all-new guise unveiled here.

In truth, the 'look' of the new rifle isn't all that much different from its forebear, and you can instantly associate it with the XS38 stable. However, delve deeper, and you begin to see quite a few new elements that highlight why this model, in its latest format, is quite the current buy.

Most notably, the latest XS38 Custom Deluxe comes with open sights that boast fibre-optic inserts for faster target acquisition and more accurate aiming against tricky backgrounds. And it's not been a case of just sticking the light-gathering strips into the existing sights, either – this latest Supergrade boasts an all-new sighting set-up.

The rearsight remains fully adjustable for lateral and vertical POI shift via serrated thumbwheels – numbered (0 to 9) in the case of the elevation wheel and with L and R arrows for the windage turnscrew. However, the unit – a mix of metal and heavy-duty synthetic – has had a total redesign, with all the central unit sitting within a protective base station that sports raised sides. The sightline is slightly raised to accommodate the new foresight arrangement and the thumbwheels click extremely positively, with no sloppiness or inconsistency.

The rear's square-cut notch is flanked by green fibre-optic dots that align with the red fibre-optic of the foresight bead in the usual

fashion. There's no protective tunnel around the foresight as there was on the original model, so due diligence needs to be shown when on the range or in the field – but it's not something to make the sights a write-off. In fact, the total sight base of 425mm, coupled with the precise adjustments of the rearsight unit, make for some extremely tight groups downrange in the right hands. Those who are tempted to shy away from a scope will be surprised at just how well – and at how far – they can get results with the XS38's new open sight set-up.

There's a new business end on this latest XS38, too, with the muzzle shroud-come-lever-catch being re-designed, in synthetic, with a more fashionable look about it. The squared-off end has been replaced by one which has a hint of silencer about its appearance – although there's no sound suppression as the 475mm barrel runs almost to the very extreme of the brake's muzzle end.

Built in to the shroud is the underlever cocking lever's catch, which is released via a synthetic pull-back release mechanism. As on the original gun, the underlever linkage is articulated with the advantage that there's only a short, stock-weakening cocking slot cut into the forestock, which itself is extended well past the loading breech area to give plenty of hold options.

The XS38 also hasn't lost its anti-beartrap mechanism – a good thing, as safety is paramount on sliding-breech guns like this, where your fingers can be vulnerable when loading. However, whereas the original system was a little ham-fisted, requiring the user to pull back a lever, awkwardly situated behind the trigger blade, before the cocking lever could be returned to the closed position, this latest model has come up with a stroke of design genius.

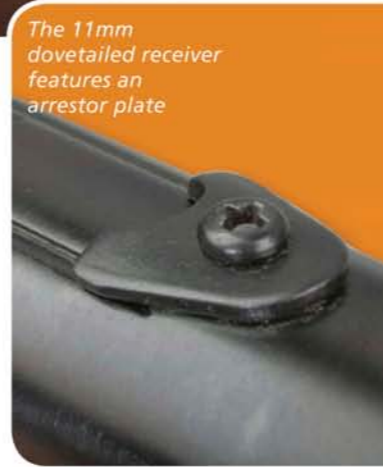
FIRST LOOK: SMK XS38 CUSTOM

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS - XS38

MODEL: Supergrade XS38 Custom Deluxe
 UK DISTRIBUTOR: Sportsmarketing
 01206 795333 • www.sportsmk.co.uk
 ACTION: Underlever, spring and piston
 CALIBRE: .22 only
 OVERALL LENGTH: 1,142mm
 BARREL LENGTH: 485mm
 WEIGHT (EXCL. SCOPE): 4.0kg
 TRIGGER: Single-stage
 SAFETY: Automatic, in-guard, resettable. Anti-beartrap cocking system
 SIGHTS: Fibre-optic opens, adjustable.
 STOCK: Beech sporter (r-h)
 POWER: 11.4ft/lb (according to pellets used)
 PRICE: £149.95



The in-set safety and trigger have been spruced up – with greater access to the trigger thanks to a more discreet safety catch



The 11mm dovetailed receiver features an arrestor plate

The remodelled cylinder end block – now beautifully curved, à la the old BSA springers, rather than simply ‘plugged’ with a serrated cap – sports what appears to be a thumb safety. But, in fact, things aren’t what they seem... because this serrated glider button is the anti-beartrap release system – you push it forward to enable the cocking lever to be swung home. Ingenious!

The safety catch proper is situated inside the trigger guard but, again, this – along with the pressed steel blade itself – has been completely restyled for the better. No longer does this ‘second trigger’ safety catch cramp your index finger’s style, though, thanks to the set-back design of the blade and the thinner, shorter shape of the safety lever, which operates in a far less intrusive manner.

Being automatic, the safety catch comes on during the cocking process – itself a fairly effortless affair, especially given the rifle’s full-power energy output – and it’s easy enough to pull back (to ‘off’) with your trigger finger when you need to take the shot. Similarly, it can be reset – by pushing forward, easily and quietly – if you need to make the rifle safe again.

As for the trigger, the XS38 was never known for its poor let-off... and things haven’t changed in that department with the new model. However, the test sample’s trigger appeared to be more single-stage than two-stage in its operation, although the set-back style of the curved blade certainly helped ensure this was anything but a hindrance to good shot release.

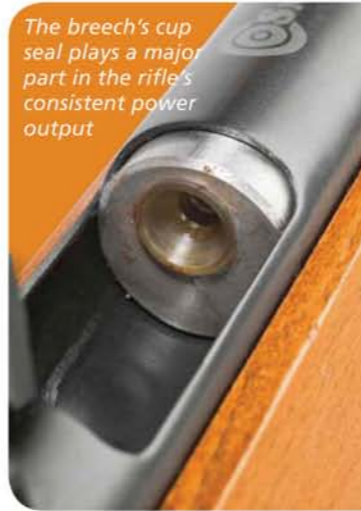
To assist on the accuracy front, the XS38 still sports an 11mm dovetailed receiver for standard ‘airgun’ mounts should you want to fit a telescopic sight for longer-range shooting. They provide 135mm of mounting space, and include an arrestor plate against which you can

butt the rear mount to stop the scope ‘creeping’. This is placed right at the end, too, allowing the full length of dovetails to be utilised. The new XS38 also has four cross-hatches milled into the receiver, between the rails, for use those mounts that have cross-pin type arrestor systems.

The ‘Custom’ tag of the flagship model identifies the rifle’s beech woodwork, which is extremely well matched to the action to provide good handling. Although it’s devoid of any chequering panels, it’s beautifully presented in a high-gloss lacquer. The grip is pleasantly raked to offer good trigger attack, the forend is gently rounded along its full length for a comfortable hold (wherever you choose to grip it) and the butt boasts both a right-hand Monte-Carlo cheekpiece and a ventilated recoil pad. Though the .22-only rifle is sold with a right-hand bias, it perfectly suitable for southpaws to shoot off the left shoulder.

Besides its woodwork, the finish of the new XS38 Custom Deluxe’s metalwork is also far more high-end than its price tag would suggest, with a good standard of polishing and blueing to the action, barrel and underlever. The silver-finished inner cylinder withdraws on cocking to reveal a solidly engineered breech, along with a highly efficient cup seal that prevents air leakage from the transfer port on firing. This plays an important role in both the rifle’s power and consistency, as seen by the velocity stats below.

For the money – under £150, let’s not forget – the ‘new’ style Supergrade XS38 Custom Deluxe is certainly a gun to turn heads and do the business. While many ‘budget’ guns meet their price point with compromises somewhere down the line, it’s a very pleasant surprise to come across one which seems to do the opposite. This is a rifle that remains very competitively priced, even though it’s just got a whole lot better. ●



The breech’s cup seal plays a major part in the rifle’s consistent power output

Closing the GAP

XS208: HW80K

XS208
V
HW80K



Break-barrel springers are the mainstay of the British airgunner – but do you have to pay a fortune to get a good one? **Mark Camoccio** tests two top-powered sporters from different ends of the price spectrum to find out...

The speedy configuration and simple design of traditional break-barrel springers still provide immense satisfaction for many shooters, despite constant advances in PCP technology. So having recently covered precharged guns, I’m focusing on the more classic power plant this time, with a pair of modern, full-powered break-barrel sporters.

Sportsmarketing’s XS208 is the standard sporter model in its highly-popular 208 range, and here it goes head to head with the HW80 from Weihrauch – a model almost three times the 208’s asking price, and one that’s over 30 years old. Be that as it may, it’s also an air rifle with legendary status among airgunners, and represents a good benchmark for being ‘a b****y good air rifle!’

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Both sporters look striking at first glance – and the full-length SMK XS208 has a slick presentation and high level of finish that seemingly belie its price tag. Its light-coloured wood stain and pleasant graining give it an air of class – and there are fully-adjustable, fibre-optic opens to make it shootable straight out of the box.

Weihrauch’s muscular hunter incorporates a fuller stock, and its beefy dimensions make for an imposing piece of machinery. My test model, which displays Weihrauch’s renowned level of finish and engineering, is the carbine ‘K’ variant of the HW80, this one being the 310mm-barrelled version that also sports a silencer.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★☆☆
 Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★☆☆

TAKING STOCK

Both these sporters’ stocks are fairly bland. The XS208 is the plainer of the two, with no definition to the cheekpiece – though this does make it ambidextrous, and it’s perfectly adequate when using the fibre-optic open sights. Its sleek forend fully conceals the breech block, giving the gun a neat appearance, and the overall slimline configuration suits the rifle’s role as a general sporter. The lighter woodwork sets off the action, helping to keep the weight down, too.

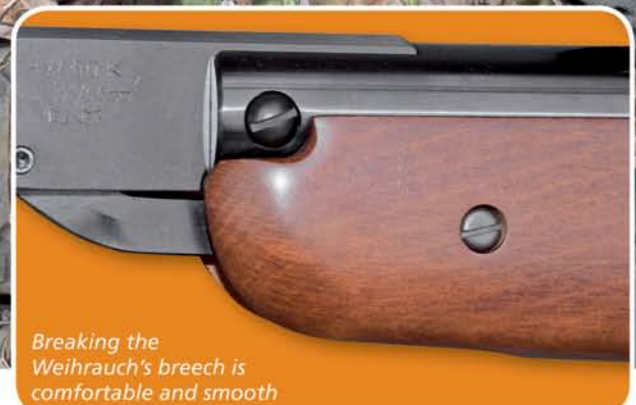
By contrast, the chunkier, deeper forend of the Weihrauch seems to complement the man-sized proportions of the action, but the cheekpiece is also a little low for scope use – a shame as this silencer-only model comes without any opens, making a scope mandatory! Bearing in mind my test

The SMK XS208’s slimline configuration suits the rifle’s role as a general sporter



SMK's XS208 is lighter and very user-friendly on longer outings

The HW80 can be more tiring when taking standers



Breaking the Weihrauch's breech is comfortable and smooth



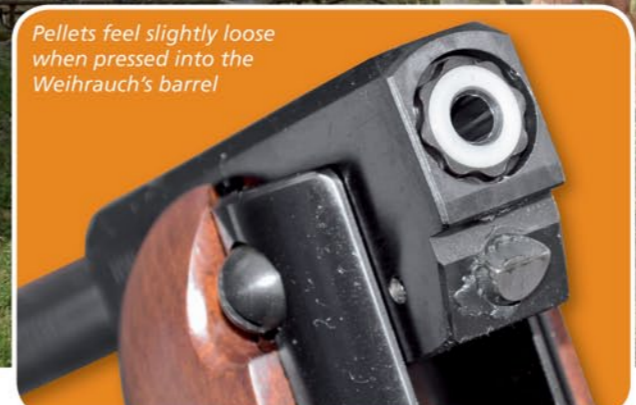
A raised cheekpiece rounds off the HW80K's chunky stock, but it's a little low for scope use



The SMK's cheekpiece is ambidextrous, and ideal for using the on-board open sights



A sharp tap is required to open the SMK's action, such is the strength of its lock-up



Pellets feel slightly loose when pressed into the Weihrauch's barrel



Weihrauch's famous Rekord trigger unit excels in operation



Though a 'budget' rifle, the SMK features a metal trigger blade and works flawlessly



Loading pellets into the SMK's rifling proves snug and satisfactory

XS208 is the 'base' version – with a luxurious thumbhole model available for a tenner more – the HW80's detail and definition have the edge, further cemented with deeply-cut panels of chequering on the grip.

- SMK XS208 ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

SCOPING UP

Fitting glassware to air rifles is a no-brainer for many shooters, given the range of top value scopes on the market – and the XS208 comes well appointed for attaching a telly. A small arrestor block sits to the rear of the dovetail rails, which prevents the rear mount from moving backwards under the whiplash effect of the recoil – scope creep, as it's known.

Weihrauch's HW80K features the company's time-honoured scope rails, with three arrestor stud holes. As many scope mounts now include a screw-in arrestor pin, achieving a perfect scope set-up couldn't be simpler.

- SMK XS208 ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

COCKING CYCLE

Breaking open the SMK requires the usual sharp tap to the barrel, where the ensuing cocking stroke is reasonable; one positive, sweeping motion sees the action primed and ready. Pellets fitted snugly into the rifling breech jaws, which allow the barrel to move in its arc without resistance. That said, the all-important breech lock-up was reassuringly solid.

But Weihrauch's design feels notably slicker, requiring just a small jolt to nudge open the breech, with a similarly weighted, but smoother cocking stroke. Once cocked, the barrel is snugly supported within the breech. However, feeding ammo into the breech is unexpectedly unsatisfactory – all the pellets I tested were loose and dropped straight into the lip of the barrel!

Both rifles can be de-cocked if required – a feature many hunters find handy in the field.

- SMK XS208 ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

TRIGGER AND SAFETY

The test duo come with automatic safety catches, and while I'm no great fan of these, each gun's worked flawlessly. The XS208 features a small safety tab to the rear of the compression cylinder, which needs thumbing

forward before taking a shot. The trigger blade is metal, and the final release weight is reasonable – but I found it a little 'spongy' as the trigger sears creep over each other.

Weihrauch's Rekord trigger unit, by contrast, is a multi-component cassette that delivers subtler, crisper and lighter settings. This feature alone accounts for a significant part of the asking price. It is money well spent, though, as the HW80's potential performance is way ahead of most comparable rifles.

- SMK XS208 ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

HANDLING

Handling both rifles in quick succession reveals a major difference in weight. SMK's XS208 tips the scales at 3.3kg, making it very user-friendly for longer outings. The HW80, on the other hand, feels a real handful at 3.9kg. However, heavy rifles tend to absorb more recoil – and the additional weight can aid steady shooting in certain

scenarios, such as seated shots. But it's certainly more tiring when taking standing shots.

Ultimately, it's a matter of compromise and personal taste. The XS208 offers a great deal of balance, though the Weihrauch's saving grace is that its more refined grip and butt do make for enjoyable handling... if you can cope with its weight.

- SMK XS208 ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

OVERALL BUILD

Putting any other springer up against Weihrauch often makes for a one-sided scrap, but the quality of Eastern-made hardware has improved significantly in recent years. Made in China, SMK's XS208 is a real case in point – and while the metal surfaces don't get the 'nth degree' of treatment that German manufacture normally guarantees, the machining tolerances have tightened up and particularly impressed me on my test gun.

Rich chemical bluing is a process the Chinese seem reluctant to incorporate, however – so the SMK does have slightly rougher metal surfaces. To be fair, though, that is typical of air rifles in this sub-£150 price bracket – they've got to save money somewhere! But overall, the 208 is a well-presented and well-engineered gun.

The HW80, meanwhile, is a shining example of Weihrauch's superiority in build quality, and its immaculate finish and precision-engineered components are to be expected – you're paying for the privilege, after all! Of course, you're also getting a Weihrauch silencer thrown in.

Head-to-head, the HW has to take this category... but take price into account, and you're laughing all the way to the bank with the SMK.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★☆☆

Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★☆☆

CONSISTENCY

I repeatedly marvel at modern spring-gun consistency – and both guns here are superb examples of the art. Over the chrono, the XS208 posted impressive figures over 10 shots, with a total spread of just 14fps with Air Arms Diabolo Field pellets, and a 12fps spread using Webley AccuPells.

The HW80K also boasted a remarkable level of consistency – a spread of just 5fps over 10 shots with Diabolos... and just 3fps with RWS Super Fields! While that took some of the shine off the excellent performance of the XS208, you can't argue with these figures – they're nothing short of outstanding for an out-of-the box springer.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★☆☆

Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★☆☆

ACCURACY

I always put several brands of pellet through test guns to properly evaluate their accuracy potential – and, surprisingly, both these rifles proved pellet fussy. Despite its power with AccuPells, accuracy-wise they weren't the best feed for the SMK – though I was able to get AADFs to group inside 30mm at 30 yards.

The pellet 'fit' in the HW80K worried me – it appears that the breech has been machined with an oversized chamfer, and all of the several pellet brands I tested proved a slack fit; I just couldn't 'feel' the pellet into the rifling, which is less than ideal on a break-barrel.

The HW80K grouped AADFs around the 20mm mark at 30 yards, and RWS Super Fields tighter still – which is excellent and what I expect from a Weihrauch... but I was still surprised that so many other brands simply didn't perform out of my test rifle.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★☆☆

Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★☆☆

VALUE FOR MONEY

This is a head-to-head test, where performance is absolute, not relative to price – so should Weihrauch be scoring nearly three times as many points as its SMK rival, given that's the price differential? Clearly, that hasn't been the case, and while the HW80K reaches this stage slightly ahead in the points stakes, the significantly less expensive XS208 is hot on its heels.

FINAL VERDICT

SMK XS208	80/100
Weihrauch HW80K	86/100

These are two very different rifles – and whether you think the higher quality of the Weihrauch is worth the higher asking price is a matter of opinion, depending on what you want from a break-barrel sporter.

Personally, I would always stump up the extra cash and invest in fine engineering. But many shooters with, perhaps, different priorities and tighter budgets may decide otherwise – and there are tens of thousands of satisfied customers who can testify to the top value of Sportsmarketing's airguns.

Regarding the performance of these two rifles, the more expensive model has, as one might expect, triumphed. But considering the differences in asking prices is over £250, the gap of just six points in the final score of this head-to-head suddenly looks a lot, lot smaller in the grand scheme of things!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS		
MODEL	XS208	HW80K (silencer model)
MANUFACTURER	for SMK	Weihrauch
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	China	Germany
ACTION	Spring and piston	Spring and piston
COCKING	Break-barrel	Break-barrel
CALIBRE	.177 (tested) and .22	.177 and .22 (tested)
OVERALL LENGTH	1,156mm	1,143mm
BARREL LENGTH	483mm	310mm (not including supplied silencer)
WEIGHT (UNSCOPED)	3.3kg	3.9kg
SIGHTS	Fully-adjustable, fibre-optic open sights	None fitted on Silencer model
TRIGGER	Two-stage, adjustable	Two-stage, adjustable
SAFETY	Automatic, resettable	Automatic (resettable on re-cock)
STOCK	Beech sporter	Beech sporter
POWER	11.4ft/lb	11.7ft/lb
PRICE	£139.95	£396
CONTACT	Sportsmarketing 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk	Hull Cartridge Company 01482 342571 www.hullcartridge.co.uk

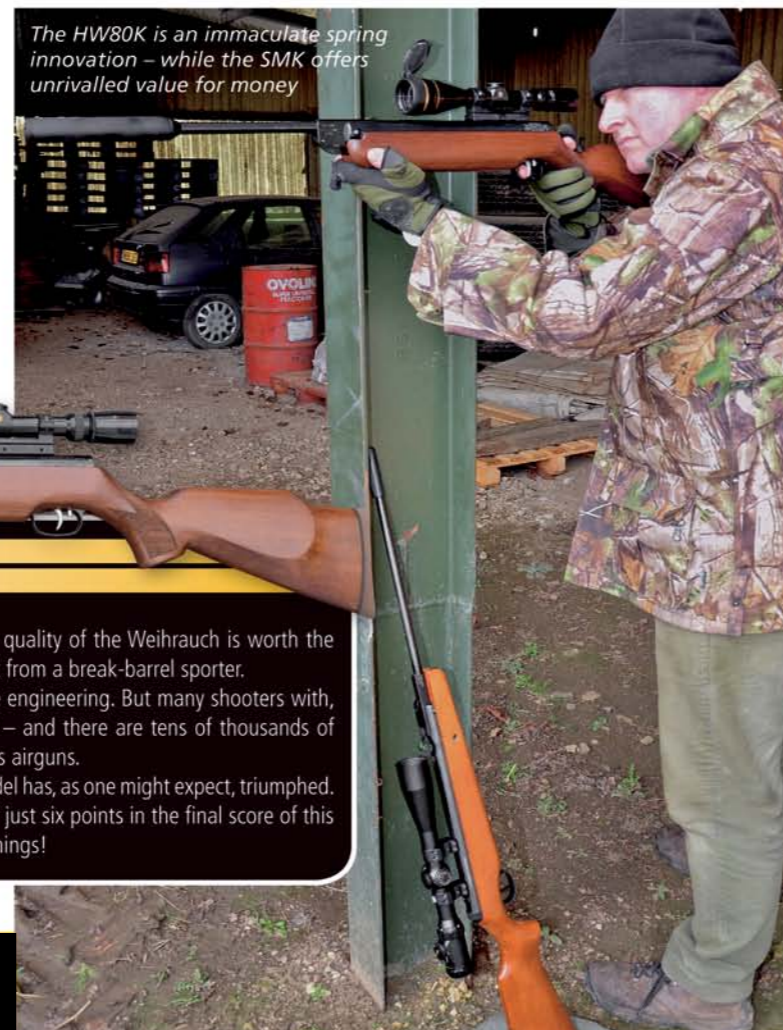
Both guns give a good return on investment – and, to be fair, are deliberately aimed at different ends of the market. For less than £150, the SMK XS208 is superb value, making it not only a good starter rifle, but also a budget-beating hunter for shooters who want a decent tool that they're not too worried about hanging over the fireplace. And it comes with high-tech opens.

The Weihrauch, on the other hand, is a classy piece of kit that many springer fans may aspire to, and despite its age and price, it still represents the pinnacle of mass-produced break-barrel sporters. The fact that you also get a silencer on this model will be a nice bonus for many field shooters and, to some extent, helps to keep the German gun 'competitive' with its cheaper adversary here.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★☆☆

Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★☆☆

The HW80K is an immaculate spring innovation – while the SMK offers unrivalled value for money



NIGEL ALLEN's take on the Sportsmarketing SKL208 SKELETON HUNTER

It's the only spring-powered rifle I know of that has a cut-out 'skeletal' butt – and being based around SMK's new, full-powered 208 series of break-barrels, that means the SKL208 Skeleton Hunter has got all the poke you need for the field without weighing heavy in your shoulder.

It's not just a weight advantage that the SKL208's totally unique stock brings. It doubles as a thumbhole, giving you improved control of the very sweet, two-stage trigger and making the



Above, from left: The fore-end features a pronounced 'hamster' to aid grip. The feel of the trigger is improved by the thumbhole grip. The SKL208 has an automatic, resettable safety and the grooved receiver sports a scope arrestor.



SKL208 an extremely capable long-range performer.

The lack of weight at the back means the SKL208's balance is front-biased – and any target shooter will tell you that's exactly what you need for consistent, accurate shot placement. This welcome trait of the rifle is further emphasised by the stylish, blued steel weight fitted to the muzzle.

Considering its awesome power, I found cocking the SKL208 required little effort on my part. I was pleased to see the barrel swings around a chunky bolt, not a pin, too. That means you can tighten things up should the breech jaws become sloppy over time. Not all break-barrels have this facility – but I reckon it's imperative if you want to keep the rifle's accuracy on song. While designed as an out-and-out field sporter, the fore-end has been shaped with a bulbous 'hamster', along the lines of a competition rifle. While this sits nicely in the palm of your leading hand, it's also handy for those awkward, steeply-angled shots. I had no problems elevating the rifle in my shoulder when shooting quarry from the tree-tops. Being ambidextrous, the

gun's also suitable for both right- and left-handers.

Despite its legal-limit power output, there's not much kick from the SKL208, and most of that's absorbed through the thick, ventilated rubber butt pad. This 'sticks' nicely in your shoulder, so you don't have to battle with holding the rifle on target. At the business end, the steel weight dampens-out your wobble, locking the muzzle on your target during aim and reducing barrel 'flip' after you've let the shot go.

I had no doubts as to the reliability of the safety catch at the rear of the cylinder. It comes on automatically when you cock the rifle and easily re-settable should you abort the shot.

There are no open sights, so fitting



You can easily steady the Skeleton Hunter's business end thanks to its aimstabilising muzzle weight.

a scope to the grooved receiver is mandatory. I opted for SMK's 3-9 x 40 mil-dot which I anchored tight-up against the built-in arrestor block

FACTS - SKL208

- Action:** Break-barrel
- Calibre:** .22
- Length:** 114cm
- Barrel Length:** 48cm
- Weight:** 3.81kg
- Trigger:** Two-stage
- Safety:** Automatic
- Stock:** Hardwood, skeletal butt
- Sights:** N/A
- Power:** 12 ft/lbs
- Price:** £199.95

Field CONTENDERS

ON TEST: CO2 RIFLES



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Gas power is certainly a way to get the benefits of PCP power without the hassle. **Chris Wells** took two CO2-powered rifles from Sportsmarketing into the field for evaluation

Consider, if you will, the CO2 airgun system. You get the same lack of recoil as a PCP, without the need for arduous pumping up or recharging from expensive, cumbersome diving equipment. Instead, it's a case of just replacing a CO2 canister – easy. Plus, there's no need to cock an action like on a springer. So CO2 brings the best of both worlds; you get the full-power, recoil-free and fixed-barrel accuracy of a PCP, with the simplicity of a springer. Which is probably why Sportsmarketing's XS79 and TH78D – two prime examples of top-notch CO2 rifles in a market not exactly littered with gas-powered rifles – are so popular with airgunners 'in the know'.

Both rifles come with accomplished mechanics, with their near-identical actions featuring a smooth trigger – that's adjustable via a small grub screw once you remove the stock – and a spring-enhanced 'flip' safety you can operate without coming off aim.

In fact, as well as the safety catch, the bolt and loading bay are all situated within easy reach of your trigger hand, making both SMKs as beautiful to handle as they look – although there's no denying that the TH78D is probably the sexier of the two!

The loading bay in the middle of the breech is fairly small, but it's not difficult to roll a pellet into the loading channel – even with a scope on board – after cranking the manly sidebolt backwards. No effort's required as the action actually cocks when you push the bolt forward to breech your pellet.

Despite utilising the same base mechanisms, the XS79 and TH78D are quite different animals – and while they can cover all manner of tasks you may require, I'd say they each have their specialist uses. If general fungunning's your game, take your pick – but if it's fieldwork you've got in mind, it's time to consider which fits your game plan...



Similar actions – completely different animals: the TH78D (left) and XS79



The 79 might not feature the most flamboyant woodwork design you've ever seen, but it's not supposed to be. Dressed in solid Eastern hardwood, it's a highly practical, all-out workhorse sporter. Its short, slim stock ends early at the forend, with an 88-gram, 'bulk-fill' CO2 canister protruding further forward. (While I can see budding DIYers wanting to make themselves a sleeve, I rather appreciated the raw look of exposed metalwork.)

Rearward, the long butt remains fairly flat, dipping downwards from the action to finish in a rubber butt pad. On the underside, the shallow grip almost melts into the rest of the design – which, incidentally, is fully ambidextrous and sure to be welcomed by Southpaws.

Its sister 78 is quite different, and clearly aimed at the airgunning connoisseur who appreciates style as well as function. Its stock's got all those panache touches that the XS79 doesn't really need – a rolling Monte Carlo cheekpiece, palm swell and, of course, that beautiful thumbhole. The chunky butt is just as long as its slimmer sister's, and it fills your shoulder even more comfortably. Plus it's all capped off with a well-shaped, slide-adjustable rubber butt pad, which is set apart from the rest of the stock with a classy, white-line spacer. That's not the only aesthetic touch – the TH78D's got a beautiful gold-anodised finish on both its bolt and trigger, adding that chic sheen a deluxe rifle should boast.

Unlike the XS79, the 78's action is powered not by a large, 88-gram tank, but two of the standard 12-gram capsules – and these reside inside the gas cylinder slung under barrel. The advantage of this system – aside of aesthetics – is that the Deluxe's stock has a more conventional forend, making full use of the beautifully grained beech wood that it's been crafted from. By the way, although it's designed as a dedicated right-hander, with a profiled Monte Carlo cheek, the palm swell does expand around the steep pistol grip in such a way that a leftie could get to grips with it.

Both models come equipped with adjustable iron sights, featuring a rearsight that's adjustable via a sliding, notched ramp. Its V-notch marries nicely with the foresight, although as you'd expect, the TH79D has a slightly more superior offering. While a parallel post sits atop the XS79's raised ramp, the Deluxe 79's equipped with a red fibre-optic bead which glows in the ambient light to help you acquire the target precisely and quickly. While I enjoyed plinking with the opens, I chose to harness the full potential of each rifle by rigging up SMK's 3-9x40 telly. Its magnification range is brilliant for short-to-mid-distance hunting work – the kind of ranges, in fact, I need around the pheasant pens which I control for of the local game syndicate!

The XS79's definitely a fast-to-shoulder tool for the field. It's extremely light and easy to handle – though, with such a long pull length, it's more suited for adult frames. The clean-cut image and flat, slim stock is tailor-made to shoot swiftly, with the balance point resting fairly forward – so I'd say it's less a gun to sit in a hide with, and more an up-and-about pest controller.

I found it best to get hold of the front of the forend (even gripping the gas canister) and then 'attack' the rifle into the aim position. It feels quite natural; you've got to press your head forward because of the lengthy butt, but your crosshairs will then quickly lock-on solidly to the target. Even standing, I got



Fancy vs function – the TH78D features flair the XS79 workhorse doesn't need



Above left: A classy, gold finish on the trigger completes the deluxe TH78D



Above: The 78's sliding butt pad makes for quick target acquisition at all angles



If opens are your game – the fibre-optics on the TH78D collect light well

Left: Its light weight and forward balance make the XS79 a snap-shooter – perfect for on-your-feet pest control



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS		
RIFLE	XS79	TH78D
Distributor	Sportsmarketing	Sportsmarketing
Country of origin	China	China
Type	CO2 sporter	CO2 sporter
Calibre	.22 (tested) and .177	.22
Action	Sidebolt	Sidebolt
Power	88-gram capsule	Two 12-gram capsules
Overall length	39.5in	39.5in
Barrel length	21.5in, rifled	21.5in, rifled
Weight	2.4kg	3.5kg (approx)
Sights	Fully-adjustable open	Fully-adjustable fibre-optic
Trigger	One-stage adjustable	One-stage adjustable
Safety	Manual, resettable	Manual, resettable
Stock	Hardwood sporter	Thumbhole, hardwood sporter
Power	11+ft/lb	11+ft/lb
Price	£109.95	£179.95
Contact	Sportsmarketing, 01206 795333, www.sportsmk.co.uk	

good thumbnail-sized groups out to 20 yards, which is more than adequate for dealing with the rat and pigeon infestations that often threaten pheasant feed. Though I didn't count specifically, I reckoned I was getting around 200 shots per tank before the pellet velocities started dropping.

While I was enthused by the XS79's performance, I felt the TH78D deserved more of a challenge – after all, it doesn't take SMK's CO2 flagship mantle for no reason! Rather than trudge it around a rough shoot, its well-shaped stock and more deliberate handling makes it a perfect sniping partner, where precision, rather than snap-shooting, is the name of the game.

The TH78D comes into its own when you're sat down, with your eyes on the quarry. Due to the extra weight, the set-up nestles into your stance and makes the muzzle feel far more controlled for those longer-range executions. I did expect the balance to be further rearward than it actually is, but its weight sits midway between your two hands – almost 'neutral'. This is the perfect gun for combating winged adversaries: Settle under a tree and leave the sliding butt pad loose – but glued in to your shoulder – and then just push the rifle down when a high shot presents itself. This 'on-the-fly' adjustment lets you get locked on without any neck contortions – and you'll find eye-to-scope alignment is a far more natural thing, allowing you to make the absolute most of the thumbhole stock's fine ergonomics.

Of course, 2 x 12 grams does not equal 1 x 88 grams in terms of gas volume – but, despite that, the luxurious TH78D's twin power source still returns around 50-odd shots between gas-ups. Both guns spit pellets out around the 10ft/lb mark, incidentally – though, like all CO2 guns, this can change a bit with temperature; increasing in the hotter weather. To power up, simply unscrew the knurled nut at the front of the cylinder, and when the

excess gas has vented off, drop in two new capsules, their necks facing outwards, and screw on the nut.

Talking of power, the only down-side of these CO2 systems is that you can't remove them half-used without losing the rest of liquid CO2 that remains, but that's no great problem and is more than made up for in their simplicity of operation. For sure, it's far easier than fiddling with the charging gear of a PCP and, of course, because CO2 works at much lower pressure than the compressed air of precharged air rifles, the guns are less 'stressed'.

While few would choose CO2 for competition work, for general shooting and mid-range pest control, it's a system that has a lot of advantages – and both these rifles represent the very best of gas-powered sporters. They're each beautifully presented, with the finish of the TH78D being enough to tempt any connoisseur – and at just £109.95 for the highly practical XS79, and £179.95 for the mouthwatering TH78D, they're both pretty hard not to consider opening your wallet for. ●



Top: Slot the two 12-gram capsules, facing outwards, into the TH78D's forend for power

Above: The XS79 simply needs a chunky 88-gram capsule – and it'll last for around 200 shots!

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Shooting with BOTH BARRELS

TEST: SMK DUAL CALIBRE



Heralding an innovative new concept, Sportsmarketing's latest offering is a top-quality break-barrel package that not only comes with scope, mounts and a bespoke case, but also interchangeable .177 and .22 barrels. **Nigel Allen** assesses the Beeman Dual Calibre



face. However, the manufacturer has foreseen this potential pitfall and a spare is provided should you lose it.

The barrel locks with a single, large grub screw under the block, and an arrow-chevron etching on the side of the block and barrel help you align everything correctly so that the screw locates into its pre-drilled recess. One thing I did notice, however, was that screw kept loosening with the .177 barrel in place and I eventually ended up using a quick-acting thread sealant to secure it. It was an easy problem to overcome and barrel changeover remained an easy enough procedure to carry out, even in the field.

Each of my barrels were well rifled, with smooth internal bores, and both calibres were lightly choked in the last 12mm. I'm sure this had a big part to play in the gun's overall accuracy in either calibre, and why they were able to shoot most pellets so well. As you'd expect, the more expensive brands proved to be the most accurate and I settled on Daystate FT in .22 and H&N Field Target Trophy in .177. At 25 yards, both these pellets were capable of printing sub-inch groups on paper, making them an ideal choice for hunting out to 35 yards.

As a sporter, the Dual Calibre is a man-size gun and certainly inspires confidence. It has a robust appearance and feel and, what it lacks in practical stock embellishments – there's no chequering or cheek-piece, just a raised comb and non-slip rubber butt pad – is more than made up for in its handling. The forestock is nicely extended to the end of the breech block to give plenty of hold options, the comb is ambidextrous and the perfect height for the supplied 3-9x32 scope, and the grip raked perfectly for good trigger attack.

There are cosmetic embellishments, though – black inserts neaten the side stock screw holes and there's a gold Beeman insignia inlaid on the left. The only slight gripe I have is that the pistol grip area is rather chunky. It strengthens this generally weak area, for sure – so I doubt the stock would fracture if you accidentally dropped the rifle – but I'd have welcomed a bit of a thumb muscle cutaway.

Despite the rifle's full power performance, the Dual Calibre goes off in your shoulder with hardly any kick at all. I did feel the recoil was slightly harsher in .177 set-up – possibly accounting for that loose screw – but it was very manageable, otherwise I wouldn't have been able to stick in the impressive groups that I did.

The two-stage trigger does its bit for accuracy, too. Its broad-bladed face has raised blocks for a good feel, and the sear engagement can be adjusted, via two tiny screws, without removing the stock. Once I'd tweaked the factory setting, I felt the trigger worked with much greater consistency – though this could be down to personal preference.

There's an 'in-guard' safety that automatically sets on cocking the rifle. It's easy enough to push 'off' with the back of your index finger and can be reset. The rifle can also be decocked, and the overall cocking

Over the decades, very few production airguns have been offered with interchangeable barrels – although my first-ever 'adult' rifle, a Webley Hawk I bought new for £27.50 in 1976, was one of them! While I think that was more a gimmick than a genuine attempt by its maker to offer the shooter the benefits of both calibres – that's certainly not the case with SMK's new Dual Calibre break-barrel from Beeman. It's a full-powered, field-ready combo that comes complete with a 3-9x telly, mounts, fitted case and barrels in both .177 and .22. This gun delivers in a very serious manner.

I suppose the first question is 'why?' Why would you want a gun with two calibres? Well, there are a number of answers, and having it for 'gimmick value' is *not* one of them. You'll find many situations where one calibre is more suited than the other. For instance, controlling winged pests is generally more effective with the high penetrative qualities of a .177, while a .22's stopping power is better for rabbits, rats and squirrels. Practising (or plinking) with .177 pellets is much cheaper than with .22s, and shooting over longer ranges is easier with a .177 thanks to its flatter trajectory. Though .22s do tend to hold steadier on windy days. So, with SMK offering all these options on just the one combo, it clearly works out cheaper than buying two rifles.

With any airgun, .177 calibre tends to be less efficient than .22. In PCPs, that means you get less shots per charge for the same power, and in the case of a springer, like the Beeman, you either have to uprate the

spring in a .177 model, or accept a loss of up to 2ft/lb power output. As the Dual Calibre uses the same action for both barrels, the latter applies. So, my first task with the test rifle was to put it over my Skan Pro1/S3 chrono to see what the *actual* power differential was between the two calibres. After all, if the .22 set-up was doing 11ft/lb but 'gave away' 2ft/lb with the .177 barrel fitted, it would render it useless as a field rifle in the smaller calibre, 9ft/lb being far short of the 10ft/lb minimum I consider necessary for humane pest control work.

However, as you can see from the graph over the page, the four pellets I chose across the two calibres gave powerful results in both .22 and the less efficient .177. I chose these particular brands to test power as they represent a broad range of weights – from ultra-light to medium-heavy. I must admit, the results surprised me. For instance, I didn't expect the 15.71-grain Daystate FT to give the ultimate power in .22 – nor did I think the ultra-light, 5.1-grain U-Bolt would give the lowest in .177.

Generally, the .22s produced in the region of 11.5ft/lb, while the .177s returned around 10.5ft/lb. This difference of just 1ft/lb proved to me that the Beeman is capable of pest control work over typical airgun ranges with either barrel fitted.

Accuracy-wise, I have no complaints whatsoever, either. Both barrels fit the well-engineered breech block as though they've been custom-machined, though you do have to be careful that, when changing bores, you don't push the breech O-ring seal out of its seat in the block's



Top left: The semi-hard case is a fantastic feature and allows for both barrels to be taken into the field

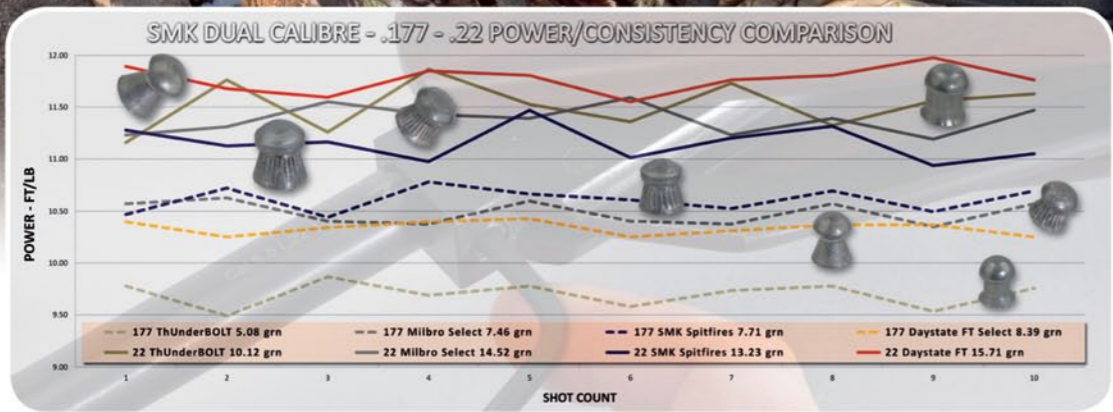
Top right: The 3-9x32 scope is a real bonus, as was the arrestor plate

Far left: After some tweaking, the trigger let every shot go very consistently

Left: The breech lock-up is excellent – and note the forend screw covers



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS	
Model:	Dual Calibre
Distributor:	Sportsmarketing
Country of Origin:	China
Type:	Spring and piston
Cocking:	Break-barrel (with decock facility)
Calibre:	.177 (4.5mm) and .22 (5.5mm) (both barrels supplied)
Overall length:	1,185mm
Barrel length:	457mm
Weight:	3.9kg (scoped)
Sights:	Scope rail only, with arrestor plate
Stock:	Beech (synthetic option)
Length of pull:	370mm
Trigger:	Two-stage, adjustable
Safety:	Automatic 'in-trigger', resettable
Power:	11+ ft/lb
Price:	£299.95 (wood or synthetic), including twin barrels, scope, mounts, bespoke canvas case, tools and spare seal
Contact:	Sportsmarketing, 01206 795333, www.sportsmk.co.uk



cycle is pretty easy given the gun's full-power. Part of this is because the barrel is a full 18 inches long, not including the ported muzzle brake, so you get a good mechanical advantage. Actually, I could easily cock the rifle holding it at around 14 inches, so I'd say this rifle would work well as a carbine. Spring guns don't need long barrels, unlike PCPs, so losing a few inches would cause no problems.

The scope that comes as part of the package is an absolute cracker, offering 3-9x zoom magnification, parallax adjustment, a Duplex-style reticle and finger-friendly BDC turrets – and its flat-top mounts also sport a screw-adjustable arrestor pin, making the scope suitable for use on other rifles. You don't need to deploy it on the Dual Calibre, though, because the dovetails are finished with an arrestor plate – and I'm pleased to see this is right at the end of the grooves, too. So many rifles have a mis-positioned plate, and you can't butt the rear scope mount tight against it. One thing I needed to do, however, was pack the rear mount of the scope as the Dual Calibre's design sports a 'droop' barrel – something once only found on the best break-barrels!

The finishing touch to what is a truly outstanding rifle package is the case. A semi-hard affair that's been designed to hold the action, barrels and scope individually via Velcro ties. There's full-zip closure and

carry handles, and even a protective flap inside to stop everything rubbing together. Because you have to split the barrel, scope and action to store the Dual Calibre in the case, I was keen to see how well zero held. While some minor tweaking of the scope was needed, I was never more than an inch out from either barrel's respective 'zero' every time I re-assembled the rifle.

Whether the .177 or .22 barrel was fitted, I loved shooting the Dual Calibre for its sheer usability. There is an old adage 'beware the one gun man', yet those airgunners who have two rifles in order to span both calibres will know it's often hard to get the best out of either when you're continually chopping and changing. But with the Beeman, you can get completely familiar with one rifle – and just choose your barrel according to the job in hand. Brilliant. ●

Above: The barrel-changing process was easy enough to undertake in the field

Above, inset: The etched arrows facilitate quick and easy barrel changeover

Graph: The chrono threw up some surprises, but clearly shows the rifle to be powerful enough for pest control in both calibres

FIRST GUN

MOD. 15 - FACTS

Importer: Sportsmarketing ☎ 01206 795333.
 Action: Spring-piston.
 Calibre: .177 (4.5 mm.) only.
 Cocking: Break-barrel.
 O/A Length: 920 mm. (36.25 ins.).
 Barrel Length: 369 mm. (14.5 ins.).
 Weight: 2.05 kg. (4.5 lbs.) (unscoped).
 Stock: Hardwood.
 Trigger: Two-stage, non-adjustable.
 Safety: Automatic, resettable.
 Length of Pull: 310 mm. (12.25 ins.).
 Sights: Hooded foresight post, fully-adjustable rearsight.
 Power: 570 f.p.s. (174 m/s) with SMK Air Gun pellets.
 Price: £69.95.
 (SMK 4 x 28 scope - £24.95).

MYLES' SCORE: ●●●●●●●●●●
DAD'S SCORE: ●●●●●●●●●●

Sportsmarketing's Super Grade range of spring-powered 'adult' air rifles is very highly-rated amongst airgunners who want good quality sports that are well engineered, powerful and accurate, but which don't cost an arm and a leg. Also in this impressive Super Grade line-up is the Model 15 Junior's rifle, which sports all the top-end features of its bigger brothers, but which has been 'down-sized' to suit younger airgunners and those starting out in the sport. In fact, many gun shops across the length and breadth of the UK recommend SMK's Super Grade 15 to shooting and non-shooting parents prospecting for a first gun for their sons (and daughters). Retailing at just £69.95, it's certainly in the right price bracket – so let's see what one teenager and his Dad have to say about this compact break-barrel...

Junior Test Report by:
MYLES HENRY



Myles Henry, shooting the SMK Super Grade. See what this teenage airgunner thinks of SMK's junior air rifle over the page.



WE TEST HARDWARE FOR YOUNGER AIRGUNNERS

THIS MONTH: THE SMK SUPER GRADE 15

PARENT POINTS - What Dad

You can instantly tell if a youngster likes an airgun just by watching them shoot it – and though Myles initially thought this junior-sized rifle might be a little small for him, it soon became clear that the SMK's dimensions were absolutely perfect.

Coming at it from an adult's perspective, the Model 15 is not only fantastic value, it's also a superbly-engineered rifle that does everything you'd require from a youngster's 'first gun'. Its weights and measures are easy for teenagers to manage, giving them every opportunity to improve their shooting skills... and see that they're doing so.

The fully-adjustable open sights are excellent for such an inexpensive rifle – and I was well impressed by the standard of engineering throughout. In particular around the breech block, which features a bolt and locking screw (pictured right) to keep things from getting sloppy with use.

I was also very pleased to see that this junior model came with a modest power. This meant Myles had no problems cocking the break-barrel action – and dealing with the rifle's relatively soft recoil. It also made me feel comfortable for him to shoot it in the garden (under my supervision).

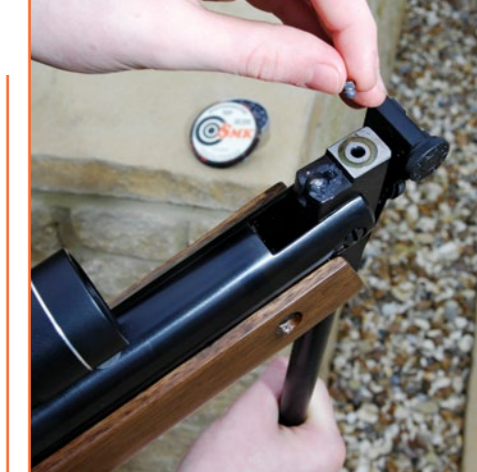
reckons to the SMK MODEL 15

The trigger's pull-weight, though non-adjustable, offered a good compromise between safety and technique – and I witnessed Myles extract a good proportion of the rifle's accuracy potential once I'd bolted SMK's £24.95, compact 4 x 28 telly onto its grooved receiver.

The safety catch, which automatically comes on when you cock the rifle, is a great way to get a young gun into the habit of using a safety – and it can also be reset without having to re-cock the rifle. I was slightly disappointed there was no anti-beartrap – though the auto-safety effectively 'blocks' the trigger to avoid any accidental discharges during cocking.

The finish of both the wood and metalwork was exemplary – so much so that I noticed Myles frequently casting admiring glances over the rifle as he was 'polishing' it over with an oily rag after each shooting session!

This is an excellent first air rifle for any youngster.



Loading the break-barrel action. Thanks to its modest power, cocking the Super Grade 15 is also 'teenage-friendly'.



squeeze through to actually fire-off the pellet.

Dad told me the trigger was excellent for a junior's rifle – and although I don't know a lot about triggers, I certainly didn't have too any problems snatching the shots 'off'. The gun's hardly got any kick to throw you out, either – plus there's a rubber butt pad to help keep it in firmly your shoulder.

It seemed that the more I got used to the rifle, the more my scores improved – and

Dad was happy that I was n't learning

as I shot some very good scores on paper targets.

The rifle comes with really cool open sights – and my step-Dad showed me how to 'set' them using the numbered thumbwheels. I had to adjust the top wheel to bring the pellets 'up' into the bull – but I could leave the left/right sidewheel alone because the shots went dead-on. Dad said that this was because the barrel was so well aligned (which he was most impressed with on such an inexpensive model).

Each time the rifle's cocked, the safety catch at the end pops out, with a white dot to show it's on. It caught me out a few times as I went to pull the trigger... and nothing! However, I soon got into the habit of thumbing off the safety once I was on aim – and the good thing about the Model 15 is that if you don't take the shot, you can pull the safety back out again, to 'on'.

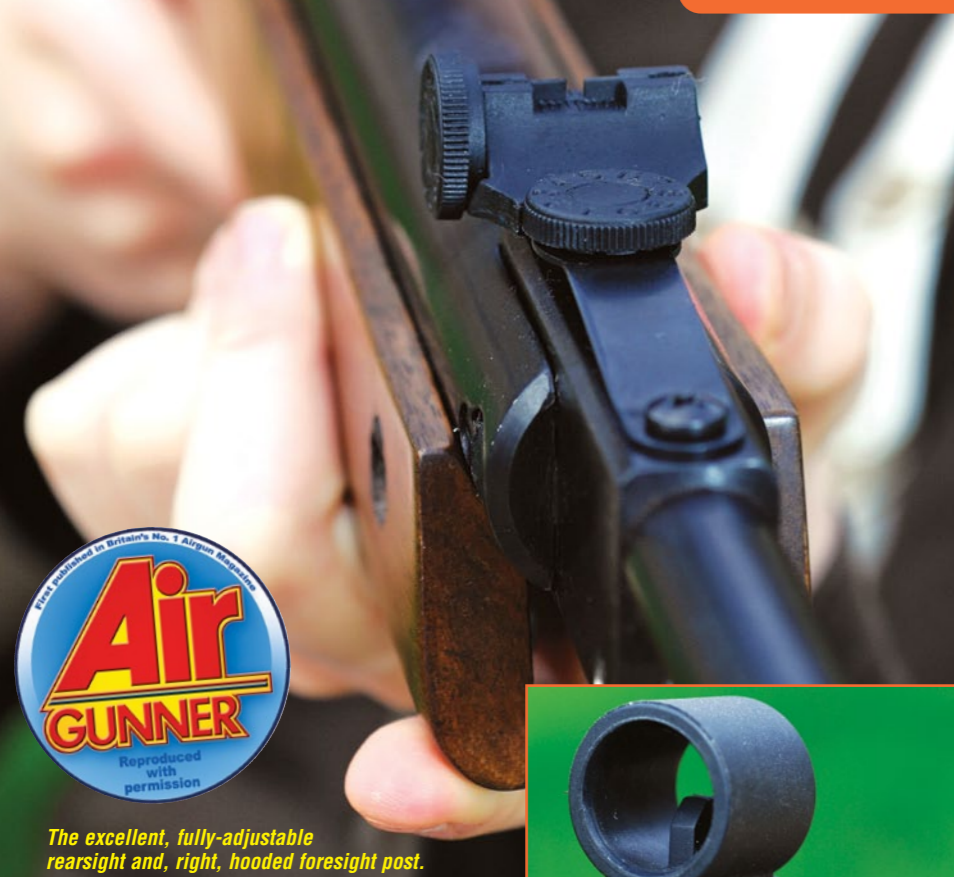
Although the trigger looks a long way forward in its guard, because it's two-stage, you have to pull it back half-way first. Then, you feel a definite stop-point which you

The SMK Super Grade Model 15 – an excellent 'first' air rifle for any teenager.

The trigger is ideal for young, rookie hands.



any 'bad habits' with this rifle. In fact, it wasn't long before he felt my scores justified a scope – and because the Model 15's receiver has grooves, he bought me an SMK 4 x 28 telescopic sight as a reward for my efforts!



The excellent, fully-adjustable rearsight and, right, hooded foresight post.



The Super Grade's receiver is grooved to take a scope (above), and has an automatic, resettable safety catch (below) at the end.



At under £25, SMK's lightweight 4 x 28 is a worthy accessory for the Model 15.



I had two first impressions of the Super Grade 15. First, its quality of finish looked just liked my Dad's rifles and, second, I was worried it might be a bit small for me (I'm 1.67 metres tall). However, once I'd had a few shots, I realised my 'second' first impression was wrong – but my 'first' first impression was definitely right!

The best news of all was that because my step-Dad felt at 'ease' with its relatively low power output, I was allowed to shoot it in the garden. This meant I had lots more sessions with it than if I'd had to go down to the farm each time.

Although I whizzed through the first tin of 500 pellets, I didn't get arm ache because the Super Grade 15 is dead easy to cock – and that also meant that Dad didn't have to do it for me.

Some ammo was hard to press into the breech with my thumb, but .177 SMK Air Gun pellets went in fine. Apparently, a tight breech helps the rifle's accuracy, which I can believe

AIRGUN LAW FOR YOUNGER SHOOTERS



UK airgun laws are very strict indeed, with specific rules for younger shooters who are aged under 18 years – the VCR Act Oct 2007 has changed the law to 18 years or older for purchasing an airgun.

If you are between 14 and 17... You may not buy or hire an airgun or ammunition, nor receive either as gift, but you may borrow an airgun – and the ammunition must be bought for you by someone over 17 (ideally, by your parent).

You may use an airgun on private premises without supervision provided you have the consent of the landowner/tenant, but you will commit a criminal offence if any pellet strays beyond the boundary of the land over which you have shooting permission.

Consideration must be given when travelling to your shooting ground. You cannot carry an airgun – which must be unloaded and, preferably, be in a case – in a public place unless you are supervised by someone who is at least 21 years old. You must have a reasonable excuse for carrying an airgun in a public place – such as travelling to a shooting club, a gun shop or to land over which you have permission to shoot.

If you are under 14... Additional rules apply to shooters in this age group. Parents who buy an airgun for use by an under-14 must exercise control over it at all times, even in the home or garden.

You may not buy or hire an airgun or ammunition, nor receive either as gift, but you may borrow an airgun and use it on private premises with permission from the landowner/ tenant provided you are under the constant supervision of someone who is at least 21 years old.

You cannot carry an airgun in a public place; any airgun which you intend to shoot must be carried by the supervisor at all times.

Both you and your shooting supervisor will commit a criminal offence if any pellet strays beyond the boundary of the land over which you have shooting permission.

Notes: A public place is anywhere where the public is allowed to go – e.g. roads, streets, footpaths, public parks, play areas and canal towpaths.

Silence is definitely golden if you buy sound moderators from SMK.

Whispering class!

Silencers are one of the must-have items for airgunners – and Sportsmarketing has a high-quality range that's worth making a noise about. Nigel Allen reports...

As strange as it may seem, a silencer is seen by airgun shooters as a vital piece of equipment – which is why specialist, retro-fit silencers are as big a selling item as scopes, gun bags and pellets for many gun shops.

To the airgun hunter, in particular, muffling the muzzle report can have a profound benefit to success in the field – and although a silencer may not appear to make any difference to the gun's noise level at the shooter's end, the extra stealth it brings down-range makes it a valuable accessory. In fact, many would never entertain going hunting without some form of sound moderator fitted to their rifle.

The silencer range from SMK is comprehensive, to say the least.

Silence is golden

While some airgun silencers (which don't require proofing) can cost up to £75, one particular model is proving extremely popular with airgunners – the Danish-precision made brand.

This is distributed in the UK via Sportsmarketing, having been engineered to their own, specific brief. One reason for the popularity of SMK's precision made silencer is the breadth of its range – there are no fewer than seven models designed for all their current crop of spring and CO₂-powered rifles. A simple grub screw is all that's required to fix the push-fit silencers, and there's even an universal model – the SSMULTI is designed to push-fit on to the vast majority of barrels of air rifles currently for sale in the UK.

All the silencers are also effective on PCPs thanks to the incredibly advanced internals, which use a brilliant patented baffle system.

In fact, tests have shown they reduce the muzzle noise of SMK's CO₂-powered air rifles by 70 per cent, and show a marked reduction in the muzzle report of springpowered air rifles of up to 40 per cent.

Military expertise

This impressive sound suppression performance is hardly surprising – precision manufacturers supplies the Danish and other European militaries and SMK is clearly benefiting from the expertise the silencer's makers have gained as a result of these military contracts.

The all-metal moderators have a very rugged look about them and, even though they are beautifully engineered, Sportsmarketing has managed to keep the price down to well below that of most other silencers on the market.

Indeed, "over-engineered, under-priced" is a very good slogan for the SMK's offerings because all but one of the range retails at just £29.95! ■



Contact: Sportsmarketing
Tel: 01206 795333
Fax: 01206 792679
www.sportsmk.co.uk

Handgun HATRICK



What can £50 get the airgunner these days? A lot actually – and Nigel Allen has been trialling three SMK pistols which each return change from a £50 note!

Testing some of the most technologically advanced and, subsequently, most expensive guns on the market can be a very rewarding experience – and I appreciate just how lucky I am in my job. But don't ever think I've forgotten my airgun roots. I know most people 'get into' airgunning by starting out at the cheaper end of the scale – and I also know plenty are also happy to stay there. Indeed, many of my shooting mates regularly buy a sub-£150 airgun just because it's affordable and, nowadays, is going to represent superb value for money.

Which is why I've been keen to spend some time with these three Chinese-made, spring-powered air pistols from SMK. Amazingly, the S2, XHS3 and QS24 each cost under 50 quid, and given spring-driven pistols are what got me into airgunning all those years ago – a Gat, followed by a Diana G4, followed by a Panther Deluxe – I was looking forward to some 'grass roots' shooting enjoyment.

When it comes to entry level pistols, I believe there are two groups of people who buy them: beginners and established plinkers looking for something inexpensive to enjoy in the back-garden. I am still – and will always remain – in one of these categories.

First impressions? Well, if you let the packaging influence you, you're likely to pass these pistols over. At these prices, such lacklustre boxing is fully understandable. But it's a shame. While I, personally, know how much SMK has done to dispel the idea that low cost equals 'cheap', a lot of newcomers aren't. And it's a serious loss to them if they miss the excellent product that

lies within. Just as you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, don't judge a low-cost SMK by its packaging! Be happy in the knowledge that the majority of the production costs are clearly going on the gun itself.

And so to the guns. My eyes are drawn toward the XHS3, with its synthetic grips, as is my right hand (though it's suitable for lefties, too). It feels good in the palm, with the stippling and contours contributing to a natural hold; no faffing about trying to find the best position with this pistol.

A quick inspection reveals that there's a fully-adjustable rearsight and a grooved rail for an additional sighting aid, such as a reflex, red-dot or telly. Like the S2 model, though, there's no safety, nor anti-beartrap – so while, on the plus side, you can cock the gun by holding the barrel and 'riding' the spring, it must be stressed to beginners that fingers need to be kept well away from triggers and breech faces.

My test trio were all in .177 calibre, and the S2 and XHS3 are also available in .22 – though, unusually, this is with a smoothbore barrel as

Above: The QS24, with the second hand supporting the shooting wrist, delivers more than acceptable accuracy

Above right: Left to right, the S2, QS24 and XHS3 won't break the bank



The S2's rears are basic, but perfectly functional



The XHS3 features finger adjustable turrets for windage and elevation



As befitting the gun with the highest price, the QS24 has the best machined rears

Below: The in-trigger safety on the QS24 is a reassuring safety feature, but its position is too close to the trigger

Centre right: SMK's Spitfire pellets are the perfect complement to the three pistols on test



opposed to the .177s' rifled version. The S2 and the QS24 boast hardwood grips, with the S2 dressed in a lighter wood. There's something quite classical about the S2 – it's a utilitarian design in some ways, and in its simplicity lies its attractiveness; it's reminiscent of the old Luger.

Being the least expensive of the three, you'll find the odd flaw in the finish of the S2 – so it's worth splashing out the extra fiver on its slightly more attractive XHS3 sister. Its dark, wooden stock is complemented by a scalloped grip, as opposed to the S2's more rounded one.

The QS24 is the most expensive gun on test (if you can call £49.95 expensive!) – but it's also the most feature-heavy. An in-trigger auto-safety is a welcome feature, though be careful when using it as it's quite close to the trigger blade.

The pistols' barrels certainly lock-up positively – and while you can never say 'too positively', straight out of the box I needed to give them a hefty tap to 'break' the sprung latch that keeps their breeches shut. That's great for maintaining consistent accuracy, but a junior gunner could struggle during the 'running-in' period of around 100 shots or so, which these guns need to 'loosen up'. Word of warning to the grown-ups, too – the foresight post can make your palm quite sore, so try and grip the barrel in a way that stops it digging in to your hand.

Key to enjoying these SMKs is having realistic expectations over their accuracy – these are not 10-metre paper punchers and you'll be kidding yourself if you think you're going to stick in one-hole groups from a one-handed stance. These are pistols that are meant to be fun to shoot – so replace your paper bullseyes with tin cans... and throw in the odd matchbox when you're a bit more proficient. You'll enjoy them all the more.

And it has to be said that the higher-priced QS24 clearly knocks the XHS3 and the S2 into the runners-up slots in terms of grouping ability, partially because the latter have quite a heavy trigger pull. Actually, it's not a criticism; priced in the entry-level sector, I think it would be irresponsible of SMK to offer their pistols with more sensitive triggers on guns which may very well be used as trainers – and, as many a match shooter will tell you, there's a lot to be said for learning how to use a heavy trigger properly. I'd be lying if I said I didn't call the odd shot because I'd pulled the trigger, but if you get a firm grip – perhaps with one hand supporting the wrist of your shooting hand – trigger control becomes quite manageable.

Even though all three pistols' triggers broke consistently, the QS24 is the smoother, more accurate shooting experience. It's also the gun with the most poke, so picking off tin cans – which pierced nicely with the Spitfires that SMK supplied me – is an enjoyable way to spend any afternoon. If you like to 'push your distances', the QS24 is definitely the one to go for – its extra power, lighter trigger and nice balance certainly extend your effective range. And it was good to see that buying an affordable pistol wasn't rendered pointless with the need to match it with expensive ammo – the cost-effective Spitfires paired well with the S2 and XHS3 models, too.

I mentioned the benefit to newcomers of heavier triggers, and I'd actually comment that the S3 and the XHS3 help in the teaching of good shooting habits in other areas. To get the best out of them, you have to ensure the correct grip and trigger follow-through – all important elements one needs to become a proficient shot. I wouldn't dismiss them on any level; indeed, I'd be as happy recommending them to someone looking to get into airgunning with a long-term



view to shooting seriously as I would to someone who simply wants a fun-gun for the garden.

All three pistols have machined grooves for attaching optics, though I'm not sure I'd have much need for a telescopic sight. Think red-dot, though, and their plink factor goes up a couple of notches, for sure. But a telly's not needed – the opens are plenty good enough to do the job these pistols are designed to do, with those of the XHS3 and QS24 being finger adjustable via thumbwheels.

Despite their lowly price-tags, all three pistols really excite me. Where they truly excel is that the potential for improving your shooting is as attainable as the potential for getting maximum shooting enjoyment. You won't have to search hard on the internet and forums to find tips and tricks to maximise the performance of these SMKs, either – from simply lubing up the sears to undertaking complete overhauls, these three pistols appear to be tinkers' dream guns.

While I've been fascinated reading up on all these online postings, though, I haven't been tempted to take the pistols into the workshop myself. I don't feel the need to do so, nor has a 'mechanical' forced me to do so. As they're about shooting enjoyment, why waste time taking them apart? After all, I pay more to take me and my boy to a game of football on a Saturday than even a QS24 costs – and we've had hours more fun for our money plinking away in the backyard with that. Plus, come 5 o'clock, it's never all over, either! ●



Top centre: Be careful when cocking the QS24 as the foresight post can cause discomfort

Top right: It's hard not to be reminded of a Luger when holding the S2

Above: The XHS3's contoured grip promotes a positive hold

Below: Don't expect Olympic accuracy from a one-hand hold – expect lots of fun!



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS			
MODEL	S2	XHS3	QS24
MADE IN	China		
CALIBRE	.177(tested), .22	.177(tested), .22	.177
SIGHTS	Fixed front, adjustable rear		
LENGTH	335mm	343mm	367mm
WEIGHT	1.08kg	1kg	1.26kg
SAFETY	None	None	In-trigger, resettable
ACTION	Break-barrel		
SRP	£29.95	£34.95	£49.95
DISTRIBUTOR	Sportsmarketing, 01206 795333, www.sportsmk.co.uk		

Cheesy PIGEON burgers

RECIPE: WOODY BURGERS



Late summer usually brings a glut of woodpigeons that have grown fat on the season's cereal crops – and a desperate urge to squeeze in a few last *al fresco* meals before autumn closes in. **Mat Manning** has a tasty recipe that perfectly combines both...



Pigeon meat is strong and flavoursome, and can be treated in much the same way as beef – which means it makes for a mighty fine burger! This summer, I've been doing a heck of a lot of pigeon shooting and because it's featured frequently on our table, I've experimented with new recipes to stop the family from becoming totally 'pigeoned-out'.

This recipe gives the good old pigeon burger a tasty twist, by adding a chunk of cheese before cooking. Bite into these meaty treats, and you get the added flavour of hot, melted cheese oozing from the burger. If you're a big fan of stinky cheese, the addition of Danish Blue or Stilton certainly gives pigeon burgers extra bite – but it works pretty well with Cheddar if you prefer. ●

INGREDIENTS (makes six burgers)

- Breast meat from four woodpigeon
- 225g sausage meat
- 2 medium onions
- 1 egg
- 2 cloves of garlic
- Cheese (one good chunk for each burger)
- A handful of chopped fresh herbs (or 1tsp of dried herbs)
- Packet of breadcrumbs (in case your mixture needs stiffening)
- Salt and pepper
- A handful of plain flour for the work surface

METHOD

Mince the pigeon breasts or blitz them in a food processor – not too fine as it's best to keep the meat chunky [1]. Then dice the onions very finely and place in a large bowl with the minced pigeon, sausage meat, onion, chopped herbs and crushed garlic [2].

Pigeon meat is very lean, so the pork fat in the sausage meat will make your burgers moist and succulent – and an egg will help bind them. So break one into a jug and beat it with a fork, finally adding it to a large bowl with the other ingredients. Give the mix a good grind of salt and pepper.

Now thoroughly work this sticky mixture with your hands [3], adding some breadcrumbs to stiffen it if it feels too moist to mould – and when all the ingredients are evenly combined, split into six portions and shape into balls [4].

Cut the cheese into chunks, roughly 2x3cm [5], pushing one into the centre of each meatball [6]. Then scatter the work surface with flour (to stop the mixture from sticking) – giving your hands a good dusting, too – and seal the cheese inside before patting into burger shapes. Aim to make them about 3cm thick [7].

Your burgers are now ready to cook – either by grilling or shallow frying for about five minutes on each side, until the outside is brown and crispy. Serve in either a bap or with chunky chips and peas. Scrum...



Shooting in the BLACK

AMMO TEST: SMK BLACK

A brand new range of pellets that's already selling in its millions, despite only being launched a few months ago! **Nigel Allen** takes a closer look to see what all the fuss is about...



Above: The new Black range from SMK comes in three configurations in both .177 and .22: Pointed, Flat and Domed

When the distributor of a new pellet claims they've sold over 2.5 million of them in the first four weeks on sale, you can't help but want to give them a go – so over the past month or so, I've been busy shooting all three configurations of SMK's new Black range of ammo. Designated BS45 in .177 calibre, and BS55 in .22, there are three types – Domed, dubbed the all-rounder; Flat, a wadcutter for CO2 and target work; Pointed, for hunting. They look extremely well-made, yet are very reasonably priced, with tins of 250 costing just £2.99 for the BS45s (black tin lids), and £3.99 for the BS55s (orange tin lids).

The USP of the Black range, its unique selling point and the reason behind the name, is the fact that the pellets are manufactured with the inclusion of graphite, the metamorphosed mineral that's used for the lead in writing pencils. Don't confuse the mineral with the chemical element of metallic lead, though – they're two completely different things!

So you may be wondering why SMK should want to specially develop a lead airgun pellet with a helping of graphite in its mix – and the answer's easy, if not a little obvious. For a number of complex scientific reasons, graphite powders have long been valued in industrial applications for their dry, self-lubricating properties, so it makes absolute sense to incorporate them into airgun pellets in an effort to reduce the friction between the projectile and barrel.

Less friction in the barrel translates to more power and I must say that in both springers and PCPs, the BS45 and BS55 Black ranges often returned above-average muzzle energies in all but a handful of rifles I tested them in over my Skan chrono. Typically, I'd see increases of between 0.2 and 0.6ft/lb compared to other brands of a similar

Average weight in grains	
14.91	8.21
14.94	8.22
14.95	8.22
14.90	8.24
14.95	8.24

	BS45 DOMED	BS55 DOMED
HEAD	0.175" / 4.5mm	0.216" / 5.49mm
SKIRT	0.184" / 4.67mm	0.226" / 5.74mm

weight. Shot-to-shot consistency was also good, which is always something I look for in any pellet.

Sportsmarketing claim that the inclusion of graphite improves other properties of the Black pellets; essentially it hardens them up. This not only means that the pellets are less likely to deform in transit, and so maintain a good fit and seal when loaded into the breech, but the extra hardness factor also improves the penetration qualities as the pellet doesn't deform so easily on impact with the target. There are two schools of thinking here: some hunters prefer a softer lead pellet for the very fact that it so easily deforms on impact with the quarry to dissipate maximum 'shock', while others – particularly those who favour heart/lung shots – would pick the extra penetration qualities that a harder pellet offers.

While I've still got loads more testing to do with the entire range, I've concentrated my main efforts on the Black Domed roundhead – after all, it's probably going to be the type that sells the most.

On the scales, the Black Domed is extremely consistent in both calibres. I weighed five, random samples of 10 pellets, and you can see from *Table 1* that there was hardly any deviation in the pellets' average weight. At around 8.2 grains, the BS45 all-rounder is pretty much your typical .177 weight, although the BS55 (at 14.9 grains) is a few tenths heavier than a typical .22; I always think of 8.3 and 14.5 grains as being 'normal' for .177 and .22, respectively.

SMK's claim that harder pellets get less deformed in the tin is certainly true. Using a micrometer, I individually measured the heads and skirts of a few dozen pellets, again picked out at random, and the readings were extremely consistent, with no pellets showing 'crimped' skirts or 'flatted' head bands, although I'm sure that the protective foam insert in the tin lid also contributes to this.

The exact dimensions are shown in *Table 2* and you can see that both the BS45 and BS55 have undersize heads, with the skirt of each being over bore size. This will be another reason that accounts for their slightly



Below left and inset: A micrometer was used to measure head and skirt size to exacting tolerances

Left: Typical target cards shot at 45m with an Air Arms MPR-FT with the .177 Blacks (left), and at 30m with a tuned SMK XS19 Supergrade (right)



more efficient muzzle energy readouts over the chrono – their heads do not drag in the bore, while the skirts create a very tight air seal.

Of course, all these stats may look good on paper in the lab, but it's the paper out on the range that really matters – so I was keen to see how the dark grey-coloured Domed all-rounders performed in terms of group size. Like any pellet, Blacks performed better in some guns than in others, but generally speaking, there was no particular rifle that sprayed them all over the place.

As far as the PCPs were concerned, the best results in .177 were obtained from a Lothar Walther-barrelled Air Arms MPR-FT, which was able to print 35mm groups at 45 metres in calm conditions. The best .22 springer was my tuned-up XS19 Supergrade, which printed similar-sized groups at 30 metres, although most of the .22 springers in which I tested the pellets gave pretty comparable results. Typical targets at these distances are shown above, and although I haven't yet done an in-depth study of the trajectory lines, early indications would suggest that the BS45 and BS55 Domed follow standard flightpaths; I'd therefore recommend zeroing at 25 yards with the .22s, and 30 yards with the .177s as a starting point.

To see how the harder make-up of these Blacks fared in terms of penetration, I undertook an unscientific experiment of shooting them into blocks of modelling clay at close-range, comparing their results with those of some similarly weighted roundheads I had in the darkest depths of my ammo store – specifically AGS Elite PPA in .177 (8.2 grains) and Milbro TR in .22 (14.65 grains). The results can be seen to the right.

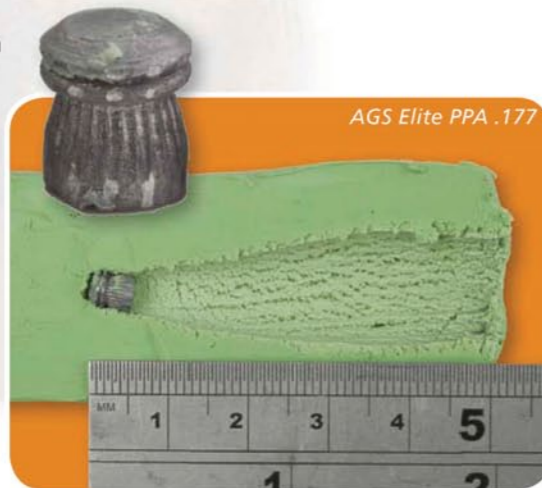
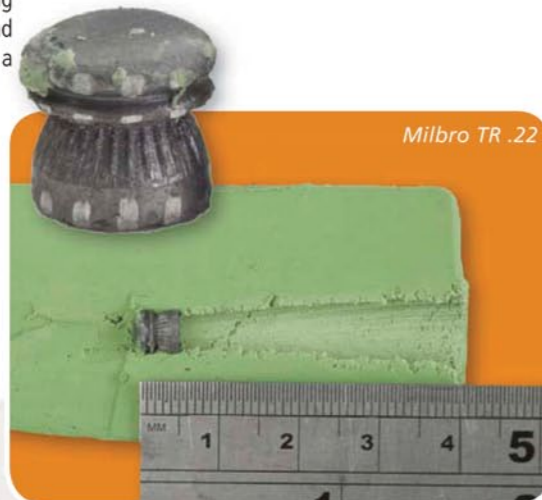
In both calibres, the muzzle energy of the test rifle was slightly more in the case of the Black ammo, but I deliberately didn't try to find comparison pellets that matched power levels – after all, I see the improved performance of the graphite-based SMK ammo as being one of its key attributes.

Finally, I should touch on one area which initially

concerned me – namely the condition of the bore after shooting the SMK Blacks. I had wondered if the graphite would cause the rifling to 'lead up' – or perhaps 'graphite-up' – more than might be the case with conventional lead pellets.

On cleaning the barrel of my main test rifle after shooting a full tin's worth of pellets – 250 – the pull-through swab was certainly more black (by virtue of the graphite particles), but at no point had I detected any drop-off in downrange accuracy due to excessive fouling in the rifling.

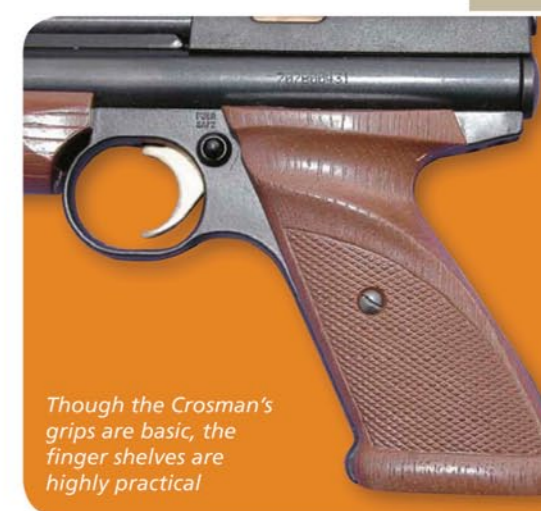
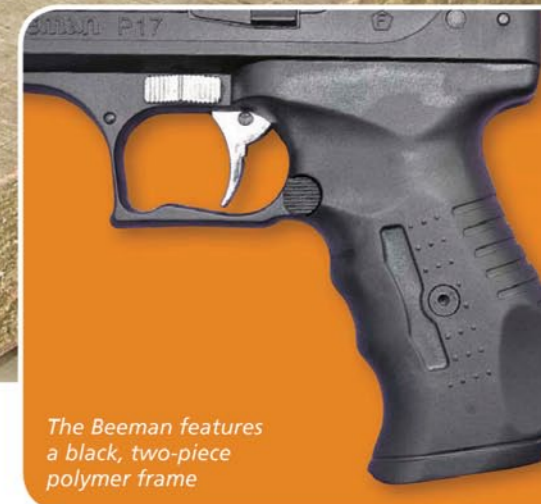
I've since shot many more rounds through one of my 'guinea pig' rifles without cleaning the bore, and can report that I've yet to notice any fall-off in accuracy. I'm sure I'll have to clean it at some point, but that's no problem; it's something I have to do after shooting conventional lead rounds for any length of time. And, at any rate, if the barrel's being lined with a graphite deposit that's going to improve the friction properties between barrel and projectile, I'm not really worried if my barrel is looking a little dirtier than normal! ●



HEAD *to* HEAD!

1377
V
P17

Old school versus modern-day. Mark Camoccio gives his verdict on two quite different pistol models that each have something extra to offer...



Describing an air pistol as 'general purpose' carries some potentially negative connotations. It risks making the product sound ordinary or unspectacular – cheap and cheerful. However, the entry-level pneumatic models I have on test here offer more than their price might suggest, and they both represent unbeatable value for money in an already crowded sector.

Many pistols at the affordable end of the market cut corners on quality; the old adage 'you get what you pay for' holds true. But what sets both my test models apart here is that, despite being bargains, they offer a generous dose of real accuracy potential, encouraging both the novice and experienced shot alike.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Dubbed the American Classic, Crosman's Model 1377 has been with us in a similar guise since I was a schoolboy, but it's by no means outdated. Indeed, the characteristic ultra-long sight base

and front pump handle still cut a distinctive profile, every bit as impressive as when the pistol was first introduced several decades ago.

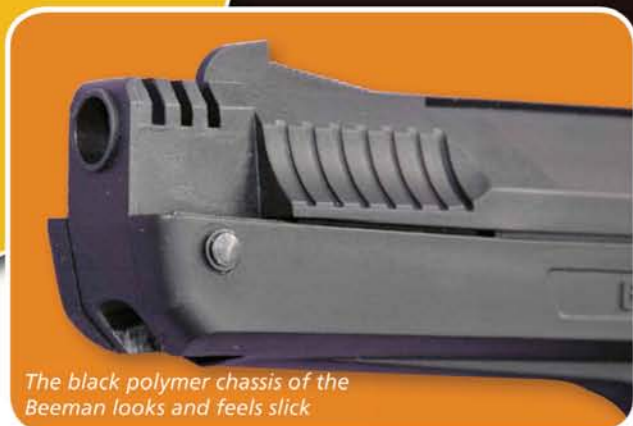
By contrast, the Beeman – which was introduced to the UK as the 2004E, but is now known as the Model P17 – looks rather more subtle and sophisticated, complete with its modern polymer black chassis and crisply moulded features. With the look and feel of a contemporary firearm, the macho image of the Beeman should appeal to those who want their air pistols to look like, well... pistols!

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆☆

Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆☆

GETTING TO GRIPS

The two-part grips of the Crosman are fairly gruesome, looking slightly crude and plasticky. That said, their ambidextrous configuration affords a supportive grip thanks to the deep finger shelf on each side. The forend section acts as the pump handle and is comfortable



The black polymer chassis of the Beeman looks and feels slick



The 1377's main cylinder has a sturdy feel – even if those plastic components don't



Just one pump of the Beeman's overlever system generates adequate power



The Crosman requires roughly four pumps for general use

enough in use, but a pistol of this quality deserves far better grips in my opinion.

The Beeman's two-piece black polymer frame has a smart, slick feel about it, and also offers ambidextrous styling. What it lacks in the absence of sweeping finger shelves, it more than makes up for in palm-filling elegance. Its detailed appearance and finger grooves result in a very assured feel once in your palms.

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆☆☆

Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆☆☆

OPEN SIGHTS

Both pistols come fitted with good old-fashioned open sights – but only the Beeman offers the option for telescopic sight or red dot use via its generous dovetail section.

For me, the Crosman should score highly thanks to its extremely long sight base – but I have to knock points off the test model, because despite lowering the sight all the way, it still shot high – even at 20 yards! Adjusting its sight is also fairly basic – the base itself is shifted from side to side once a

screw is slackened; I'd much prefer a sprung leaf mechanism. The option of a peep sight element is offered, though I'm not sure this is altogether practical on an air pistol.

By contrast, even though its windage and elevation adjustments require a screwdriver, the Beeman sports an altogether better rearsight set-up.

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆☆☆

Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆☆☆

OVERALL BUILD QUALITY

Although the 1377 is one of my all-time favourite air pistols, irrespective of price, its build quality is typical of Crosman – it uses several, cheaply-made and fairly basic components. Take a moment to remind yourself of the asking price, though and it's surely churlish to expect much better? Sturdy parts are used where it matters, with the pump leverage arm, barrel and main cylinder all adding to a solid feel.

By virtue of the grips alone, the P17 feels much the superior pistol. Nonetheless, for me, its slightly garish silver components, such as the trigger, hammer and safety catch, take something away from its quality air.

Overall though, both pistols are sufficiently weighty and well-styled to impress beyond their price bracket.

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆☆☆

Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆☆☆

PUMPING EFFORT

Both pistols are recoilless pneumatics, and though each takes a different approach to compressing the air, they're certainly worth the effort.

Crosman goes for the multi-pump approach. Firstly, the forend pump handle is pulled right down to its full reach, sucking in air, and then pushed all the way home to compress the air. The pressure – and effort – increases with each additional stroke. Ten pumps are permissible, which returns near legal-limit power, though I'd recommend four pumps for general use – a happy medium between performance and cocking effort.

The Beeman requires just a single stroke of its overlever cocking action – which returns only around 30fps less than the Crosman when primed with four pumps. Again, the air is compressed on the return stroke, and because that single pump is so effective, it takes more effort than one stroke of the Crosman's pump handle. You also need to take care not to catch your hand inside the action as it snaps shut at the end of the stroke – but that equally applies to the Crosman, too.

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆☆☆

Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆☆☆



Above: The trigger blade on the Crosman is fairly narrow

Left: Though there is some creep from the Beeman's trigger, it's a competent performer

ACCURACY & CONSISTENCY

For the test period, I fired both .177 calibre pistols over 10 and 20 yards from a rest – and I was mightily impressed all round! At 10 yards, with match-style H&N Top Shot pellets, the Crosman posted 10mm groups and the Beeman printed 16mm clusters.

Over the longer distance, I had still posted some stunning results from the Crosman, although the groups opened slightly due to its heavier trigger. Even so, 20mm groups were the norm – and the Beeman also excelled, typically with a 22mm c-to-c performance.

Bearing in mind I was using the pistols' open sights, you have to concede that both the Crosman and Beeman punch way above their weight in terms of asking price. But that's not all – both guns returned superb shot-to-shot consistency over the chrono, with 10-shot strings rarely deviating more than around 10fps.

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆☆☆

Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆☆☆

TRIGGER

While triggers are my obsession, I always consider a particular gun's prospective market in my assessments. The Crosman and the Beeman come well-equipped in this department, offering trigger mechanisms superior in operation to any of the equivalent entry level spring-powered models available.

Some creep is evident every now and then on the 1377's trigger, and its rather narrow blade is slightly irritating – but overall, I find it hard to criticise for a pistol at this price-point.

The Beeman boasts a slightly lighter pull and a much broader trigger blade, which is a definite advantage – and even though the unit on my test gun possessed a fair amount of creep, it wasn't difficult to adapt to it and develop a consistent technique that returned a wholly acceptable end-result at the target.

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆☆☆

Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆☆☆



Both pistols posted tight groups at 10 and 20 yards



The cocking bolt on the Crosman is easy to operate



HANDLING

On the range, the Crosman is the more muzzle heavy and so sits nicely on the target. Factor in those ergonomic grips and this American Classic begins to shine where it matters. The relative ease of pumping, coupled with a nicely weighted cocking bolt, means the Crosman is fairly user-friendly overall. While on the subject of the bolt area, I would recommend seating the pellet into the breech mouth only once the cocking bolt is withdrawn, as pellets have room in the channel to sit off-centre when the bolt picks them up to feed them into the breech.

No such vagaries with the Beeman, though, as the up-and-over design just needs a pellet to be fed directly into the barrel lip before the top chassis is closed on the compression stroke. The centre of balance is more central with this pistol, yet it just feels spot-on.

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆
Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆

VERSATILITY

This category is where the Crosman really shines. In theory, 10 pumps give full power,

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS		
MODEL	1377 American Classic	Beeman P17
MANUFACTURER	Crosman	Beeman
IMPORTER	ASI	Sportsmarketing
TYPE	Multi-pump pneumatic pistol	Single-stroke pneumatic
CALIBRE	.177 (4.5mm)	.177 (4.5mm)
WEIGHT	900g	820g
OVERALL LENGTH	345mm	235mm
BARREL LENGTH	254mm	170mm
SIGHTS	Opens, fully-adjustable	Opens, fully-adjustable
TRIGGER	Single-stage	Two-stage
SAFETY	Manual, resettable	Automatic, resettable
GRIPS	Two-part plastic	Synthetic
VELOCITY	550fps (10 pumps); 417fps (four pumps)	378fps
PRICE	£95	£69.95
CONTACT	ASI www.a-s-i.co.uk 01728 688555	SMK www.sportsmk.co.uk 01206 795333

but fewer will be sufficient for informal target shooting. Four pumps generate roughly 3ft/lb – with excellent shot consistency – while the full output equates to around 5.5ft/lb, giving the beefy Crosman further strings to its bow.

While the Beeman lacks the vari-power facility, its power output of around 2.5ft/lb is more than adequate for what most pistol shooters require – and well over 350fps with standard-weight .177 pellets.

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆
Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆

VALUE FOR MONEY

Bear in mind the inherently clever design features that both the Crosman 1377 and Beeman P17 carry, and this pistol pair knocks most of the similarly priced opposition into a cocked hat. We are talking about two extremely well-priced pistols, offering near recoilless performance in well-presented formats... carrying sub-£100 price tags. How can I not highly recommend either?

Each will reward you with genuine accuracy providing you do your bit, which is more than can be said for your typical spring-piston handgun. Their combination of performance, design features, and all round engaging appeal, really takes some beating – so top marks for both in this category!

Crosman 1377 ★★★★★☆
Beeman P17 ★★★★★☆



Crosman 1377 70/ 100
Beeman P17 78/ 100

Although points-wise I favoured the highly capable Beeman across the 10 categories it was tested in, I still have a lot of admiration for the classic Crosman. Both pistols are highly accurate and exceptionally consistent, yet the Crosman offers rugged styling which deservedly stands the test of time. Ultra-fast action times are synonymous with these types of pneumatic, due to the valving and air expansion characteristics, yet the Beeman arguably feels that bit slicker and crisper in its air delivery. At the end of the day, while there is a clear winner, neither pistol disappointed me.

Insets above: Release the P17's dummy hammer in order to load directly into the breech



YOUNG GUN



Teenager TOBY ALLEN cuts his teeth on the SMK SYNTARG break-barrel

When Toby Allen saw Sportsmarketing's new line-up of air rifles his famous airgunning father was testing, he made a bee-line for one model in particular – the SYNTARG. And as this teenager hadn't expressed an interest in shooting before, the fact that the SYNTARG's unique styling had caught his eye was enough to convince Dad that another member of the Allen family had just been bitten by the airgun bug.

"It takes something special to draw Toby away from his Playstation," joked Toby's father, Nigel, "and the SYNTARG is certainly something special. It even caught my eye – and as I see a dozen different airguns each month, that's no mean feat!"

Aimed primarily at the youth market, this fantastic break-barrel is a new breed of airgun – so with young Toby eager to try his hand at airgunning for the first time, Nigel unlocked his gun safe so Dad 'n' lad could go to the farm for a session with SMK's all-new SYNTARG...

FACTS - SYNTARG

- Action:** Break-barrel
- Calibre:** .177 & .22
- Length:** 100.5cm
- Barrel Length:** 42cm
- Weight:** 2kg
- Trigger:** Single-stage
- Safety:** Automatic
- Stock:** Synthetic
- Sights:** Fibre optic, adjustable
- Price:** £99.95

I don't think I'm ever going to forget my first ever airgun shoot. Not just because I had such a great time, but because the SYNTARG is the most awesome thing I've ever used. The 'real thing' is so much better than the 'shooting' I've been doing on my computer games.

Obviously, Dad was supervising me at all times and he kept on about how good the SMK was as a 'first gun'. The number of times he went on about 'this and that', I reckon he was thinking it would make a good 'second gun' for him!

I don't know much technical stuff about airguns at the moment, but you can tell from the look of the SYNTARG that's it's very much an up-to-date air rifle. To me, it looks quite big – but I didn't find it difficult to handle at all. Dad didn't find it 'too small', either and we decided that it was a good, all-round 'family gun'.

Because the stock is made from a tough synthetic, the gun's very light, and the butt has been 'skeletonised' to shave off even more weight. This makes it very easy for someone of my size to handle. I felt the gun was a bit front heavy – but Dad told me that's how you want a rifle to balance as it helps keep the barrel locked onto target.

Although its power isn't 12 ft. lbs., the .22 model we shot certainly sent tin

cans spinning for miles when you hit them right and I know Dad has since used the SYNTARG with great success on a few of the rats we saw scurrying around the farmyard during our plinking session.

The rifle is equipped with open sights that Dad said were 'much better' than what he learned to shoot with. The front sight is protected with a ventilated 'hood' and you can adjust the rearsight for up/down and left/right movement by the two click-wheels. It didn't take long to get the gun zeroed-in at 6 metres and before long I was able to score good results on paper targets.

What made aiming really easy for me

"I must have impressed Dad – he put a scope on for me!"



was the sights' fibre-optics. The back sight has two green dots, and you line up the front red fibre-optic bead between them. Because they catch the light, the dots glow, making it easy to take aim. Fibre-optics are the latest fashion in airgun sights and I can see why.

I was worried that, being quite powerful, the .22 rifle might kick hard in my shoulder. But it doesn't move much and it certainly didn't hurt me even though I was only shooting in a T-shirt.

Although I had to stretch for the trigger blade, it actually fires much



SMK 4 x 28 TELLY

WITH SUCH GREAT handling, it won't be long before any owner takes full advantage of the SYNTARG's dovetail/arrestor system and fits a scope – and SMK's compact 4 x 28 telly makes for a perfect combo.

Costing just £2 more than the black model, £26.95 silver version we chose comes with mounts and see-through dust covers. Fitted in seconds and easily zeroed courtesy of its coin-adjustable turrets, the eye-piece focuses the thick-to-thin cross-hair down to close range – and the scope has a long eye-relief so that there's no chance of bruised eyebrows. Its 4x magnification is perfect for a youngster – and Dad found the 28mm front lens ideal for ridding in low light, too.

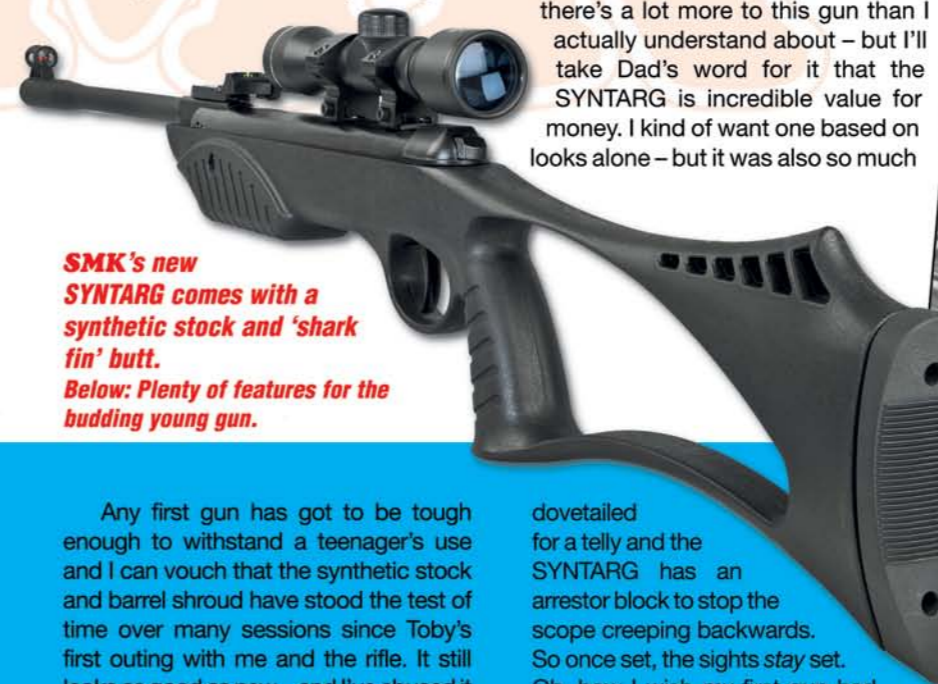
further back. This is why I hardly ever pulled a shot off to one side. Once the sights had been set, I was pretty good at hitting the bullseye area and, even, was able to pick an exact mark on the tin cans Dad put up for me.

I must have impressed Dad because he put on a telescopic sight for me to try. You need to hold your head up a bit more to see the cross-hair, but the SYNTARG's very cool looking 'shark fin' cheek-piece made this easy enough.

Although the telly's 4x magnification made it seem like I was 'wobbling' more, the SYNTARG's excellent balance actually let me extend my range to 15 metres. At that distance, the tin can was a tiny target to look at by eye, but came very close in the scope, and my shooting got better the more I used it. As much as I loved the fibre-optic open sights, I'd want to shoot this gun with a telly.

Because I'm new to airgunning, there's a lot more to this gun than I actually understand about – but I'll take Dad's word for it that the SYNTARG is incredible value for money. I kind of want one based on looks alone – but it was also so much

fun to shoot that I'll definitely be swapping a few hours' gaming every week for a bit fun-gunning with Dad around the farm from now on.



SMK's new SYNTARG comes with a synthetic stock and 'shark fin' butt.
Below: Plenty of features for the budding young gun.



Bullseye! That's this teenager's verdict.

AND WHAT DAD THINKS OF THE SMK SYNTARG

Toby clearly knew something was special when he singled out this rifle from the pack. At £99.95, it's the sort of price any parent can afford and having spent many pleasurable hours shooting alongside my boy without a TV screen in sight, I can tell you it's the best expense I've laid out on for a long while. (The SYNTARG now resides in my gun safe as I ended up buying the rifle!)

Value-wise, it's money very well spent. Besides looking really neat – even to an adult's eye – the SMK SYNTARG sports a standard of engineering that's quite remarkable. It's stacked with features you have no right to expect on a rifle in this price bracket.

Any first gun has got to be tough enough to withstand a teenager's use and I can vouch that the synthetic stock and barrel shroud have stood the test of time over many sessions since Toby's first outing with me and the rifle. It still looks as good as new... and I've abused it on a fair few ridding sessions, too.

The fibre-optic sights are the perfect system to train a young shooter's eye and, once mastered, there's scope – literally – to develop him. The receiver's

dovetailed for a telly and the SYNTARG has an arrestor block to stop the scope creeping backwards. So once set, the sights stay set. Oh, how I wish my first gun had had this feature!

The gun's very accurate because the barrel pivots around a bolt (not a pin, which can wear loose in time) and the stock shape is perfect for novice hands.

There's a swelled fore-end, a sensible pull length, and the pistol grip is positioned nicely for the trigger's break point where younger fingers are concerned. There's also an automatic safety catch which can be re-set if it needs to be.

All in all, a great mid-size rifle.



Main Photo: Toby Allen, loving every minute with the new SMK SYNTARG.
Inset: Adjusting the fibre-optic rearsight.
Top of page: It's easy enough to cock.



Simples!



The SMKS3 pistol balances well

Mark Camoccio tries the spring powered SMKS3 – one of the most uncomplicated air pistols money can buy

We all remember how we got into airguns; and I for one, began my shooting career with none other than the good old Harrington Gat. This inexpensive classic pop-out pistol has put a smile on many a school boys face over the years, and for that reason alone, deserves recognition. I was over the moon with my second hand purchase for 50p many moons ago, and it serves as a reminder that beginners 'starter kit' has an important part to play in encouraging the next generation.

Under the spotlight here is the SMKS3 pistol from Sportsmarketing (SMK), and it's a spring /piston powered break barrel model, aimed fairly and squarely at the lower end of the market. SMK kindly sent over two versions of the pistol, one in .177 and the other in .22.

Take a break

Power is of little consequence with this type of beginners pistol, but for the record, it produces around 1.5ft/lbs of muzzle energy. These pistols come fitted with stippled, high impact ABS resin grips, which I have to say, are not only very precisely moulded, but extremely comfortably in the aim.

A good start then, and despite a fairly short 7inch barrel, more good news comes with the fact that the SMKS3 is fairly easy to cock. As with any break barrel springer, just snap the barrel down, chamber a pellet, snap the barrel back up, and away you go.

The barrel lock-up is nice and solid incidentally, and there's even an adjustable breech nut, which is not a feature you would expect on such an inexpensive product.

Given the low power output, it does pay to select pellets that aren't a tight fit in the breech, and I used Marksman pellets in .22 calibre, and Edgar Brothers pellets in the .177, which seemed fine.

Fibre optic sights

Open sights come as standard here, and they're even of the fully adjustable fibre optic variety, whereby brightly coloured filaments create the rearsight notch, and fore-sight post. The image is a fluorescent pink dot sitting within two green dots, and in practise, it looks good, managing to stay bright in dim conditions. For the more adventurous, scope rails are cut into the receiver too.

Having had two identical models sent through, bar the calibre difference, gave me the opportunity for a comparison,



Fibre optics add to a good sight picture

yet in my experience, this grade of equipment can vary quite a lot from one example to the next. A good example was the trigger, being slightly lighter on one than the other. The trigger is rather crude, which is a shame, since the blade is nicely shaped, sporting a pleasantly wide, flat surface. Yet the mechanism really does take some tugging before releasing, which is less than conducive to precise grouping. That said, and with a gloved trigger hand, I managed some surprisingly good groups with the .22 version (1 inch groups at 10yds!),

whilst the .177 was nearer 2.5inches at the same distance.

Conclusions

Interestingly, the SMK catalogue lists the .22 as a smoothbore, and the .177 rifled, yet both my test candidates clearly had rifled barrels, with the .22, as I say, proving the point and shooting particularly well.

When all's said and done, to expect too much from these pistols is to miss the point, and at this price bracket, whilst a slightly lighter trigger would be nice, they represent a lot of fun for the money. **GM**

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Model	SMKS3
Type	Spring powered break barrel pistol
Calibre	.22 and .177 tested
Weight	2.2lbs
Overall length	13.75inches
Barrel length	7inches
Grips	Synthetic composite
Trigger	Single stage non-adjustable
Velocity	293fps on test using .177 Edgar Brothers pellets (approx 1.4ft/lbs)
RRP	£34.95
Contact	Sportsmarketing Ltd Tel 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk



Cocking the action is fairly easy



The rear sights are adjustable

THUNDERSTRUCK!



At 12ft/lb they leave your muzzle at over 1,000fps – so is the new, super-light .177 ThUnderBOLT pellet going to do for airgun hunting what .17 HMR did for the rimfire boys? We asked professional pest controller, Peter Meek, for his verdict



Above: .177 convert – Peter's now re-introduced the round into his pro armoury

Below: Through the chronoscope, the U-Bolts registered speeds over 1,000fps

As someone whose livelihood relies on his airgun in a professional capacity, I've been eagerly awaiting the .177 calibre version of the new ThUnderBOLT – or U-Bolt as it's become affectionately known. On the face of it, it could be a revolutionary new round for airgun hunting.

Distributed by Sportsmarketing, they've been designed and are made in England by award-winning pellet manufacturers, Prometheus – and being made from zinc rather than lead, they're much lighter than conventional .177 ammo, tipping the scales at a mind-boggling five grains.

Now, I will admit from the outset that I'm no real fan of the smaller calibre when it comes to hunting, opting for the slower, but harder-hitting, .22 – my preference being Crosman Premier. That said, just why I don't shoot .177 more is a bit of a mystery to me; I used to shoot .177 all the time when I first started airgunning. So, with their faster

velocity and flatter trajectory, you'd think I'd have given them more respect in later years.

So, with this in mind, I accepted the editor's request for me to trial these new pellets, with special thanks to Sportsmarketing who kindly loaned me an SMK XS208 Deluxe Sporter test rig in .177. I use a springer 60 per cent of the time in my business and the

U-Bolts were originally conceived with such rifles in mind. Their flared skirt sits very nicely in the breech, thereby creating a good air seal for maximum velocity.

As with most SMK rifles, my gun has an unchoked barrel – so I knew I'd get a true idea of how these pellets perform under 'real world' scenarios. Okay, the test rifle was brand new and I didn't need to clean its bore – but I would recommend that when you try U-Bolts yourself, you scrub the rifling well to remove all lead deposits first. This is essential.

RANGE TESTING

My test ranges were set at 15, 25 and 35 metres – roughly the ranges most sub-12ft/lb shooters hunt over. At the extreme, the U-Bolts put in noticeably tighter groups than the Premiers. Often, these measured sub-half-inch. One interesting point was that at 30 metres, the 10.5-grain Crosmans were hitting the target around 3mm lower than the 5-grain U-Bolts, clearly indicating the U-Bolts have a

I'm a real fan of spring-powered airguns, plus I have a penchant for models with a finish and spec-chart fit for a connoisseur. So that makes the new SMK TH208 Thumbhole Sporter an air rifle that's right up my street!

The flagship of the Sportsmarketing's new break-barrel 208 Series – which also includes a standard sporter, and models with skeletal woodwork and a synthetic sporter stock – the £199.95 'TH' version comes dressed in the finest thumbhole livery I've seen on a rifle for a long time, and the reason why this 208 model sits at the very top of the pile.

It's 'maxed out' in every department – power, accuracy, handling and finish – making it a particularly suitable choice if you're serious about your airgunning. I am, of course, and I'd happily make room for the TH208 in my gun cabinet.

Over the chrono, my test rifle spat out SMK Spitfires at bang on the legal power limit. And despite its fair old poke, I found the TH208's 48cm rifled barrel pretty easy to cock. Even on the longest of practice sessions, my arm didn't ache at all.

SMK's new rifle is well engineered from butt to muzzle, but I was particularly impressed with the breech

lock-up area which, on a break-barrel, is all important. A heavily sprung ball keeps the breech faces tightly closed, whilst not making the gun too difficult to 'break' when cocking – and there's also a sturdy axis bolt which you can tighten up down the years should the barrel start to get sloppy through constant breaking.

Like all spring-and-piston powered air rifles, the TH208 recoils, but it's very manageable and SMK have added plenty of features to make it so. At one end is a neat looking, blued steel barrel weight and at the other is a ventilated recoil pad to absorb any movement in your shoulder. (The latter also doubles as a handy ammo store – just push some pellets into the holes!)

The muzzle weight brings a forward bias to the TH208, but as there are no open sights, this evens out once you fit



The new SMK TH208 Thumbhole Sporter – a stunning break-barrel and worthy flagship of SMK's new 208 Series.

FACTS - TH208

Action: Break-barrel
Calibre: .22
Length: 114.5cm
Barrel Length: 48cm
Weight: 3.81g
Trigger: Two-stage, adjustable
Safety: Automatic, resettable
Stock: Thumbhole beech
Sights: Adjustable fibre-optic opens
Power: 12 ft/lbs
Price: £199.95

and hunters will be pleased to know that the barrel can be de-cocked to relieve pressure on the mainspring.

On paper, the TH208/3-9 x 50 combo was pretty devastating, with sub-inch groups easily 'do-able' out to 30 yards – but the rifle didn't need ring targets to prove its worth in the field.

"I'd happily make room for the TH208 in my gun cabinet"

by dampening barrel flip during the shot, the end weight improves accuracy so much that I was very comfortable shooting the TH208 at the limits of my normal hunting ranges.

Finished in a rich brown that shows up the superb grain of the beech below it, the thumbhole grip of the TH208's beautiful stock gives you full control of the trigger. What's more, it's been cleverly designed to be ambidextrous, so you can shoot from either shoulder and make full use of the raised Monte Carlo cheek-piece which has been profiled both sides of the butt.

The fore-stock is gently rounded underneath to offer a good hold, and to bring you every conceivable field advantage, it's been extended right to the front of the breech block and sports a neatly-cut chequering panel on each side.

The trigger blade has a gentle curve, exactly how I like my triggers to feel on a sporting rifle. It's two-stage and



Above: The TH208's receiver is grooved for a telly and features an arrester plate at the end.



The extended fore-end looks neat and offers some serious practical advantages in the field.

adjustable for length of first stage and pull weight, although I left mine at its factory setting.

The rifle has an automatic safety catch which pops out at the end of the receiver when you cock the rifle; an 'S' (for Safe) is visible when it's on. Its design is such that it's easy to push off, and just as easy to re-set if you wish –

Whether I was shooting from the prone, kneeling or standing position, the stock's attributes and that dampened muzzle made it an absolute joy to use against quarry.

As is befitting of a flagship rifle, and to match the woodwork's luxurious finish, the TH208's metalwork is beautifully presented in an even, rich blue that comes up even better once you've 'conditioned' it a few times with a silicone cloth and I'd be as happy spending hours lavishing some TLC on this rifle as I would shooting it. It's worth all the attention – and certainly got mine from the moment I squeezed its trigger for the very first time!

Courtesy of the thumbhole grip, extended and chequered fore-end and resettable auto-safety (insets), Nigel Allen found the superior handling of the SMK TH208 Thumbhole Sporter break-barrel a joy to use in the field.



NIGEL ALLEN'S verdict on the new SMK TH208 Sporter

A FLAGSHIP FOR THE FIELD!



Loading up. The TH208's break-barrel breech has a very positive lock-up.



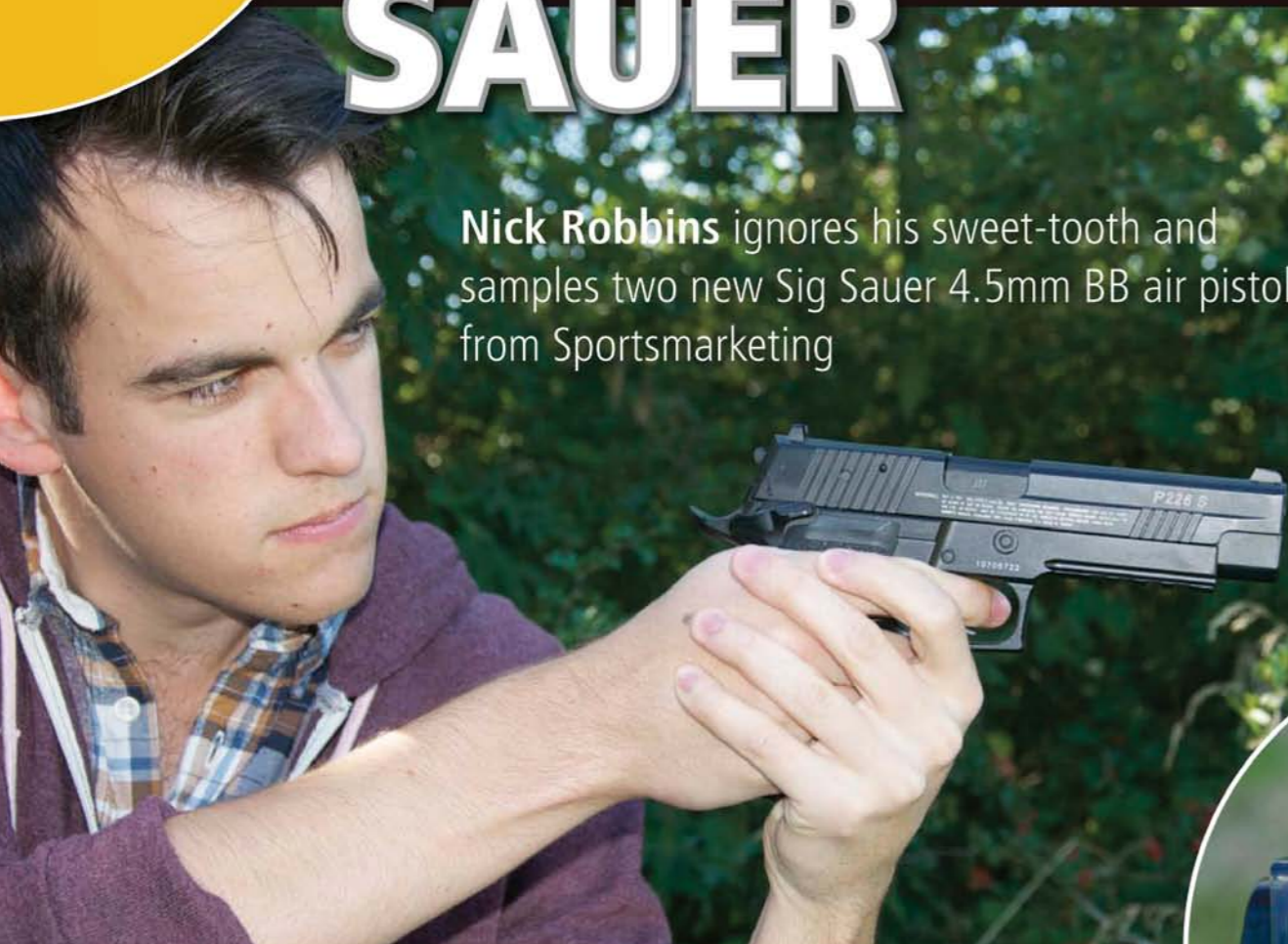
The trigger is a two-stage, adjustable affair.



A great tip for the ventilated recoil pad! Simply press in some pellets for an ultra-handly ammo store!

Sweet & SAUER

Nick Robbins ignores his sweet-tooth and samples two new Sig Sauer 4.5mm BB air pistols from Sportsmarketing



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS		
MODEL	SIG SAUER GSR	SIG SAUER P226 X-FIVE
MADE IN	Taiwan	Taiwan
TYPE	CO2	CO2
CALIBRE	4.5mm BB	4.5mm BB
MAGAZINE CAPACITY	21	18
BLOWBACK	No	Yes
WEIGHT	1.1kg	1.1kg
LENGTH	200mm	220mm
VELOCITY	397fps (manufacturer's claim)	300fps (manufacturer's claim)
PRICE	£79.95	£119.95
CONTACT	Sportsmarketing www.sportsmk.co.uk 01206 795333	

Below: The majority metal GSR is well-balanced in your hand...
Left: ...but the P226's crisp metal trigger unit adds an extra bit a quality
Inset left: Loading both of these pistols with BBs is a straightforward affair
Inset right: The GSR (left) and P226 X-Five (right) may look similar, but they have some crucial differences

PISTOLS: SIG SAUER BB

If I could predict the fluctuations, fortunes and fashions of any industry, I'd be a rich man! But one company that always seems to be one step ahead is Sportsmarketing. Their array of cost-effective airguns and accessories has seen them established as a go-to firm for airgunners established and new, with something in their line-up for novices, dilettanti and the seasoned hunter alike. One area in which they have been particularly successful is air pistols and, through distributing Cybergun's considerable range of products, SMK brings a vast number of products into the UK – the latest two of which I'm testing here.

Both the Sig Sauer GSR and P226 X-Five are made under the Sig Arms marque for Cybergun – and are, in fact, made by the Taiwanese firm KWC, an outfit perhaps better known for its soft air (sub-1 Joule) pistols than airguns. Both of the pistols on test here fire 4.5mm metal BBs – 21 per magazine for the GSR and 18 for the P226 – propelled by a single 12g CO2 capsule. As such, they're defined as air pistols.

The BB pistol market is certainly buoyant, with demand for these replica pistols representing not only a key way to entice newcomers to the sport, but also a way for rifle shooters to complement their hunting or target work with a bit of fast-firing – but relaxing – fun.

Each is classified as a 'semi-automatic' pistol, meaning they spit out BBs as fast as you can pull the trigger. And both sport BAXS, a sophisticated 'hop-up' device that ensures that the BB exits the barrel with backspin, with the net result that the pistols retain their accuracy over longer distances. Though the GSR comes with factory-set BAXS, the P226 gives the user to opportunity to adjust this by removing the pistol's top slide and adjusting a dial within the unit. The other key difference between the two pistols is that the P226 is a blow-back – its top slide shoots back under recoil – while the GSR is a fixed-slide model.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Unboxing both of these pistols reveals black, heavy guns and a cursory glance may give the appearance that they're highly similar pieces. But dig a little deeper and differences become apparent – ones that ultimately influence which model you may prefer to buy. Similarities first, though. They're almost identical in size and weight, sport fixed, notch-and-post-style open sights and have an under-barrel tactical rail for accessory mounting – the P226 offering 10mm more usable rail. As befits the more expensive gun, the P226 offers many of the same features as the GSR, but at a slightly higher quality. The trigger, for example – a flat unit with a straight pull-back on the GSR and a curved blade on the P226 – is metal on the higher-value P226, but plastic on the GSR. The same is true for the hammer.

A quick flick-back of the two hammers will also reveal that only the more expensive pistol has a true double-action firing cycle, it's simply a dummy unit on GSR – though one that will move when the gun is fired. Both guns have manual safeties located at the rear – flick them up to make safe, down to fire. Interestingly, only the GSR has any markings to indicate this, though – an etched 'F' and 'S' as well as a clear red dot when the safety is off. It also has the appearance of a grip safety, a la the Colt 1911, but again this is for aesthetics only.

That's not to say the GSR feels in any way cheap. Its majority metal construction – including some very sturdy grips with a stippled effect – gives nothing but reassurance in the hand, and it's surprisingly well balanced, too.

IN THE HAND

Gassing and loading each gun is a simple affair, and all the necessary tools – hex-head key and an adapter to slide over the mag to aid inserting the BBs – are included in the box. Slide the well-machined magazines back into the base of the pistol and you're good to go. It would be relevant here to talk through the two triggers, because this area is where the pistols deviate the most.

The curved, metal blade of the P226 is a good unit, in that I have little to say about it. I don't feel it necessarily positively impacted my shooting, but neither did it hinder my enjoyment or accuracy. It has a broad face that allows for a solid attack and neither of the two stages is particularly heavy. Knocking back the hammer for single-stage shooting is great fun, and the trigger feels especially crisp in this mode of shooting.

Conversely, the GSR is let down a little by its trigger unit, and not simply because it's plastic. Unlike some, I don't have a major problem with plastic units – sure, they may lack some precision, but it's often a 'book by its cover' issue... on pistols, at least, and I try to avoid snap judgements. However, this unit is both too heavy and too narrow, which I felt made for a slightly uncomfortable shooting experience. It also takes some getting used to in accuracy terms – I initially found myself 'fighting' the trigger, which resulted in some scattergun groups until I got things more under control!

You wouldn't choose either gun for show-stopping accuracy, but they're both more than able to knock down cans out to about 20 paces – and it's enjoyable taking on the challenge of making them perform to their potential. The BAXS – especially on the P226, which is slightly

more accurate in my opinion – did have a positive effect, and these would stand up well against other, similarly priced BB shooters on a target card. But I think to spend time trying to print five-shot groups on paper is somewhat missing the point of these pistols. Grab some friends, grab some cans... and grab some fast-action range time!

CONCLUSION

There's no denying that both of these guns are incredibly well machined and highly enjoyable to shoot, but the big question is: why might you spend 20 quid either side of a hundred to buy one of them? Personally, I think everyone should find room in their armoury for a high-quality BB pistol like one of these, because it's a reminder that airgunning, away from all the technicalities of hunting and competitive target shooting, is, at its very core, fun with a capital 'F'.

If you can afford the extra outlay, I'd plump for the P226. That realistic blow-back action is fantastic to feel in your hand. It's ultra-realistic and the Sig returns a high number of magazines per CO2 bulb. However, the GSR is hardly the lesser sibling. Indeed, I'd rate it as just as good a pistol – it's just that it's slightly stripped back of some of the A-grade features of its more expensive stablemate. Either way, though, I challenge anyone not to shoot one of these with a broad grin on your face! ●

THE TUCKER FAMILY PLAYS THE...



The Tuckers – Dad, Paul and Gareth – shooting the new SMK Super Grade XS models 20, 12 and 15 respectively.

What better way to enjoy your airgunning than lining up on the firing line with your kids for a shoulder-to-shoulder, shooting extravaganza! Well, that's what me and my boys have been enjoying on a regular basis lately – all thanks to a trio of new rifles from budget gun specialists, Sportsmarketing!

Actually, the new Super Grade series – which was officially unveiled last month with the launch of the XS19 break-barrel model – is so affordable that it's about the only time the whole family can shoot simultaneously! A rifle each for young Gareth, Paul and myself has a total value of under £330 – not just a small price to pay for three rifles... but even better value when it does away with any arguments over whose turn it is to have a go with 'the' gun!

The rifles that each of the Tucker Family have been enjoying are the Chinese-made Super Grade models XS20 (the flagship, at £169.95), XS12 (£89.95) and XS15 (69.95) – and because they've 'freed-up' the Play Station, my wife can't believe how much TV she's been able to watch just lately; her men have all been out in the fresh air, shooting their hearts out!

And to give you an idea of how great SMK's new rifles are, here's a snap-shot of how the Tucker boys each rate them...

SUPER GRADE XS 20 (Dad's)

Of course, my choice was the top-of-the-range Super Grade model! In .22 calibre only, it's an out-and-out hunter, offering full-power from its break-barrel, sporter-



The fully-adjustable rear sight of the XS 20 (shown) and XS 15.

stocked action. It even comes with its own barrel weight as standard! Not a bad deal for under £170, it must be said – though if you think it's a 'cheapy' rifle, you'd be wrong... really wrong!

While it's clearly a man-sized model, the 3.1-kilo XS 20 is easy to shoulder and, once tucked in, the 1,092 mm.-long gun settles 'on point' like a magnet.

The classic, sporting-style lines of the well-finished hardwood stock don't just look good, they're also correctly sculpted in order to give you a good hold, and my



The trigger on the XS20 is not only two-stage, it's fully-adjustable, too!

head fell in the perfect position on the butt in order for my eye to align with the SMK 3-9 x 40 scope which I'd fitted – an optional extra that's a must as the XS 20 comes with no open sights!

The receiver's been milled with dovetail grooves that measure a long, 190 mm., so you've got plenty of options when positioning the clamps – and, surprisingly for a budget model, the Super Grade's receiver has been drilled with deep scope 'arrestor' holes into which you can anchor the scope mount.

SUPER GRADE XS 12 (Paul's)

The XS 12 and XS 15 are definitely 'smaller' than Dad's model – but although the model numbers suggested that the 15 would be the next one 'down' in the Super Grade line-up, there was no doubt in my 16-year-old mind that the XS 12 was obviously for an older teenager (like me), or lady shooter.

The XS 12 isn't intended as a hunting rifle – on Dad's Skan chronoscope, it clocks up a power around 7.5 ft. lbs..

for both side-to-side and up-and-down movement, so it's a cinch to 'click your way' to a perfect down-range zero – and a good sightline is achievable the second you come on aim courtesy of that lovely stock which has a profiled cheek-piece to give you the correct eye alignment!

In terms of the price scale, the XS 12 is quite a way 'down' from Dad's XS 20 – but in terms of its performance and quality of engineering, it's anything but down... making it a superb choice for either newcomers or young guns on a budget.

GENERATION GAME!

Despite its legal-limit power rating, I was surprised at how easy the XS 20's break-barrel action is to draw back – and how smooth it is, too.

A cross-bolt safety catch automatically pops 'out' of the rear of the action each time you cock the gun. Thanks to its position on the left-hand side, it's a doddle to snick-off – and, because it's resettable, back on, too! (You simply push it 'on' from the other side.)

I was also surprised at how well the trigger measured up. It's a two-stage unit that's fully-adjustable for pull-weight and

"They do away with any arguments over whose turn it is to have a go!"

first position travel – and it performed faultlessly with no creep, hitch or hiccup.

Of course, this is a real aid to shooting accurately, but the manageable recoil and positive barrel lock-up also contributed towards the XS 20's down-range capabilities.

As the flagship of the Super Grade line-up, I can't see any area in which it doesn't fall short... apart from that lowly asking price, of course. Once you've seen for yourself how well this rifle performs, that's a lot 'shorter' than you'd ever expect!



Loading a pellet into the break-action breech of the XS15.

That's a couple shy of being suitable for general vermin work – though I reckon for rats, where ranges rarely exceed 15 metres, it *would* have enough poke provided the accuracy and shooter ability's there.

Available in .177 calibre only, with an uncomplicated beech stock dedicated to right-handed shooters, I was most taken with the XS 12's finish, handling and performance – and for the price, this is one of the best-value airguns I've ever come into contact with.

As is befitting of any teenager's break-barrel rifle, this Super Grade is a doddle to cock – and at the end of the cocking cycle, there's an audible 'click' as the auto-safety engages.

Situated at the rear of the action, this 'T-shaped' safety is easy to thumb forward (with your trigger hand) to the 'off' position when you're ready to take the shot – and you can also pull the bar back out to re-set the safety if you later decide against slipping the trigger.

Though, at around 5 cm., it's not a lot shorter than its flagship stablemate, it feels a lot lighter, tipping the scales at 2.94 kilos., and far more balanced for use by a teenage-sized shooter.

Unlike on Dad's gun, I didn't need to bolt on any optics; the XS 12 comes with its own open sights ready-fitted – though if I ever do want to upgrade to a scope, the rifle's cylinder has been dovetailed to make life easy!

I was well-impressed by the XS 12's opens for a number of reasons! Complementing the hooded, parallel-bladed foresight post is a fully-adjustable rear sight with a deep, U-notch. The rear boasts easily-turned, numbered, click-stop thumbwheels

SUPER GRADE XS 15 (Young Gareth's)

As the youngest in the Tucker household, I'm used to getting the smallest of everything – but I'm not moaning about

They're highly affordable, highly capable performers for the whole family!



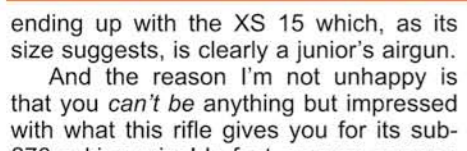
Right: The Super Grade trio! From left to right – the XS 15, XS 20 and XS 12.



Above left: The auto-safety of the XS 20. Note, also, the scope arrestor holes.



Above: Fitting the supplied silencer to the flagship XS 20.



Left: The T-bar safety of the XS 12 and XS 15.

Right: Paul finds the break-barrel action of the XS 12 a cinch to cock.



ending up with the XS 15 which, as its size suggests, is clearly a junior's airgun.

And the reason I'm not unhappy is that you can't be anything but impressed with what this rifle gives you for its sub-£70 asking price! In fact, no way can you call it the 'entry level' model in SMK's new Super Grade series – because it comes with almost all the features that my older bro' has on his XS 12... just in a pint-sized package!

As I've already 'hinted' to Dad, the break-barrel Super Grade XS15 is a delight any father could deliver to his young son (or daughter) at Christmas or on their birthday!

Any budding airgunner over the age of eight will have no problem handling the 940 mm.-long, 2.38-kilo XS 15 – and, in my book, starting off with a rifle that's manageable is the best way to

build up your shooting ability from an early age.

The fully-ambidextrous beech stock and its hard-rubber

recoil pad was perfect for my smaller size – and, for once, it didn't feel like I was trying to fit the gun; more like the gun was fitting me!

When Paul checked the .177 calibre-only, XS 5's power on Skan's speed meter, it punched out 6 ft. lbs. – which is about as powerful as you'd want a junior rifle to be; no responsible parent should let a young beginner go hunting, after all!

But the advantages of a plinking power rating are that the gun's barrel is a cinch to cock by the smallest of shooters and it's easy to shoot accurately as there's so little recoil!

'My' XS 15 comes with a T-style auto-safety that looks and operates like Paul's

XS 15's trigger to be a two-stage unit – but it is! Nicely situated, reach-wise, from the unchequered grip, it has a slightly-curved blade with a decent-length first stage and definite 'stop' as it reaches second-stage. I thought it was brilliant – and both Dad and Paul reckoned it was superb for teaching the rudiments of good trigger technique.

I also never expected my gun's sights to be anything above 'basic' – but they are! In fact, they're exactly the same as those on the XS12 – and once I'd had

THE SUPER GRADE SET - FACTS

Distributor:	Sportsmarketing. Contact: ☎ 01206 795333.		
Model:	XS 20	XS 12	XS 15
Action:	Spring and piston. Break-barrel.	Spring and piston. Break-barrel.	Spring and piston. Break-barrel.
Cocking:	.22 (5.5 mm.) only.	.177 (4.5 mm.) only.	.177 (4.5 mm.) only.
Calibre:	1,092 mm. (42.9 ins.).	1,041 mm. (40.9 ins.).	940 mm. (37 ins.).
Length:	3.1 kg. (6.83 lbs.).	2.94 kg. (6.48 lbs.).	2.38 kg. (5 lbs.).
Weight:	None.	Adjustable, open Beech.	Adjustable, open Beech.
Sights:	Beech, r/h profile.	Two-stage.	Two-stage.
Trigger:	Two-stage, adjustable.	Auto, re-settable.	Auto, re-settable.
Safety:	Auto, re-settable.		
Power:	11.8 ft. lbs. (15.99 J).	7.5 ft. lbs. (10.16 J).	6 ft. lbs. (8.13 J).
Price:	£169.95	£89.95	£69.95

Young Gareth reckons SMK's Super Grade XS 15 is the perfect investment in a youngster's shooting future!

– and because of the rifle's scaled-down proportions, it's easily reached by smaller thumbs without waving the rifle around. The latter makes for safe handling – always important when young guns are involved!

I never expected the

some help in zeroing them in, they gave me the confidence to make the most of the rifle's light-recoil accuracy.

I think I've shot the most pellets out of all of us, and though I'm the least experienced with an air rifle, I'm able to put in some reasonable-sized groups at 10 metres with the XS 15 – and it's no problem to regularly topple tinnies at 15 metres!

I doubt there will be many young airgunners who wouldn't be excited about taking up the sport – but while there may be a few, unmanageable models out there that can soon be off-putting to a 'little one', the whole family's agreed that the XS 15 is the perfect investment in a youngster's shooting future.

It's given me all the encouragement I could ever want, that's for sure!

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Runaway SUCCESS!



The life of the professional pest controller is a diverse and exciting one. **Peter Meek** recently got called in to eradicate the rabbits on a busy airfield with his air rifle

Name:
Peter Meek

Profession:
Pest
Controller

Rifle:
SMK XS20
.22

Pellets:
ThUnder Bolt
.22

Having recently decided to change careers and set up his own pest control business, Peter Meek has found his airgun services in big demand. His ever-growing list of clients call him in to eradicate pests such as rats and feral pigeons in all manner of situations – but his latest job has to go down as one of the oddest.

THE BRIEF

Today, I find myself being called out to a local flying school a few miles away. The place is awash with privately-owned aeroplanes dating back to World War Two, and it also doubles up as a flying school and sky-diving centre.

As you'd image, the aero-club is located in a rural setting and, as you drive up to it, there's a host of paddocks to one side that have been left to their own devices. There is a thriving rabbit population but, worryingly, the only thing separating rabbits from airstrip is an old tatty wire fence – and it's not doing a very good job of 'separating'.

The evidence makes it abundantly clear that this place hasn't seen much air rifle – or any other shooting – activity. To be absolutely truthful, the rabbit population is quite stunning in its proportions! I took a drive up to the airfield late one evening, just as the sun was beginning to set, and must have seen over 100 rabbits out, grazing away without a care in the world. The owner informed me he did used to shoot a .22 rimfire on the land, getting bags of up to 80 rabbits at times – but a lack of time had forced him to look to me. Talk about putting on professional pressure!

I drew the car to a halt, with engine still running. Not one rabbit even bothered to look up at me. It seemed that, to them, I posed no threat whatsoever. But to the users of the airfield, the rabbits could become a

massive problem. The last thing anyone wants is holes in either of the two grass air strips; imagine what the consequences would be if a light aircraft caught a wheel on take off or landing.

At the moment, I'm told such disasters are averted by a daily assessment and visual check of the strips for sign of any rabbit damage; if holes or scrapes are identified, they get filled in manually. This is a legal requirement, actually – and, obviously, very time consuming – but it's not really getting to the root of the problem. It's treating symptoms, not offering a cure. I'm sure my activities will be very welcome – and from the rabbits' point of view, rather unexpected!

TACTICS

Due to the summer evenings, the aerodrome is used for long hours. That means I can't get on to site much before nightfall, and the bulk of the shooting is going to take place once the

airfield is clear and everyone has gone home. So, most of the job will require me to be shooting in total darkness using my trusty lamping combo – but it's one of my favourite types of shooting, so I'm not too disgruntled at the unsociable hours.

On this particular assignment, though, I'm going to change from my normal field stalking tactics. I'll be shooting from the comfort of my car to start off with and then, once the rabbits have wised up to my mobile activities, go 'lighter', on foot, much later on – probably around the early hours.

GEAR

Tonight I am going to try some Thunderbolt .22 pellets in my SMK XS20 Super Grade break-barrel to see how they fare under actual hunting conditions; usually I go for my usual Crosman Premier ammunition, but I've been very impressed with the 10-grain U-Bolt's flatter trajectory. Like

all airgun pellets, you have to try them to make sure they're good for your particular rifle, but I can certainly vouch for their performance in the un-choked barrel of my SMK XS20

I put in a 20-shot string at 35 meters and got a nice group that I could cover with my thumbnail (discounting three which were slightly outside the main group, but still in a 'kill zone'). I've got myself a few tubs so that I can try them in my other hardware. Although these lightweight, zinc-alloy pellets are primarily intended for spring-powered guns, I'd imagine that the results would be very impressive in the field if using a choked PCP. Not sure how

Below: With no-one shooting the land around the airfield, the rabbit population had exploded

Bottom right: Potentially dangerous – damage to the air strips, done by the rabbits, could pose a threat to landing aircraft





my PCP's power output will react to such an ultra-lightweight pellet, but I've heard it rumoured that a heavier-weight ThunderBOLT, specifically for PCP use, is currently on the drawing board.

THE SESSION

I get in position late evening and the place is alive with conies. It takes my breath away and I have to take a moment to calm myself down; even though I now shoot for a living, I still get the buzz I've always had when hunting, and my passion for airgun shooting still burns strongly. I always get a rush when shooting on a new piece of land for the first time, too – so my emotions were like a mixture of pressure and pleasure all rolled in to one.

I must admit I did initially curse myself a little for not bringing along my Theoben Rapid 7. A recoilless pneumatic would make the mammoth task so much easier, but I was too revved-up at the prospect of a good session, so I didn't dwell on this for too long. Besides, I love my springer, so I didn't feel at too much of a disadvantage – and, not having really been 'gunned' for some time, these bunnies were easy enough to get within the 35-metre range at which I'm more than confident with my SMK XS20.

I opt to sit in the back of the car shooting out of both rear windows, with my driver doubling as cameraman. We drive up and down the long approach road adjacent to the runways on tick-over, which gives me plenty of opportunities to get some shots off at my furry foe from my ready made hide on wheels.

The rabbits are all over the place, from pretty much point blank out to 30 metres; just about everywhere

I care to look, I see a target. Aiming out the window, I lock on to bunny number one. It hasn't even bothered to raise its head when we pull up alongside it! At 20 meters I almost feel guilty as I let slip the trigger, rolling the rabbit on to its side without so much as a twitch.

Several more get taken in similar fashion, but I leave them where they drop for later collection. It was turning out to be one of those sessions where you couldn't go wrong – and it wasn't even dark yet!

AFTER DARK

Once the light has gone, I settle down to reflect on events so far; I'm pleased with results. I take time out for a coffee and to give the rabbits time to calm down – then it's time to switch over to the lamping gear. We've done so well driving up and down the approach road that I see no point in changing tactics; for an hour or so, I continue 'kerb crawling' and take several more rabbits. They seem to have no fear of the lamp and with them obviously accustomed to traffic (cars and planes!), along with humans, my job's being made all the more easy.

Inevitably, as the evening wears on, things go a little quieter and I decide it's time to park up and for me to stretch the old legs. A few more bunnies are bagged, and as the clock turns past midnight, it's the laborious job of mopping up so that tomorrow's visitors don't see dead rabbits lying all over the place. ●



Above: Collecting the quarry – with so many rabbits taken out, the end-of-night mop-up operation took quite some time!

Left: The bunnies were so comfortable with Peter's presence he could drive up and down the runway, shooting from the back seat of his car



AIRGUNS



RIGHT on the MONEY!

Mark Camoccio goes back to basics as he tests the Sportsmarketing SMK20 rifle with open sights

The SMK20 is a solidly made rifle, that handles well



General purpose spring powered airguns are the area where the Colchester based company, Sportsmarketing, really specialize; and they now command an enviable share of this market sector. It's

a logical way to go too when you think about it, since the budget end of the market is as popular as ever; especially in the current economic climate.

Sportsmarketing, or SMK as they are probably better known, have an amazing array of models from which to choose, but the model on test here is the SMK20, which serves as a perfect illustration of the company's successful formula for customer

satisfaction. Many shooters just want no-nonsense, straight forward spring power, at a price that's right, and that remit just about sums up this popular rifle.

Full Power

The SMK Model 20 comes complete with open sights, and is a light weight, yet full powered break barrel. In addition, it comes with an attractive hardwood sporter style stock, and a two-stage trigger.

If the profile looks familiar, that's hardly surprising, since this gun follows closely the external pattern of a few famous classics from a certain German brand. 'Nuff said, but leaving that

obvious observation aside, the end result is undoubtedly attractive, and first impressions of the SMK20 are extremely positive. This grade of rifle can often be wanting where the final finish is concerned, yet all credit to SMK, for the well polished and nicely blued metalwork on show

here. OK, the chemical bluing looked just a little thin in places, but overall, this is well above average for this price sector.

An automatic cross bar safety catch is fitted which sits just to the right side of the rear of the cylinder. Whilst I'm no fan of these auto designs, it is at

Cocking effort is minimal with this model



The stock's subtle configuration means it can be used by right or left handers

least easily nudged off with the thumb, meaning inconvenience is kept to a minimum.

Bearing in mind that this gun may well act as a 'first rifle' for many, the fact that open sights are included as standard is a real bonus. SMK mix and match here, with the fore-sight a traditional 'iron sight' post, and the rear sight, formed from green fibre optic elements. Overall though, the sight picture is crisp and clear, and as I've said before, for training beginners in the art of marksmanship, these sights will do just fine, earning many fans in the process.

Scoping Up

The natural progression these days is to fit glassware of course, and in that regard, this model comes perfectly well appointed. Extensive dovetail rails (seven inches long) are cut into the cylinder, which also include no fewer than three arrestor stud holes, so all bases should be covered. Most spring powered airguns will inevitably suffer from scope creep, as the recoil generated from the guns piston-action is partially transferred to the scope and mounts. The remedy is to either fit a one piece mount, which with the designs longer area of grip, should nail the problem then and there, or alternatively, to use an arrestor block, positioned on the rails, just behind one of the mounts. Many mounts themselves now come fitted with arrestor studs, which can be wound out so that they locate with the arrestor holes in the gun's cylinder - and in short, the SMK20 basically allows for all of these eventualities and more.

Stock

Overall the SMK20's woodwork handles pretty well. Technically, it's a right handed stock, with defined cheek piece et al, yet in practise, the bias is so mildly configured, that the end result is all but ambidextrous. That's probably a good thing for a beginners or general purpose model in any case, and whilst 'bland and conservative styling'



The fore-sight is a traditional hooded 'iron sight' post

(Right) The open sights include a fibre optic style rear sight

The SMK20 is undoubtedly an attractive rifle for the money



The grip is plain but well shaped - note the quality of the wood

may seem an apt description, it's perhaps those very qualities that give this rifle such wide appeal. Overly technical, target style weaponry can simply be off putting to many, and that's where the timeless traditional look of the SMK20 can pay dividends.

The business end

We've established that visually, this gun is highly appealing, but how does it shoot?

Firstly, just cocking the action is an enjoyable and easily manageable task, given the moderate cocking effort required. Secondly, the pseudo 2-stage trigger, whilst still fairly creepy, manages to release the shot after predictable movement, and modest pull weight.

Chronograph check first, and using Milbro Select ammo, some highly creditable figures began to take shape. A ten shot string varying by just 10fps proved that consistency wasn't hard to come by, although, sadly, the

barrel just refused to group with them. Making a tactical switch to the ubiquitous Air Arms Diabolo Field (JSB) brand, returned an equally impressive 12fps variation, for an average kinetic energy reading of 11.8ft/lbs which really is quite remarkable consistency; especially given this rifle's price bracket.

Accuracy wise, over 30 yards, the best groups recorded were

1.25inches, which isn't bad for this grade of rifle, and par for the course with open sights.

Listed

In a crowded sector of the market, spring powered break barrels are jostling for supremacy, yet sales figures suggest that Sportsmarketing are appealing to many, where value for money, budget beaters are concerned.

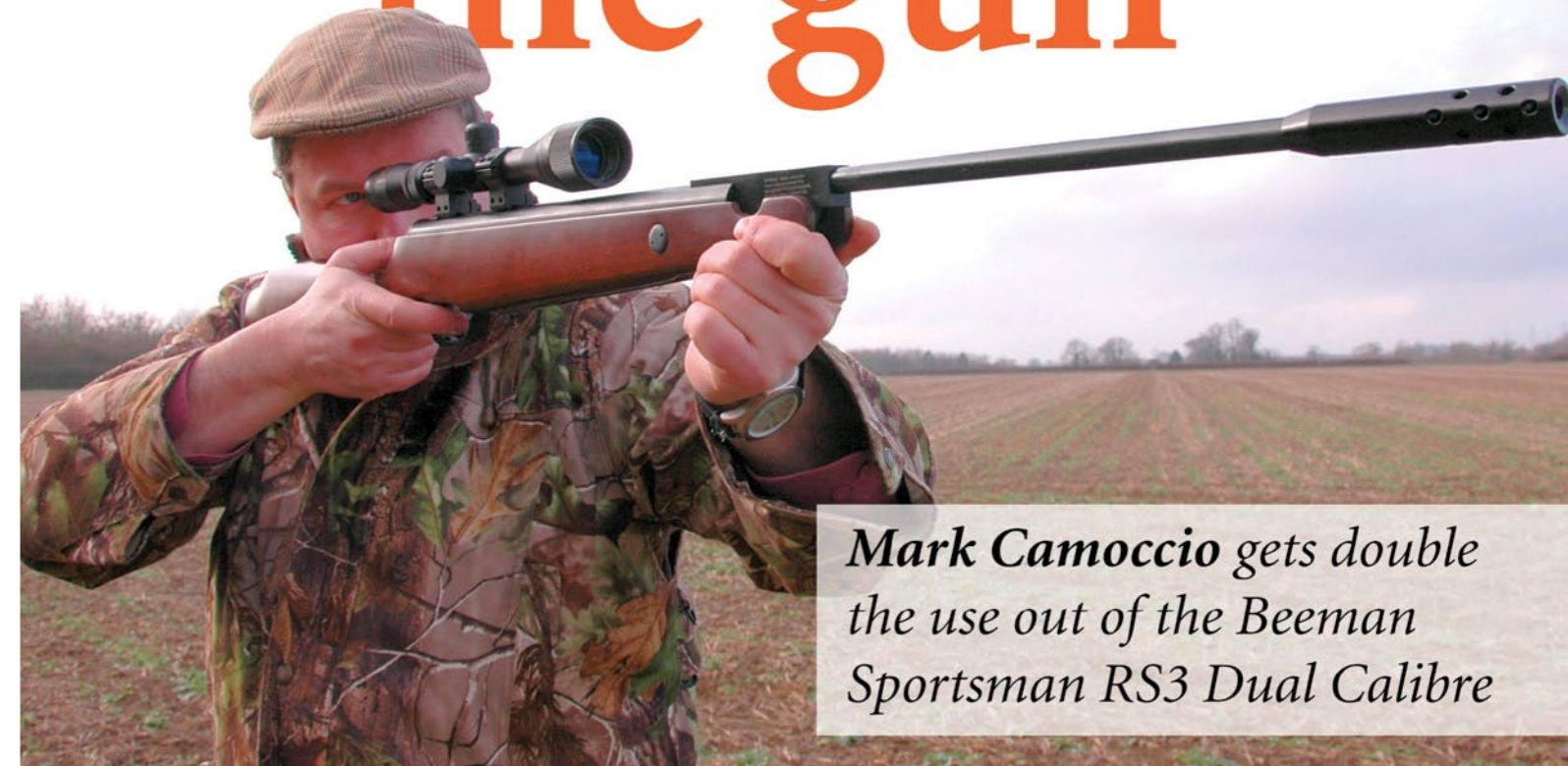
This rifle offers the enthusiast an impressive array of features, in a highly shootable format, and these factors come together to present the shooter with a user friendly, full powered rifle, at a price to suit; ideal as a starter pack, or for close range vermin control. Indeed, to coin a cliché, you could say the SMK20 does what it says on the tin, and on that basis, it certainly deserves a closer look. **GM**

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Model:	SMK20 Open Sights
Type:	Break-barrel /spring-powered
Calibre:	.22 on test/ .177 available
Weight:	6.73lbs
Overall Length:	42.3inch
Barrel Length:	16.1inch
Stock:	Hardwood sporter
Average velocity:	576fps using a ten shot string of Air Arms Diabolo Field pellets
Spread:	12fps
Energy:	11.8ft/lbs
Trigger:	2 stage adjustable
RRP:	£189.95
Contact:	Sportsmarketing Tel 01206 795333

Twice the gun

The Beeman Sportsman RS3 Dual Calibre is a solid performer



Mark Camoccio gets double the use out of the Beeman Sportsman RS3 Dual Calibre

As the calibre controversy rages in airgun circles, and enthusiasts from both camps continue to espouse the benefits of one over the other, the temptation to experiment with each, can be overwhelming.

What if it were possible though, to physically switch barrels in a moment, and thus change calibre? Well now it is, and this new Beeman Dual Calibre package from Sportsmarketing, is an intriguing product, which has been particularly well thought out.

New concept?

Memories come flooding back with this model, as the idea of switching barrels to change calibre is hardly new.

Indeed, just before I embarked upon a lifetime of airgun sport, I remember my good old uncle John, in the mid '70's, showing me his Webley Hawk; a break



A large grub screw locks the barrel in place - just remove it to change calibres



Have case, will travel - this neat package sees all the constituent parts held securely

barrel model, offering much the same package as my test model here. Webley went on to up their game considerably, with the introduction of the full power Vulcan; yet the twin calibre concept was always destined to return.

Custom outfits such as Airmasters dabbled with the multiple barrel idea in the '80's, with their top-end Chameleon models, based on the legendary HW77 action, while Venom Arms brought out their break-barrel 'Snipe' with a choice of three barrels, so there's no doubting the appeal of the whole idea.

Well Presented

This new Beeman is an exciting project though, as it offers dual calibre performance at a highly affordable price. It comes extremely well presented too, in a dedicated, beautifully compact carry case.

A conventional spring piston action is supplied, along with two interchangeable barrels; one in .22 and the other in the

smaller .177 calibre, making the Beeman Dual Calibre RS3 fairly unique in today's market place. A Beeman 3-9x32 scope is also included, along with mounts and the appropriate Allen keys - all as stated, tucked away in the padded carry case. Velcro straps hold everything in place, although in my view, the retention of some of the transit packaging makes sense, such as the sheet of thick cardboard that adds further protection between the barrels and the action, once the case is closed up.

At 34inches long, the entire pack is extremely compact, and if a less obvious approach is needed to your shooting expeditions, then this case will raise few eyebrows, being more akin to a deluxe snooker cue holder than a shooting rig. Yet once this Beeman is handled, it becomes clear that the pint sized carry case belies the full sized, highly capable rifle lying within.

Getting it together

Assembly is beautifully simple, and just about as streamlined as it could be. Each barrel comes with the breech/ connection end wrapped in polythene to protect the liberal coating of grease applied at the production stage. Just select the barrel/ calibre of your choice; slacken off the large grub screw on the underside of the breech block; gently push home the barrel into the receiving hole in the breech block, taking care to line up the arrow on the side, and finally nip up the grub screw. Job done. Because

of the obvious indent where the grub screw locates, any minor misplacing of the barrel soon self corrects, as the grub screw pulls itself into its correct location. In practise, I found the crispness of engineering, and sheer simplicity of the design, meant the whole process worked a treat.

Whilst the breech area is particularly finely engineered however, some of the edges could do with a subtle rounding off, being just a little sharp to touch.

The Beeman branded 3-9x32 scope and mounts, all come, as previously stated, as part of the package. Mounting is made all the more easy as an arrestor block is set onto the receiver, which is another nice touch, eliminating any chance of creep at a stroke. For the record, this scope is fitted with a conventional 30/30 style reticle (equidistant fine centre lines, and four thick outer posts), variable magnification from 3-9x, and a comprehensively marked front parallax ring. Reassuringly crisp target turrets complete the spec, and on test, the adjustments were spot-on, along with very impressive general clarity.

Overall finish to the woodwork is very good, with a thick varnish, evenly applied, enhancing the natural grain of the beech timber used. As for the metalwork, the occasional machining mark does show under the traditional chemical blueing, yet the overall impression is still one of a solid, slick product, finished to a fairly high standard.



Cocking effort is fairly manageable with either calibre barrel

Characteristics

In use, an automatic safety catch comes into play, which means the small tab just in front of the trigger, needs to be nudged forwards before each shot can be taken. Note though that de-cocking the action is possible here.

Cocking the action of this Beeman requires an all in one approach, with the point at which the trigger sear/piston engages, coming earlier in the arc than expected. A fairly short stroke is probably responsible, yet with both barrels being a full 18inches in length, and both sporting a smart ported end piece, leverage is of course enhanced. The firing cycle itself is a pleasant experience, with a snappy action, devoid of spring resonance, and only a slight amount of creep in the trigger. A broad trigger blade helps enormously by spreading the load more evenly across the finger, and the overall release pressure is wholly acceptable.

Take your pick!

With the .177 calibre barrel firmly fixed in place, RWS Superfield pellets were tried first, which at 8.44 grains, follow an extremely similar pattern to the all conquering JSB design. These proved pleasingly accurate over 30yds, with clusters forming just a shade over half inch. Whilst energy levels were a little low at around 8.5ftlbs, a switch to Webley Harrier pellets instantly added over a ft/lb, so experimentation, with various pellet brands is obviously vital here.

I have to admit to a fascination with this rifle and the general concept, and to say that I was eager to switch barrels and gauge the outcome is a serious understatement. I felt like Christmas had come early! Having zeroed with the .177, for the record, the groups moved around 4.5inches to the right, once the larger calibre was installed. Air Arms

Diabolo Field (JSB) printed groups of around 3/4inch, which again is highly acceptable for a rifle of this type. Energy as expected with the heavier calibre, rose significantly (.22 being generally more efficient than .177), with the Air Arms recording 10.1ft/lbs. For the record, SMK's own Spitfire pellet brand posted similar groupings, and achieved around 10.4ftlbs.

As usual with airguns some variation is to be expected from one example to the next, and with pellet/barrel compatibility, not to mention variation in the barrels themselves, expect some other examples to be a little more powerful. The

muzzle energy will also rise naturally with use as the rifle's components 'run-in'.

Success

In this Beeman Dual Calibre RS3, Sportsmarketing (SMK) now have an intriguing product in their extensive line-up. Close range vermin control is of course on the cards, but for the enthusiast who just wants versatility along with hours of absorbing experimentation, all at a highly affordable price, owning this fairly unique rifle makes a lot of sense; the .22's heavy hitting shock effect or the .177's flatter trajectory - now you decide! **GM**

CALIBRE COMPARISON RESULTS

Barrels on test:	.22 Calibre:	.177 Calibre:
Pellets: (10 shot string)	AA Diabolo Field	RWS Superfield
Average velocity	532fps	672fps
Average spread	8fps	16fps
Average energy	10.1ft/lbs	8.4ft/lbs
Pellets: (10 shot string)	SMK Spitfire	Webley Harrier
Average velocity	583fps	676fps
Average spread	13fps	15fps
Average energy	10.4ft/lbs	9.6ft/lbs



The beech woodwork is conventional but nicely finished

That well specified Beeman scope is all part of the deal; an arrestor block comes fitted too, giving positive scope location

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Name	Sportsman RS3 Dual Calibre
Manufacturer:	Beeman
Type:	Break- barrel/spring-piston
Calibre:	.177 and .22 with interchangeable barrels
Weight:	8.6lbs including scope
Overall Length:	47inches
Barrel Length:	18inches
Stock:	Beech sporter
Trigger:	Two-stage adjustable
RRP:	£299.95
Contact:	Sportsmarketing Tel 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk



Just slide in the barrel of your choice, then re-tighten the grub screw



A broad trigger blade is a big help to accuracy



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Although CO2-powered airguns came 'off ticket' over a decade ago, it amazes me that the vast majority of guns that run this system are either pistols or fun-guns. A notable exception, however, is SMK's new TH78D Sporter – a full-powered sporting rifle designed for the hunting field.

CO2 format offers all the combined advantages of spring guns and precharged pneumatics, without any of their disadvantages! For instance, unlike a springer, you can keep a CO2 gun cocked for as long as you want, without having to worry about mainspring fatigue. A CO2 gun is pretty effortless to charge up, too. No cumbersome charging gear's needed, nor manual stirrup-pumps to break your back as with a PCP. You just drop in a self-contained gas capsule!

Well, in the case of the TH78D, you actually need two of the standard 12-gramme CO2 gas capsules – but that's because, at 11+ ft/lbs, it's a full-fat shooting machine (see panel opposite). That's around four or five times more power than the single capsules produce out of the pistols – yet, courtesy of its slow-release valve, SMK's twin-capsule hunting rifle still returns around 100 shots per gas-up.



Above: The thumbhole and its sculpted grip.

As with all CO2 guns, the actual power and shot output will vary dependent on the pellet type and ambient temperature, but I certainly found the system very effective when I took the TH78D for a spot of pest control work at my local farm over the summer.

I'd been ordered to seek out the rats and feral pigeon. This type of vermin control calls for a fast-handling sporter, and I couldn't think of a better gun for the task than the TH78D. It's very light, beautifully balanced and its deluxe thumbhole stock makes it handle like a dream. In fact, having shot many hundreds of rounds through this rifle, I'd go so far as to say this is the kind of rifle you'd want if you were a professional pest controller!

It's a fast-handling gun, too. Not just because of its manageable weight and beautiful balance, but also because of

its delightful, ultra-quick bolt-action. Once lifted from its lock position, the bolt – luxuriously gold-anodised to match the rifle's trigger blade – is easy to pull back and has a very short throw.

Once the bolt's fully drawn, the channel of the loading bay is opened to allow a pellet to be dropped in. This then gets 'breached', and the firing hammer cocked, once you return the bolt and lock it down.

The opens, which feature a red fibre-

Below: The gold-anodised bolt is a delight to cock and there's a well-sized pellet loading bay.



optic foresight and a fully-adjustable rearsight with green fibre-optic inserts, are pretty decent in my book – but this gun's far too good not to rig it up with a scope! I opted for an SMK 3-9 x 40 Mil-Dot, which required me to remove the rearsight, and this showed how the totally recoilless firing cycle of the CO2 system really makes the TH78D perform with pin-point precision.

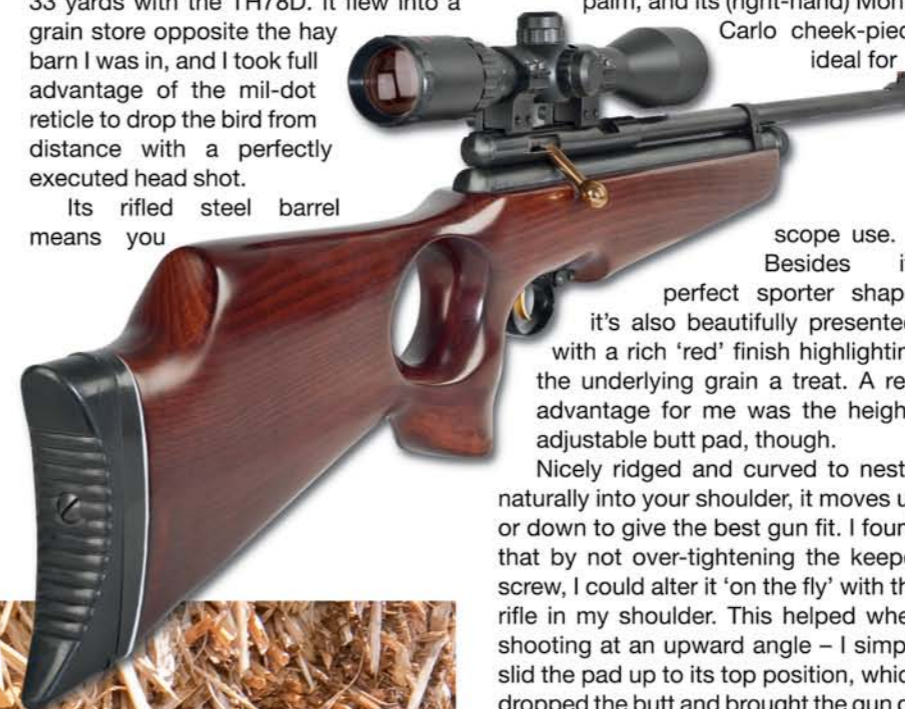
Although most of my farmyard work never required a shot more than 20 or so yards away, I did drop a woodpigeon at 33 yards with the TH78D. It flew into a grain store opposite the hay barn I was in, and I took full advantage of the mil-dot reticle to drop the bird from distance with a perfectly executed head shot.

Its rifled steel barrel means you

can group your shots very tightly even at extreme ranges and the TH78D's three-way adjustable, single-stage trigger is perfect for getting the best from both rifle and shooter.

The safety catch, at the front of the trigger guard, is manual and perfect for hunters. You point it forward to fire, back to engage it, and an arrow points to either 'F' and 'S' to let you know its status.

I loved the rifle's stock. Its thumbhole grip is beautifully sculpted to fit into your palm, and its (right-hand) Monte Carlo cheek-piece is ideal for



scope use.

Besides its perfect sporter shape, it's also beautifully presented, with a rich 'red' finish highlighting the underlying grain a treat. A real advantage for me was the height-adjustable butt pad, though.

Nicely ridged and curved to nestle naturally into your shoulder, it moves up or down to give the best gun fit. I found that by not over-tightening the keeper screw, I could alter it 'on the fly' with the rifle in my shoulder. This helped when shooting at an upward angle – I simply slid the pad up to its top position, which dropped the butt and brought the gun on line with the target.

With CO2 capsules costing just around 75 pence and the rifle on sale in gun shops for only £179.95, I reckon SMK's new TH78D must be one of the

GASSING UP



THE TH78D's full-power performance comes courtesy of two 12-gramme CO2 capsules, which locate in the under-barrel chamber. Remove the cap, drop in the first capsule, neck-down, then the second, neck-up. Screw the cap back on until you hear a hiss that signifies the 78's 'gassed up' and ready to go.

deals of the decade. I said earlier it's a rifle that would suit professional pest controllers down to the ground – but it's also such a beautifully finished gun that I'd want it in my gun cabinet for pride of ownership alone!

The trigger is backed-up by a manual safety switch on the side of the guard – rotate it fully forward for 'fire', as indicated on the left side. For improved handling, the butt pad is height adjustable.



BOLT-ACTION BEAUTY!



NIGEL ALLEN field trials SMK's TH78D Thumbhole Deluxe CO2 Sporter

FACTS - TH78D
Action: Bolt-action CO2
Source: 2 x 12g CO2 capsules
Calibre: .22
Length: 100.5cm
Barrel Length: 54cm
Weight: 2.4g
Trigger: Single-stage, three-way adjustable
Safety: Manual, resettable
Stock: Thumbhole beech
Sights: Adjustable fibre-optic opens
Power: 11+ Ft/lbs
Price: £179.95





The 1084 Carnivore has centrefire styling, yet despite the lengthy proportions it handles quite nicely

Imported Beef

Pete Wadeson tests the Beeman 1084 Carnivore break barrel springer and reckons it will deservedly attract the frugally minded airgunner...

I can hardly remember the last time I reviewed an air rifle from Sportsmarketing (SMK.) If I remember correctly though it was one of their main sellers at the time – the SMK B2 Carbine.

I think they still import them – the rifle being a very cheap 'n' cheerful springer of Chinese origin. However, since I last reviewed a rifle marketed by them they've grown out of all recognition as a company, buying in the right products, offering

decent rifles at sensible prices and becoming a market leader not only for budget guns but also for top quality air rifles, certainly since they've now taken on distribution of air rifles from the famous German manufacturer, RWS Diana.

They also have a vast stock of CO2 rifles and pistols not forgetting the huge range of airgun related accessories. All are well priced in my opinion, so there's a springer for everybody in their range.

Beeman

They're currently 'showcasing' their Beeman branded products

The manual safety blade sits midway within the plastic trigger guard

including air pistols and the spring powered air rifles, most being bundled with an alternative sight for pistols while the rifles come with a scope plus two piece mounts.

The 1084 Carnivore is advertised as one of three in the Beeman family that includes the well regarded Beeman Dual (twin barrel), which is available in two versions, one with

a hardwood stock or one with a black ABS stock.

The Carnivore comes complete with a Beeman 3 - 9 X 32 scope and two piece mounts as mentioned previously - and a nice scope it proved to be during testing.

First impressions of the rifle is the lengthy synthetic stock but the twist here is that it's covered with what is termed 'Next (GI)' camouflage – a pattern that is proclaimed to be the 'next generation of concealment.' It's a photo-realistic design having a typical blend of branches, leaves and twigs. The overall hue is a quite light grey background overlaid with a mix of brown leaves and twigs. In fact it's reminiscent of a pattern I favoured for certain terrain but sadly no longer available in the UK – that being Hardwood 20/200.

Even though this lengthy centrefire styled air rifle pushes the tape to 47" from butt to muzzle. I was surprised that after scoping up it didn't feel unwieldy or front heavy. The overall fullbore based appearance with the eye-catching camo covered stock really will stand out when displayed on any gunshop rack.

A whole lotta' stock

The synthetic camo covered stock is fully ambidextrous and quite lengthy - I guess to accommodate for the 16.5" barrel. There's no cheekpiece, rather a low comb for head position with a very stylish pattern to the ventilated black rubber butt pad. The neck is quite slim with a shallow rake and is slab sided even at this position, which continues all the way down the chequered pistol grip.

Shrouded barrel

From the mid-section the stock begins to slightly curve outwards allowing the forend to be much thicker, with



The 1084 Carnivore - an attractive individual looking springer designed for plinking and powerful enough for hunting/pest control at medium range



The tapered forend has generously chequered panels

two pairs of generously cut chequered panels on either side running up to the black plastic cover capped stock screws. The underside is also nicely rounded, tapering slowly upwards to the rounded tip.

Here you can see the quality of engineering on the breech loading face, with a neat breech seal and the sprung stainless steel ball bearing for locking in the closed position



Dominating the front of the rifle is the outer fluted barrel shroud, giving the Carnivore the look of a custom barrelled centrefire. The shroud is purely cosmetic and measures 15 5/8" from muzzle to the front of the relatively long breech block. The very front of the shroud doesn't show the barrel but instead is hollowed out extending approximately 2" back with an inner diameter of 5/8" and an O/D of 3/4". The barrel it hides is rifled steel and measures 16 1/2".

The Carnivore un-latches at the breech very easily for cocking, due to the lengthy barrel acting as a lever, and it locks securely back in the open

position at the end of the stroke, allowing safe, direct barrel loading. Here you can see the quality of engineering on the breech loading face, with very neat breech seal and the sprung stainless steel ball bearing used for locking the detente in the closed position. The cocking stroke isn't overly strenuous and a direct cocking linkage arm is used rather than an articulated type. You'd think this would make for a 'cranky' feel to the cocking stroke but it's quite smooth and certainly does the job.

A manual metal safety blade sits midway within the plastic trigger guard when engaged. Disengage it with



The rifle doesn't show a cheekpiece, rather a low comb for head position and the 'ventilated' black rubber butt pad has a rather stylish pattern to it

the back of your trigger finger and it travels a good way forward out of the way from the nicely curved, inner ridged, chrome effect trigger blade.

Range time

With the Beeman 3 – 9 X 32 scope sitting on top, backed up to the removable metal arrestor strap, you can now begin loosing the lead down range to set zero. Though the rifle weighs in at 10lbs un-scoped I didn't feel it too much of a problem taking shots in the standing position, and also took kneeling shots as I fine tuned a 25-yd zero. The 2-stage adjustable trigger unit isn't bad at all, and releases shots quite cleanly without any creep.

The Carnivore on test was in .22 calibre and as I've been testing the range of Power-Force pellets from Henry Krank, I used the Field Power Force Pellets that have certainly shown they're good quality roundheads for the price. Running them in the Carnivore I was soon making sub-one-inch groups at the zero range I set. I'm also pleased to report recoil was minimal and muzzle report was surprisingly low.

Conclusions

Overall there's nothing really to gripe about, as this is quite an attractive individual looking springer designed for plinking and powerful

The 1084 Carnivore comes 'bundled' with a Beeman branded 3 - 9 X 32 scope and two piece mounts



The 'Next(GI)' camouflage is proclaimed to be the 'next generation of concealment'



The outer fluted barrel shroud, gives the Carnivore the look of a 'custom barrelled centrefire'



enough for hunting at medium range. It's certainly capable of knocking over rabbits at 25-35-yds and showed 11.2ft lbs of muzzle energy over my Combro Chrono Mk 4 using .22 Cal 14gr Field Power-Force Pellets.

I'd say though the 1084 Carnivore is aimed (no pun intended) at the frugally minded, it's a good buy for anybody, considering you also get a decent quality scope and mounts. The rifle/scope combination handles well and is certainly accurate, but due to its length I feel it's more of an adult sized gun or teenagers of a

larger build – but there are plenty of other SMK models to suit the younger shots. If you want a reasonably priced and powerful rifle/scope outfit that looks a little out of the norm with its fullbore styling, then I'd certainly say you should take a serious look at the SMK 1084 Carnivore. **GM**

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Model:	Beeman 1084 Carnivore
Stock:	Fully ambidextrous camo dipped synthetic sporter 47"
Overall Length:	47"
Barrel Length:	16.5"
Weight:	10lbs un-scoped
Calibre:	.22 on test, .177 available
Trigger:	2-stage adjustable
Safety:	Manual (in trigger guard)
Price:	£229.95
Contact:	Sportsmarketing (SMK) 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk

The cocking mechanism uses a direct linkage rather than an articulated one



NIGEL ALLEN's take on the Sportsmarketing SYN SG SUPER GRADE

Whatever your persuasion regarding synthetic stocks on guns, I guarantee you'll fall instantly in love with the new SYN SG Super Grade break-barrel sporter from Sportsmarketing! This hunting power horse has got everything you need for the toughest of field assignments – high power, pin-point accuracy and super-fast handling – and it must be one of the best non-wood stocked air rifles I've ever shot.

The SYN SG comes with tricked-out opens that look the part and really aid your shooting. When you see just how accurately you can shoot with the SYN SG's, you may think twice about adding a telly.

The foresight sits on a raised, ventilated ramp and incorporates a red fibre-optic bead that picks up all the available light, making target location very easy. It's complemented by a rearsight that sports numbered thumbwheels for windage and elevation adjustment and which also has two, bright green fibre-optic dots – one either side of the sight notch. Aligning a red dot between two green ones really speeds up your aiming, so acquiring your target with the SYN SG seems very 'automatic'.

As is hitting it! The accuracy of this break-barrel is astounding which, given its phenomenal power output, makes the

"An awesome performer if pest control's the name of your game"

FACTS - SYN SG

- Action:** Break-barrel
- Calibre:** .22
- Length:** 114cm
- Barrel Length:** 48cm
- Weight:** 3.31kg
- Trigger:** Two-stage, adjustable
- Safety:** Automatic
- Stock:** Synthetic
- Sights:** Fibre-optic, adjustable
- Power:** 12 ft/lbs
- Price:** £139.95



Above: The fully-adjustable back sight has fibre optic inserts - and the SG's trigger is adjustable, too. Left: The synthetically stocked SG Super Grade is a highly practical sporter. Below: The receiver is grooved for a telly, and comes complete with an arrestor plate.



SYN SG a pretty awesome performer if pest control's the name of your game.

The breech pivots around a large axis bolt that can be tightened to allow for wear and tear down the years, so the impressive accuracy I experienced during my tests will remain with the rifle for life.

Besides the advantages the SYN SG's advanced open-sighting system offer, there are big plus-points if you fit a scope. Not only are the receiver's grooves long enough to deal with the biggest of field optics, but they feature an arrestor plate, against which you can anchor the scope's rear mount. This stops it creeping along the rails, maintaining accuracy.

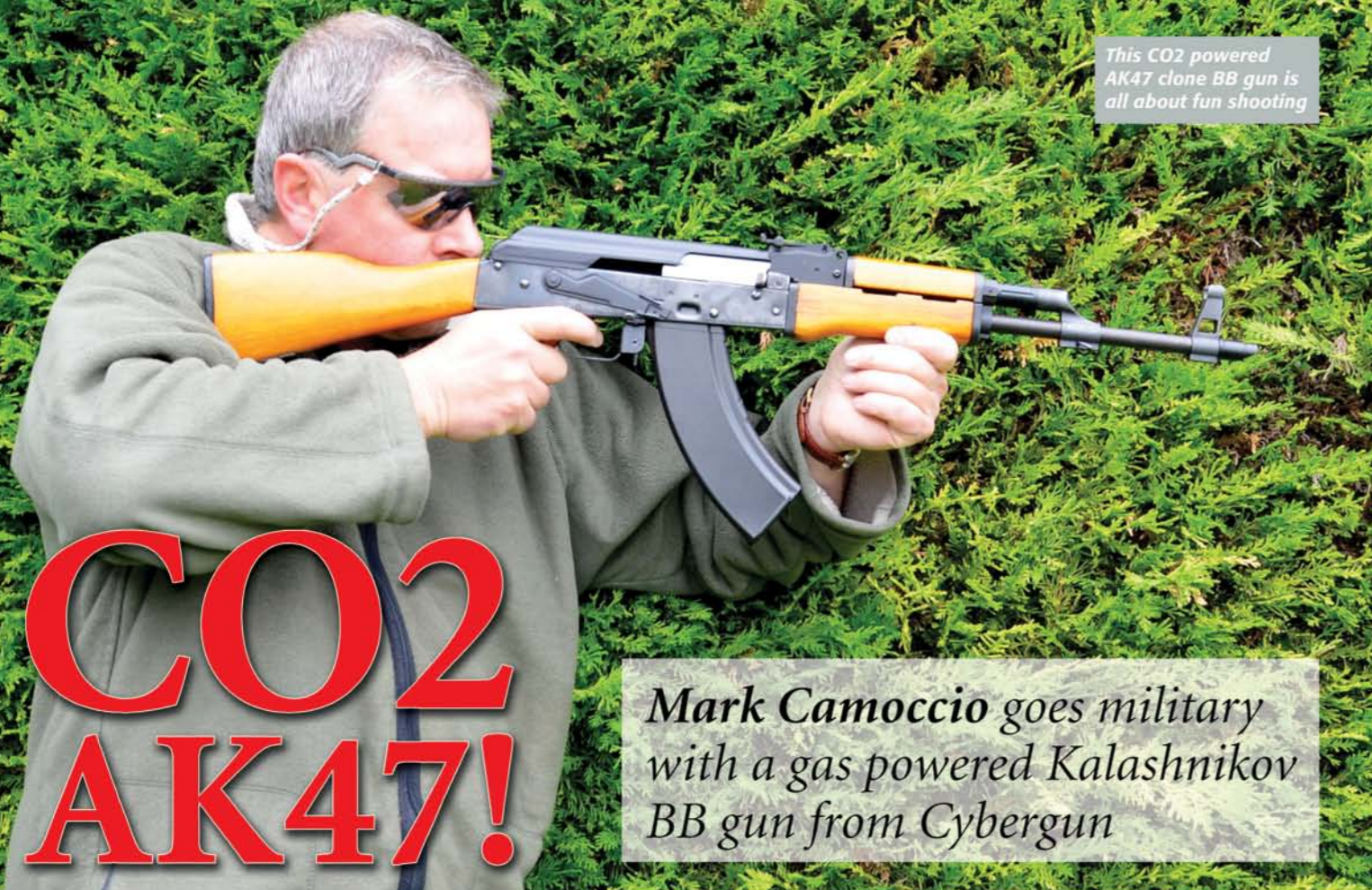
Backed up by an automatic and resettable safety, the SYN SG's trigger is a two-stage, fully-adjustable affair that's an absolute peach for getting the most out of the rifle's precision-rifled, steel barrel.



The stock ranks amongst the best-shaped and most practical handles I've ever gripped – synthetic and wood! It boasts a long, slimline fore-stock with moulded chequering that's as sharp as you need for a firm hold, and because there's a thumb muscle cut-out on both sides of the pistol grip, you can shoot from either shoulder.

The flagship of SMK's all-new 208 Super Grade series, I was genuinely surprised to learn it retails for just £139.95. At that price, you could put a decent scope on it and still get change from 200 quid. **Amazing!!!**





This CO2 powered AK47 clone BB gun is all about fun shooting

CO2 AK47!

Mark Camoccio goes military with a gas powered Kalashnikov BB gun from Cybergun

Ask anyone to name one of the most famous weapons available, and it won't take long for the name Kalashnikov to crop up; as the AK47 is arguably the most infamous of the lot. The Russian design was the brainchild of tank commander Mikhail Timofeevich Kalashnikov in 1947, and a combination of rapid firepower, and an absurdly simple, almost indestructibly robust design, has seen this legendary assault rifle become the weapon of choice in guerrilla warfare around the globe. The original design's popularity in combat situations stemmed from

having a minimum of working parts, and a reputation for astonishing levels of reliability, in less than favourable conditions. Replica versions have long been available of course, but the model on test here, adds to any collectors enjoyment, by being a fully working BB gun into the bargain. Granted the payload is somewhat less deadly, since this version prefers a diet of low power 4.5mm steel BB's, yet the combination of an all metal action and hard wood stock, lends a real feeling of authenticity. The metalwork seems to have been treated to a 'distressed' look too, with a

slightly roughened up finish adding to the genuine feel. Likewise, the three part wood stock, complete with drop down pistol grip and sling swivels, looks and feels the part. **Fun Shooting** Where BB shooting is concerned, the emphasis is always on fun, and this AK47 doesn't disappoint on that score. Before the action can start though, the gun needs to be prepared. Firstly, the magazine (the outer casing of which is pretty well the only plastic to be found on this model) needs to be removed from the action, by pushing the small retaining

catch with the thumb, at the same time as pulling the mag clear. Now press the small silver metal button and pull the internal section clear. A 12g CO2 capsule can now be located inside the frame, and tightened gently into place, until gas is heard to escape. This means the seal has been broken on the capsule, to power the system. The next stage is to fill the mag with BB's. Pull the spring loaded catch down and back along the side of the mag, until it locks in the rear position. Steel BB's can now be fed into to small hole at the top, until 19 are loaded. The spring loaded clip is then gently released to



Real wood combined with an all metal action, gives the Cybergun Kalashnikov AK47 an authentic feel



The small thumb catch allows the mag to be removed

tension the balls in position. Now the internal assembly can be pushed back inside the magazine, and the whole magazine pushed up into the rifle's action until it locks in place.

The 'Selector' bar on the right hand side of the action can be taken off safety, and with safety goggles in place, the shooting can now start.

To fire the AK47, pull back the large silver cocking lever on the right side of the action, which cycles the next BB; then squeeze the two stage trigger. Shots can now be taken just as fast as that lever can be cycled. Accuracy wise, I managed 5inch groups over 25yds, which means that something like metal plate shooting over man- sized targets, could be great fun in the right conditions. Accuracy and power do tail off comparatively quickly with BB's, and this AK47 was at its best out to 30yds.

In use, cycling the cocking slide and action, was a little sticky

at times, yet overall, this gun made all the right noises, offering a level of solid satisfaction that I simply wasn't expecting.

Refreshing Change

To be honest, my obsession with competition grade kit would normally see me overlook this type of hardware, yet this particular model really impressed. It's authentic enough in appearance to be taken seriously as an imitation firearm, yet comes with the added benefit of being a usable CO2 powered BB firer.

If the truth be told, before I opened the delivery box, I'd already told myself that the asking price of £229.95 was going to seem a little steep. Having now handled and shot the Cybergun Kalashnikov AK47, it's difficult not to be impressed. It's fun all the way, and if you're in the market for a working imitation model, this is a real corker! **GM**



Note the diagonal 'selector' bar - this is effectively the safety catch



Safety glasses are a prerequisite where BB's are concerned



A hard butt plate finishes the stock end



That small button releases the magazine internals...



... a Co2 capsule is fixed into position within the magazine mechanism



...then up to 19 steel 4.5mm (.177) BBs are loaded inside

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Model	Cybergun Kalashnikov AK47
Country of Origin:	China
Type:	CO2 powered multi-shot
Calibre:	4.5mm steel BB
Weight:	6.7lbs
Overall Length:	35.4inches
Stock:	3-part real wood
Trigger:	2-stage
Magazine Capacity:	19BB's
Velocity:	360fps approx with 4.5mm steel BB
RRP:	£229.95 guide price
Ammo:	Premium Grade Steel BB, 4.5mm £1.99 per 435 CO2 12g capsules - 75p each approx
Contact:	Sportsmarketing Tel. 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk www.cybergun.com

Shooting the Cybergun SIG Sauer GSR is above all enjoyable



Fast fire fun!

Mark Camoccio tests the SIG Sauer GSR CO2 pistol

CO2 is a whole world of airguns in itself, and to my mind, the emphasis here is on fun shooting. On test here is Cybergun's CO2 powered reproduction of the SIG Sauer GSR pistol, and this is a typical example of what is available in the sub £80 bracket.

The GSR comes very well presented, not to mention protected, in a very neat boxed set including the pistol, a small box of BB's, an allen key, and a plastic speed loading tool. This model fires 4.5mm steel BB's and features a semi-automatic action. It utilizes standard 12g CO2 capsules too, so the power source is readily available. Informal plinking sessions are what this gun is all about, and opening the neat packaging revealed an attractive pistol, that certainly looked the part.

Handle the GSR and the first impressions are of a solid pistol. Enough of the construction is metal (magazine and main top slide section) to give the GSR a

satisfying weight in the hand, and it certainly feels good on aim. A tactical accessory rail features as part of the main body frame, and for those who wish to play with all manner of add-ons, such as torches and lasers etc., this could be a useful feature. Sights are non-adjustable with this model, although they are clearly picked out, with white dots on the notch and post, affording a good sight picture.

Encapsulate

Before any action can take place, a 12g CO2 capsule needs to be loaded. This is actually concealed inside the pistol's magazine, and to gain access, just press the small button behind the trigger, to release the mag. With the magazine withdrawn, the allen key supplied needs to be used to gently release the tension. The capsule can now be removed, and replaced with a new one. As always with CO2, handle the

spent capsules with care, as they can become super cold as the last of the contained liquid turns to gas. With a new capsule in position within the magazine, the allen key is again used, to take up the slack, and apply pressure, gently piercing the seal on the capsule in the process. Once you hear the gas escape with a small hiss, that should be enough, so be careful not to over tighten.

Now we're ready to fill the magazine with BB's. This is done



The plastic speedloader attachment helps the process



Note the accessory rail along the bottom edge

by sliding the speed-loading tool into position over the mag, which in turn, pushes back the spring loaded clip. Keep a firm grip of this assembly and carefully pour BB's into the magazine's opening at the top, until the prescribed 21 have been loaded. With the magazine fully prepared, push it back inside the pistol until it clicks, and you're ready to go. It's here that the fun begins, and our inner 'Bodie and Doyle' takes over. Well older readers (much older readers) will know what I mean!

backspin to the BB, allowing it to travel further, but the downside is that this can often be at a slight angle; sending the BB off to the left or right. The BAXS system features an additional point of contact to the BB, with effectively two dimples, one at 10 o'clock and one at 2 o'clock, within the firing mechanism, which apparently leads to greater accuracy.

Performance

My initial testing was to be over 10yds. The GSR only shoots on double action, whereby the pulling of the trigger has to bring the hammer all the way back before the mechanism fires, which does mean that trigger pressures are rather heavy. Semi auto operation however, means that the fire rate is just as fast as you can pull the trigger, which is great fun for sure. If you require a safety catch, then that takes the form of the thumb bar, just

below and right of the hammer. A red dot shows when the pistol is live and ready to go.

So just what can you expect from this model in terms of accuracy? Well over 10yds and shooting from a rested position, I managed five shot groups just shy of an inch, which I reckon is quite reasonable for this type of gun. Over 15yds, the best achieved was 1.5inches, so fair results considering we are talking the far less efficient steel BB here. Point of impact was rather high with shots landing around four inches high at 10yds, but of course allowances can be made at certain ranges. One point to note here, is that I would always recommend the wearing of safety glasses when shooting steel or 'copper coated' BB's as they do have a

greater propensity for ricochets than conventional lead pellets. I tended to overlook this at times through the testing, but it should be second nature.

On test and for the record, the GSR managed around 150 shots per capsule, which gives a good guide as to what to expect.

Considerations

Factor in the additional running costs of the CO2 capsules themselves, and CO2 shooting in general is obviously more expensive than shooting standard airguns. The major attraction for many though, has to be the fast-fire semi automatic feature, and if that does it for you, then the SIG Sauer GSR is a solid little contender. It's neat, compact, well presented and unashamedly FUN! **GM**

THE BREAKDOWN ▶▶



This is a good looking and solid feeling pistol



Note the button near the thumb to release the magazine



The fixed fore-sight is also picked out in white



Well marked sights make aiming easy

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Model	Cybergun SIG Sauer GSR
Type	Co2 Semi-auto repeater
Power Source:	12g Co2 cartridge
Calibre:	.177
Magazine Capacity:	21 BB's
Ammo:	Steel BB's only
Shot Count:	On test over 150 shots per 12g capsule of gas
Sights:	Fixed
Weight:	2.4lbs
Overall Length:	7.3inches
Barrel Length:	3.5inches
Velocity:	390fps approx
Trigger:	Double action only
RRP:	£79.95 approx inc BB's and speedloader
Contact:	Co2 12g cartridge 90p each approx Sportsmarketing tel. 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk

Benson ON A BUDGET

Want one of these guns? Well, I've owned one or two XS78 rifles and, out of the box, they were certainly usable - something of a rough diamond - but a huge improvement on typical Chinese budget guns. With a bit of fettling they could be turned into something very useful indeed, and this fact began a whole new cottage industry of aftermarket spares or tuning services, there's even a few websites dedicated to this rifle.

The basic guns still have some niggly little faults. The plastic butt plate feels a bit cheap - though I suppose that's not too surprising - and other areas of 'niggleness' are the pressed steel open sights, which are neither terribly precise nor easily adjusted, but no problem if you fit a scope as most users do. The final fly in the ointment is the basic model's plastic barrel band, which is functional, but when the rest of the action is metal it's a bit of a let-down.

After all that, I bet the vast majority of shooters didn't even notice such minor niggles. All they were after was a budget priced plinker, to pop away at cans in the back yard - which is exactly what they got. And three squillion plinkers can't all be wrong, the basic gun must be one of the best UK sellers at the moment.

Jamie Benson rejoins the mag with his assessment of the QB78 Deluxe - a proper budget-beater if ever there was one

From the enthusiasts, though, I'd bet there were mumbles about how they'd rather have a few small improvements and pay a few quid more. These mumbblings must have been heeded, because SMK have sorted them all out, added a few superb features and, most importantly, not added much to the budget price, either.

What you see here is the QB78 Deluxe model, and its most obvious improvement is the new gold coloured bolt handle and trigger - which I accept adds nothing to the functionality of the rifle but it does look nice. Part of the enjoyment of any new air rifle is the aesthetics and I wonder how many teenagers got one of these for Christmas and spent a good few minutes just looking at it with a cheesy grin.

The next big improvement is the stock where wood quality, I'm sure, has improved. The timber appears to be noticeably better in graining and finish, and most importantly it now has a rubber butt pad, which not only looks and feels good but also adds a bit more length.

FEELS BETTER

The stock is also slightly chunkier around the comb than the basic model and feels much better for it. It's a small investment that's made a big difference to the overall quality and feel of the rifle.

Another distinguishing feature of the deluxe model are the open sights. The new ones are fully adjustable and use fibre-optic elements - the rearsight glows green and the foresight has a glowing red pip. These optics pick up ambient light, directing it towards the end of the element, and it's surprisingly effective in low light.

Just the ticket for rat shooting.

Another obvious improvement is the barrel band. The new one is made from anodised alloy and is slightly thicker, though I'd prefer a pair of grub screws holding it to the cylinder rather than the single screw between the cylinder and the barrel. Still, a significant improvement over the original.

The barrel appears to be thicker than the older model too, which could be a boost if you fancy doing away with the barrel band and free floating the barrel. Whilst in comparison mode I've also decided that the deluxe model has a slightly better finish on the metal surfaces. Another upward trend.

PROOF OF THE PUDDING

Now for the additional proof of the pudding: the shooting. If you're not familiar with this type of rifle, all you do is unscrew the cylinder end-cap and drop in a pair of 12-gram CO₂ capsules from which you can expect around 50 full-power shots - which should run at 9 to 10ft.lb on a cool day.

You will get variations in power with temperature and, although it's good practice to check your zero every time you hunt, only the most dedicated shooter will shoot serious targets when it's less than about 8°C and it rarely gets above 24°C in the summer. That 16°C window pretty well sums up our UK climate and it's not going to make an enormous amount of difference to this rifle.



The good thing about CO₂ is that you get a reasonably consistent power curve before it drops off the end from 'exhaustion'. Most shooters plink away until the gas is barely a sniff in the tank, which is fair enough for tin cans, but if you plan a spot of close-range ratting don't run until empty, use the top of the charge. 30 or 40 rats would be one for the record books anyway!

PLEASANT SURPRISE

The accuracy of these guns comes as a pleasant surprise to most owners. With a clean barrel and quality pellets most competent shooters can expect thumbnail-size groups at around 20 yards. Well of course it's not in the FT league but it is more than adequate for pinking and close range hunting.

Price is certainly a big attraction. The club where I shoot has a raft of XS and QB owners, including an XS79 with the large CO₂ 'AirSource' tank, and there were five on the range the other day, all bought by folk who normally shoot Daystates and Rapids. So what's the attraction? Simply that they are huge fun to shoot and especially appealing to those who love to

customise. I can see the attraction of customising the base model but, so far, nobody has touched a deluxe model which I guess says it all really. I'm sure it would benefit from a touch of polishing in the bolt and hammer assembly but this rifle shoots perfectly well out of the box, so there's no real need to mess with things. The bolt is a bit stiff when new but gets smoother after a few hundred shots - and it's a heck of a lot easier than cocking a springer!

I suppose I might adjust the trigger sear a touch, to reduce a small element of creep, but that's about it. Getting at the adjustment screw means punching out the safety catch from the opposite side and undoing the stock nut to release stock and action, at which point the sear engagement is visible through the small hole in the trigger assembly side and the trigger is adjusted via a grub screw. It's totally shootable as it is but there's no harm in knowing.

I'll write this last bit quietly. I don't actually know the recommended retail price of this rifle but, although I suspect it's over £100, if you shop around you can find them for less. Worth it? You bet!

Join the Q

ANOTHER DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF THE DELUXE MODEL ARE THE OPEN SIGHTS. THE NEW ONES ARE FULLY ADJUSTABLE AND USE FIBRE-OPTIC ELEMENTS



Gold anodising on the bolt and trigger are two obvious signs of the QB78's deluxe upgrade, but wood grade and level of overall finish are two more. Even more noticeable, especially with the rifle at your shoulder, is the up-rated fibre optic sighting system

The SMK XS19-18 may be a bargain basement air rifle but its features and performance would put many higher priced weapons to shame



Below: The test rifle was fitted with a PAO 3-9x40 scope, mounts and a moderator as optional extras



Revelation!

Bruce Potts is surprised as he tests the SMK XS19-18 air rifle and finds that you don't have to spend a fortune to get an accurate springer

We are all feeling the pinch these days, so everybody looks for value for money when considering their next purchase; so it's nice when you actually get a bargain once in a while.

Sportsmarketing have a huge selection air rifle related products and sell the very reasonably priced SMK range of airguns from China. I will be honest and say that I have never tested an SMK before, but now I have one in my hands I can see why SMK have such a large range of rifles on the market today.

Bargain priced break barrel

This XS19-18 model is a budget priced rifle designed to offer a full power and adult sized weapon primarily for hunting use but then again ideally suited for a spot of plinking in the garden also. This is the basic model although a custom version is offered with walnut stock if you so desire but as it is I think it's a very good serviceable hunting tool, something you are not going to worry about scratching in the hedgerows.

The rifle has a traditional break barrel cocking mechanism which I have always favoured

for its simplicity of design. The crucial part with regard to consistent accuracy and velocity is how the barrel locks in line with the receiver. Any slack here and you are doomed. The SMK has a very good lock up, using the detente catch system which means it has a sprung plunger catch that locks solidly into the base of the receiver face as the barrel is returned into position. To make sure that it does not slacken after a lot of use there is a cross bolt pin that acts as a hinge for the break barrel action with a small grub screw that locks this into position to stop loosening.

The overall finish of both barrel and receiver is an even bluing to the metal parts but with a semi matt tone, ideal for hunting so no unwanted reflections here. If you prefer a bit of "bling" then the SMK XS20 Super Grade model has some very nice deep bluing.

The barrel is 17 inches in length and rifle's overall length is 43 inches, so not over long even if fitting a sound moderator. The test rifle that I borrowed from an underkeeper is in constant use so already had a moderator fitted using a compression olive system to the outside of the barrel as there

was no screw cutting to the barrel muzzle. This increased the overall rifle length to 47 inches. The moderator also acts as a handy cocking aid.

The barrel is used to cock the action in the conventional way, and internally a lever pushes the piston back, compressing the spring. I have to say this is where the nice surprise was; cocking the SMK was very easy and smooth, no drag at all, and the trigger locked the piston back with a good audible click.

When you pull the trigger the firing cycle is remarkably smooth with just a faint twang from the spring as it expands.

Sporter stock

There are no surprises with the fairly standard sporter styling of the XS19-18 stock. The slender forend is rounded and comfortable to handle, while twin securing screws attach it to the receiver. The pistol grip is well sculptured and fits the hand well and the raised comb Monte Carlo style helps with correct hold when a scope is used. However there is no chequering to either the forend or pistol grip area, I guess to save costs, which is a shame. The overall wood finish is in a matt lacquer.

There is a good solid black rubber recoil pad to keep the rifle in the shoulder and

finish off the stock. The wood used on this model is beech, and for a rifle of this price it is more than good enough and well suited for a hunting arm. For those that would like walnut with chequering, go for the custom XS20 model.

Sights, Trigger and Safety

I should imagine that well over 90% of purchasers will fit a scope but nevertheless this rifle comes with usable open sights fitted. The fore sight is a simple ramp affair but the rear sight is fully adjustable for windage and elevation. There are large adjustment wheels with audible clicks and the "u" shaped notch of the rear sight blade is flanked on either side with a Day-Glo fibre optic for high visibility. This is the difference between the standard XS19 model and the XS19-18 that we have on test.

A scope can be fitted to a conventional dovetail cut into the top of the receiver so the PAO 3-9x40 scope and Sports Match mounts fitted fine. The scope mounts did not move a morsel throughout the tests.

The trigger is a two stage affair but this one was more like a single stage on test. There is quite a lot of creep but no roughness before the sear breaks and the pull weight was 5.5 lbs - not wonderful but useable. The



For those that prefer to fit a scope, there's a substantial length of dovetail rail on the upper receiver



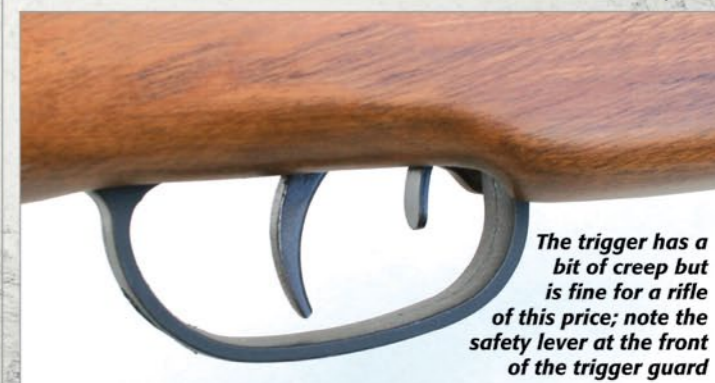
Day-glo rear-sight elements show up well if you intend to use the open sights



The slender forend covers the strong lock up in the break barrel action design



The stock has a matt lacquered finish with a comfortable cheek piece



The trigger has a bit of creep but is fine for a rifle of this price; note the safety lever at the front of the trigger guard

Ammunition tests: All tests were made with five shot groups of pellets

Pellet Type .22 calibre	Pellet Weight in grains	Velocity in fps	Mean velocity	Energy in ft/lbs	Accuracy at 25 yards inches
Air Arms Field	14.56	554.6, 549.2, 551.3, 541.7, 550.2	549.4	9.76	1.0
RWS Hobby	11.82	627.2, 621.4, 620.9, 631.5, 625.5	625.3	10.26	0.5
Premier	14.22	569.6, 564.2, 560.7, 564.7, 562.8	564.4	10.06	1.25
RWS Superpoints	14.36	558.3, 559.9, 551.1, 563.3, 560.4	558.6	9.95	1.0
Bisley Pest Controls	18.24	452.7, 458.1, 450.7, 459.9, 441.5	452.6	8.30	1.5
Bisley Superfields	14.98	505.6, 526.8, 501.4, 502.2, 521.7	511.5	8.70	1.75
Logun Penetrator	14.30	539.1, 542.8, 538.3, 551.0, 537.8	541.8	9.3	1.0
Wesley Lazapells	14.47	511.2, 505.0, 508.7, 523.7, 501.9	510.1	8.36	1.25
FTT	15.6	534.7, 525.1, 559.9, 544.1, 551.0	543.0	10.21	0.75

manual safety lever sits within the trigger guard in front of the trigger blade. This design is not my favourite, but it is being used by a number of manufacturers now.

Range time

First off this was a four month old rifle a friendly under keeper had loaned me, so the power figures may be down a little as the rifle is 'run in', but he was still shooting rabbits at 30 yards with it. Accuracy wise the SMK really liked the RWS Hobby and Field Target Trophies with five shot groups of 0.5 and 0.75 inches respectively at 25 yards. The Hobby's would be my choice here as the velocity of 625.3 fps was higher than the FTT's although energy figures were comparable.

The Air Arms Field, RWS Super Points and Logun Penetrator all gave 1.0 inch accuracy at 25 yards with 9.76, 9.95 and 9.3 ft/lbs energy respectively but the SMK really did not like the Bisley

Superfields as accuracy was 1.75 inches, but these pellets were quite tight in this barrel.

Cocking the action was remarkably smooth, barrel lock up was positive and the whole firing cycle was fast too, with only a slight spring twang to be heard on discharge. For the money this SMK shot really well.

Conclusion

I have to say I had to eat my words a little here, thinking it to be a cheap and cheerful rifle only suitable for plinking when actually it's a very capable hunting gun. It's not going to set the world alight in looks, although the deluxe version in walnut is very nice, but it will do just fine as a knock about vermin getter for someone on a budget. Power was more than good enough and accuracy from the RWS Hobby pellets was very good. The price of £139.95 is great value and allows you to add a sound moderator and scope all for under £200. **GM**



In use in the field, the SMK XS19-18 is a lot of gun for your money

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION	
Model	SMK XS19-18
Type	Break barrel cocking spring/piston air rifle
Calibre	22 on test (.177 available)
Overall Length	43 inches (47 inches with sound moderator)
Weight	6.75 lbs
Barrel length	17 inches
Stock	Beech Sporter
Sights	Fibre optic open sights (and scope mounting dovetails)
Trigger	Two stage adjustable
Price	£139.95
Contact	Sportsmarketing tel. 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk

SCOPE OPTION – SMK 3-9 X 40 MIL-DOT



TO MAKE the most of the DB4 Delux Custom's sweet firing cycle and 12-groove rifled barrel, you will probably want to mount a scope and SMK's 3-9 x 40 – price £49.95 plus £5.95 for the mounts – complements the combo perfectly.

This telly boasts the airgunner's favourite magnification rating, allowing you to zoom between 3x magnification and a powerful 9x. The lower power is useful for 'spotting', while cranking the zoom ring to full power is ideal for max-range work.

With the scope firmly anchored to the DB4's grooved receiver, setting zero is easily achieved thanks to the scope's finger-friendly adjustment turrets, which can be clicked to the desired setting without any need of tools. Once set, the 'zero' stays protected courtesy of the screw-on caps.

The 40mm. diameter objective lens

has been blue-coated for increased light transmission and maintains a bright sight picture on the gloomiest of days – and SMK's scope features a quick-focus eye-piece to keep the image pin-sharp no matter what range you're shooting over. Like the magnification ring, this turns steplessly, with a silk-like action.

Perhaps the optic's best feature, though, is its reticle – the ideal match for such a capable rifle. Despite its low price, the scope incorporates a Mil-Dot reticle (above) which features six dots on each of the four inner, thinner cross-wires, along with thicker, outer posts.

Very much in fashion, mil-dot reticles provide plenty of aiming reference points for shooting at different distances, and when allowance for wind drift is required. It makes accurate shooting a whole lot easier than when aiming 'into mid-air', that's for sure!

High speed AMMO

PELLET TEST: THUNDER BOLT



It's being billed the fastest sub-12ft/lb pellet available. **Nigel Allen** loads up with the new ThUnder BOLT ammo from Sportsmarketing in .22 calibre

Top left and right: The bullet-shaped ThUnder BOLT. Note the flanged skirt which grips the rifling and improves consistency

Most airgunners know that a .177 pellet has a much flatter trajectory than a .22 at a given muzzle energy. By virtue of the fact that it's smaller and lighter, the .177 also starts out with a much higher velocity – around 800 feet per second (fps) against the approximate 600fps speed of a .22. All these factors add fuel to the greatest airgun debate of all time – the calibre controversy. Is .177 better because of its more forgiving trajectory, or is it .22 because of the extra stopping power and down-range energy retention? And which holds best in the wind? The .22's slower, bigger and in the air for more time, but its extra mass is also harder to blow off course than the lightweight .177.

Well, the argument may well be about to come to an end thanks to a new pellet that's been designed by the all-British Prometheus team. It's called the ThUnder BOLT and because it's being supplied to the trade via distribution giant Sportsmarketing, you can expect to see plenty of them on the shelves of gun shops nationwide by the time you read this.

Prometheus has accumulated many awards for its innovative pellet designs over the years, many of which have been constructed from non-toxic materials instead of lead. The original Prometheus sported a

synthetic base which you self-assembled with a steel, bullet-shaped nose. More recently, the company has seen success with its range of Dynamic pellets, which are made from tin.

Its latest ThUnder BOLT is similarly shaped, but made entirely from zinc – a lightweight material which Prometheus dabbled with in the mid-1990s when the firm introduced its original Paragon Z1 and Z2 ammo. This married a synthetic body with a semi-domed nose, but was highly controversial due to its extremely impressive ballistic coefficient (BC); it put some spring air rifles over the legal power limit and was later redesigned and supplied purely for high-power rifle use.

This isn't the case with the all-zinc ThUnder BOLT, though, despite the fact that it only weighs 10 grains in .22 and just five grains in .177.



Left: The new pellet is ideally suited to springers this XS19 Super Grade showed a variation of just 5fps!

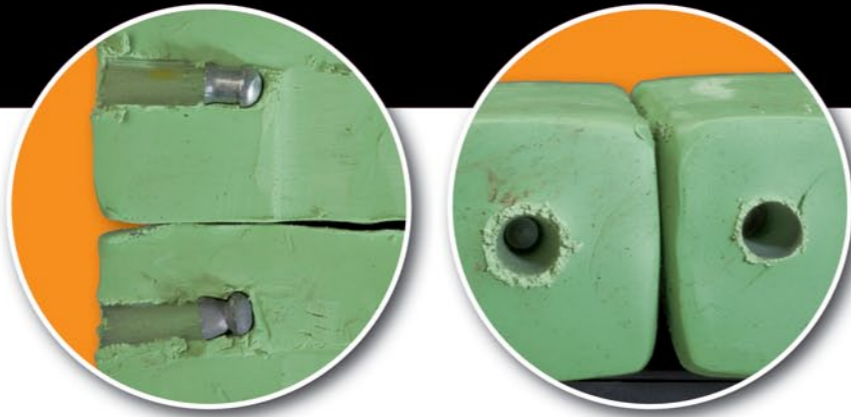
FEATURE: NEW PELLET

ALL IN THE NAME

If you're wondering as to the use of all the capital letters in the ThUnder BOLT's name, it's actually a play on the pellet's high-speed capability. The capitals spell 'U BOLT', as in Usain Bolt, the fastest man on earth!



Above right: The penetration tests. Although there wasn't a lot to choose between the U-Bolt (top) and Premier, its entry hole (left) showed much more 'collateral damage'



I've been testing the .22 and although the markings on the box suggest it's for spring-powered rifles, I've also found the pellet excellent in PCPs. The data I've compiled here relates to the .22 calibre U-Bolt (as I like to refer to it).

At present, .22 calibre U-Bolts are being made with only the one head size (5.50mm), which the makers say best suits choked barrels. I'd like to see an additional, larger size because it's clear that not every unchoked barrel likes them. However, for a choked muzzle (or tighter bore), the existing head size works well.

As with the design of the Dynamic, the U-Bolt has a flanged skirt that spreads out and grips the rifling under pressure of the air behind it. The theory behind this is that it provides a good seal and, correspondingly, better shot-to-shot consistency – and my chrono tests would confirm that. A 10-shot string from an SMK XS19 break-barrel showed a variation of just 5fps, while a 20-shot string from my own Theoben Elan PCP varied by just 6fps.

Weight consistency plays a part in this, also. I weighed 100 pellets at random: 77 came in at 10.1 grains, 18 at 10.0 and 5 at 10.2 grains. The manufacturer's claimed weight is 10 grains, by the way.

Of course, for a .22 this is extremely light, with the lightest lead pellet I know of being the RWS Hobby (11.9 grains). At 12ft/lb, a U-Bolt returns a velocity of 731fps – 110fps more than a standard-weight (14-grain) .22 would generate.

Given the controversy the Z2 had caused, I was concerned that U-Bolts would put many springers over the limit, but they didn't on a single one of the six spring-powered rifles I checked. Obviously the muzzle velocity was significantly higher, but the muzzle energy equated to a figure that was either a little more, the same or no more than 0.4ft/lb below that achieved with conventionally-weighted lead ammo. As you'd expect with a lightweight, there was a significant drop in PCPs – between 0.6 and 1.1ft/lb on the four rifles I chrono-tested.

For the purposes of my down-range testing, I elected to shoot my Theoben Elan PCP in order to establish the U-Bolt's accuracy capability (it has a choked Anschütz barrel). I could also easily adjust the power so that both U-Bolt and the lead pellets I was comparing could start at roughly the 11ft/lb mark. In speed terms, this equated to 707fps for the U-Bolt; 585fps for Crosman Premier; and 568fps for Daystate FT.

VELOCITY / ENERGY PERFORMANCE FIGURES

PELLET	VELOCITY AT MUZZLE	ENERGY AT MUZZLE	VELOCITY AT 30 YARDS	ENERGY AT 30 YARDS	ENERGY RETAINED AT 30 YARDS
15.9-grain Daystate FT	568fps	11.4ft/lb	460fps	7.47ft/lb	65.5 per cent
10.1-grain ThUnder BOLT	707fps	11.2ft/lb	560fps	7.03ft/lb	62.8 per cent

As it's primarily a hunting pellet, I assessed trajectory tests between 15 and 35 yards – the extremes most airgunners hunt over – and you can immediately see from the targets below that the U-Bolt flies much flatter. The total rise above and fall below the crosshair at those distances is just 24mm, whereas a 14.45-grain Crosman Premier is more than double that, at 55mm.

I zeroed the rifle at 25 yards – the 'norm' for a sub-12ft/lb .22 – but I'd seriously consider moving that out to 30 yards with U-Bolts. That way, anything closer than zero would never be more than 8mm above the crosshair. At 35 yards the drop would be only 16mm – making this the most forgiving .22 round out there in my book. Indeed, its flightpath isn't that far off a heavyweight .177's.

Accuracy-wise, the targets show the U-Bolt's performance against the Premier's – my favoured ammo in the Elan's .22 barrel. As you can see, it's comparable and more than suitable for hunting, with the 35-yard group measuring 17mm c-to-c. I shot the U-Bolts in both a slight breeze, which dropped when I came to test the Premiers, and in still conditions. (The longer-distance targets shown here are the results in still conditions, but the groups I shot in the breeze were nearly as tight, shifting about an inch laterally.) Before accuracy testing the U-Bolts, I thoroughly cleaned out the bore to remove all lead deposits.

I haven't used the U-Bolts on live quarry yet but, because of their extra starting velocity, I was keen to see what their penetration qualities would

be, along with their down-range energy retention. For the latter, I pitched them against 15.9-grain Daystate FT ammo because I consider these the best mid-weight .22s for stopping power. To my surprise, the lighter U-Bolt retained almost the same energy at 30 yards as the heavier FT – and at over 60 per cent, there wouldn't be much quarry walking away from a direct hit!

Penetration-wise there wasn't much difference, with the U-Bolt perhaps drilling into my Plasticine blocks a tiny bit deeper. But what was noticeable was the entry hole – much bigger and with more 'collateral damage' around its circumference. These factors appeared to be caused by the splayed-out skirt flange and I think this would impart a lot more 'shock' factor on impact than a conventional lead pellet. Given that the residual energy is roughly the same as normal-weight ammo at 30 yards, I can see the U-Bolt becoming an extremely popular hunting round. Time will tell.

While my experience with the new ammo is in its early days, I'm looking forward to trialling it more in a number of my rifles, and would certainly recommend hunters giving it a go. I can't wait to give the .177 ThUnder BOLTs a thorough testing, either. On 12ft/lb they'll be pushing out over 1,000fps, and at five grains I've no idea what to expect from them! ●

Price: £9.99/tub (400 in .22; 500 in .177)

Contact: Sportsmarketing

T: 01206 795333

W: www.sportsmk.co.uk

BORE CLEANING

The zinc construction of ThUnder BOLTs will keep your bore much cleaner than lead ammo, but for them to shoot at their best the rifling *must* be thoroughly clean in the first place. On break-barrel springers, use a conventional rodding set, but on fixed-barrelled guns, like PCPs, choose a pull-through. And always clean from breech to muzzle.

PULL-THROUGH AIRGUN CLEANING KIT

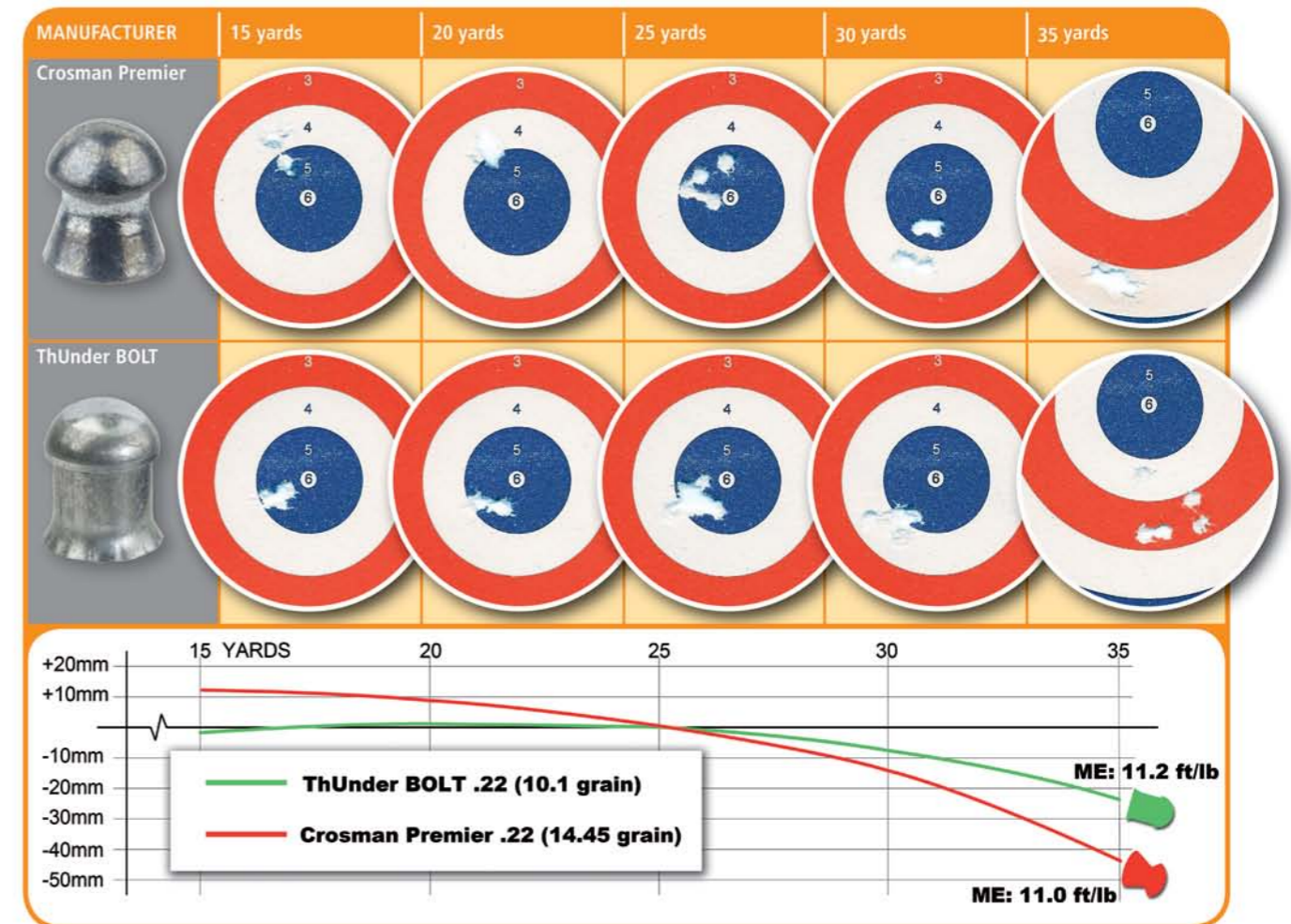
Ideal for fixed-barrel guns, like underlevers and PCPs, the kit comes with the wire, patches and oil, all wrapped up in a neat pouch.

Price: £21.95

UNIVERSAL AIRGUN CLEANING KIT

Fits pistols as well as rifles; this comes with mops, jags and phosphor bronze cleaning brushes for both .22 and .177 calibre barrels.

Price: £10.95



Mark Camoccio tests the SMK XS36-1 and finds a dramatic advance in airguns from China

Far Eastern Promise

The test rifle was certainly accurate enough for hunting at reasonable air rifle ranges

When I started up my own Field

Target club some years ago, I remember being just a little shocked when two junior shooters arrived and presented their 'beginners rifles' for inspection. Loose fitting parts, disconnecting themselves when the rifle fired, jagged edges around the breech, and an overall finish that just screamed 'bargain basement'.

Well times have certainly changed; and the rifle on test here is an astonishing example of just how far our Far Eastern cousins have come in the intervening years.

Striking Profile

With a sliding breech action and a fixed barrel,

this model SMK XS36-1 from Sportsmarketing is a spring powered under-lever cocking rifle, produced in .22 calibre only.

Open the frugal packaging, and first impressions are of a nicely proportioned and highly attractive rifle, with a profile, given that elongated trigger guard, that has a touch of the Parker Hale Dragon about it. The hardwood stock offers good support, with a fairly deep fore-end, and stylishly



The grip isn't chequered but is well shaped

angular tip. A distinctive cut-out to the rear of the cylinder, gives this model further character, and the beautiful graining of the test model was perfectly accentuated with the walnut staining. One slight criticism, and it seems a modern phenomenon on many brands of rifle of late, is the unnecessarily hard rubber used for the butt pad. The one here on the XS36-1 even appears deceptively

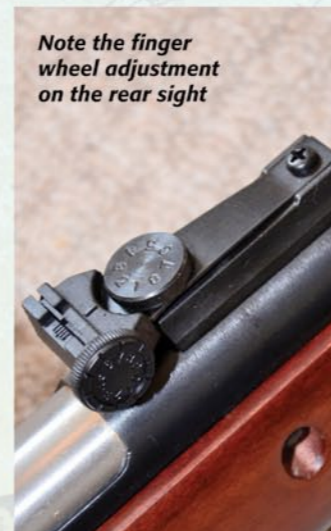
to be a spongy ventilated version- but it's solid as a rock! That minor detail apart, this is a genuinely impressive and striking gun, and a solid piece of engineering if ever I saw one.

Finish

So the furniture passes muster for sure. As for the metalwork, this is an area where Chinese manufacturers still have to play catch-up. A dull, slightly abrasive finish covers the action, including the under-lever, barrel, and main compression cylinder, yet the components are overall, well engineered. A blueing of sorts covers the action, and whilst admittedly rather shallow, given the amazingly low asking price for this gun, I think it only reasonable for some allowance to be made here. Overall, I'll stick my neck out and say that this has to be the best engineered and finished Chinese made airgun that I've



This shows that front fore-sight assembly close up



Note the finger wheel adjustment on the rear sight



Note that safety tab just forward of the trigger



The XS36-1 is actually an extremely attractive rifle

encountered to date, and a far cry from some of its forebears.

Gone are the tacky clips retaining the under lever. Instead, a well designed and streamlined barrel assembly; incorporating a perfectly weighted spring loaded under lever catch, and integral hooded fore-sight. The catch is just a ball détente, with no lock, so fitting sling swivels to the under lever is probably best avoided.

The sight incidentally, even allows for interchangeable elements; easily replaced by unscrewing the rim of the hood in the usual way. Few shooters will bother of course, given the general beginners market, to which this gun is aimed; yet this is great attention to detail on such a rifle nonetheless. Add in the quite excellent fully adjustable rear-sight, and any novice will be perfectly equipped to learn the art of marksmanship. The rear unit comes with

clearly marked finger wheels, so adjustment and tracking of adjustment, is easy too.

Handling

If you happen to tire of those excellent open sights, then fitting glassware is a piece of cake, courtesy of scope rails, and that most welcome of inclusions - the arrestor block. SMK's version utilizes a small plate, screwed to the receiver, and it's nothing if not neat. Spring piston models can often suffer from scope creep, but with mounts placed right against that arrestor, the problem is solved at the outset.

The dovetails are rather short, but then small basic scopes will be par for the course; given firstly that this is a beginner's gun, and secondly by virtue of that ultra short cylinder, limiting the size of any scope used. Fit too large a model, and the objective lens will simply foul the sliding breech area, making loading



The stylish fore-end is a feature of the XS36-1



An arrestor block comes as standard

unnecessarily fiddly; so take the rifle with you when purchasing a scope and mounts to make sure that it all fits and feels right (always a good policy with any rifle/scope combo). I attached a compact Hawke 2-7 x 32 Airmax scope to do the accuracy tests, and this size and type of scope suits the XS36-1 perfectly.

Cocking the action of the XS36-1 (achieved by pulling the under lever down and back until the trigger engages), requires little effort, and the test gun was incredibly smooth into the bargain. This design allows for direct access to the

barrel, which means when chambering ammo, the shooter is able to feel an overly tight or slack fitting pellet. An automatic safety catch comes into play at this stage, and an anti-bear trap system means that before the lever can be returned to the closed position, the small safety tab, just forward of the trigger, needs to be nudged forwards. The catch is a little crude, but it works well enough.

As a cautionary note, safety systems or not, this style of rifle dictates that



The under-lever action is very easy to cock

the under-lever should be gripped firmly at all times whilst your fingers enter the loading bay area. If you are right handed; just pull the lever completely back with your left hand, then continue to hold on to the lever and tuck the rifle butt under your opposite (right) armpit, then load a pellet with your right hand. The opposite obviously applies for left-handers. With the pellet loaded, return the under-lever to its 'rest' position which closes the breech. Automatic mechanical safeties are fine as a 'last resort' but your own secure and careful loading regime is always the first line of personal safety.

Performance

On the range, initial shots were just to get used to the feel of the action and the cocking cycle, before some serious testing would begin - and at this point, it became clear that the trigger is easily the weakest link in an otherwise impressive rifle. A flat, broad blade shouldn't add much if anything to production costs, yet the added feel and spreading of the load across the finger, would be so beneficial. As it stands, the thin blade is bearable, especially if the initial creep is slowly taken up, and the unit overall is certainly no worse than many of its rivals. You could always attach a trigger shoe at a later date - a cheap accessory that will

improve the feel of virtually any factory fitted trigger blade.

At 8lbs in weight, this is no lightweight gun, but it is finely balanced. That mass goes some way towards absorbing recoil, and keeping the gun steady on aim too. OK; it's maybe a handful for some, but the overall configuration, and solidity of the action, gives the XS36-1 a mature feel way above its price bracket.

Prepare to be amazed...

This style of rifle should be all about fixed barrel accuracy, but whilst many guns on the market mirror the layout of the Weihrauch HW77, few get near the down range performance of that German classic.

The XS36-1 was fairly muted action recoil wise, and clocked consistency figures showing an incredible overall spread of just 6fps over 10 shots using Air Arms Diabolo Field (JSB) ammo. Power came in just under 10ft/lbs with the test ammo, but this should increase as the rifle is 'run in'. However, it was the accuracy stage shot from an over-arm FT stance that really blew me away!

Using the SMK Black Dome 'hard granite' pellets supplied, the XS36-1 posted sub 3/4 inch at 30yds; which for this level of kit, is not bad at all - by which I mean good! However,

something told me this gun could do better, and my suspicions were rewarded with simply stunning 3/8inch clusters using the Air Arms JSB ammunition. Once a rifle achieves good consistency, then the final contributory factor to down range performance has to be the barrel. All I can say is it would appear that inroads have been made in this most important area.

The Chinese are coming...

In short, this rifle is an illustration of the dramatic improvement in engineering and build quality, happening at the lower end of the market. For the XS36-1 is nothing short of a revelation. Consider that this model comes in a whisker under £100, and what's on offer is really quite startling. As stated, this is easily the best finished, and most accurate Chinese made airgun I have ever shot; and whilst other examples may vary, I wouldn't hesitate to undertake close to medium range hunting with the test gun. Ultimate praise indeed. Maybe the Chinese have already arrived... **GM**

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Model:	SMK XS36-1
Type:	Spring/piston, fixed barrel under-lever cocking
Calibre:	.22 only
Weight:	8lbs approx
Overall Length:	41 inches
Barrel Length:	17.25 inches
Stock:	Hardwood
Trigger:	Single stage
Safety:	Auto safety
Pellet tests	Using AA Diabolo Field (over a 10 shot string)
Average velocity:	527fps
Average spread:	6fps
Average energy:	9.9ft/lbs on test
Best accuracy:	3/8" at 30 yards - stunning!
RRP:	£99.95 approx.
Contact:	Sportsmarketing (SMK) tel. 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk

The nicely figured timber is well finished and the cheek piece is nicely proportioned too



NIGEL ALLEN's take on the Sportsmarketing SYNXS break-barrel

Sportsmarketing are known for offering fantastic value-for-money rifles, but I reckon there's a new 'flagship' in their bargain basement - the synthetic-stocked SYNXS break-barrel sporter. At £79.95, this must be one of the best-value hunting rifles an airgunner's money can buy.

Traditionalist might mourn the lack of any 'woodwork', but the SYNXS's

polymer livery is extremely well shaped, tougher than wood and, being lighter, it helps improve the rifle's overall handling. I was particularly impressed to see an ambidextrous cheek-piece - and the stock also offers very grippy chequer panels on the fore-end and grip.

I rather like the gun's all-black appearance, which is played off nicely with the white-line spacer in front of the ventilated recoil pad. Of course, synthetic is such a hard-wearing material that the gun will still look like new even after you've taken it on some rough, tough field assignments.

To complement its very sporter-like handling, the SYNXS spits out its pellets close to the legal power limit, making it an ideal rifle for vermin control - but the SYNXS is also a very versatile rifle. It's as

FACTS - SYNXS

- Action:** Break-barrel
- Calibre:** .177 & .22
- Length:** 110.5cm
- Barrel Length:** 48cm
- Weight:** 2kg
- Trigger:** Single-stage
- Safety:** Automatic
- Stock:** Synthetic
- Sights:** Fibre-optic, adjustable
- Power:** 11 ft/lb
- Price:** £79.95



Left: The stock comes with grippy chequer panels and an ambidextrous butt (left) - plus there's an autosafety at the rear of the receiver.



The break-barrel lock-up is extremely positive.

happy punching tight holes in paper targets as it is knocking over targets of the feather and fur variety.

Included in the price are fully-adjustable open sights - and these feature the very fashionable green and red fibre optic elements. The system makes for a much quicker target acquisition.

I rigged my .22 calibre test rifle with one of SMK's 4 x 40 mil-dot scopes - choosing the silver model as a pleasant contrast. The receiver sports long dovetail grooves and, amazingly for the price, there's even a built-in arrester block at the end to hold your scope firmly in place.

That's a great feature because the SYNXS is a very accurate performer. Its barrel pivots around a bolt which can be tightened to take up wear over the years,

and the trigger breaks very cleanly. Hunters will be pleased that it's backed-up by a positive, pop-out safety catch button, too.

This is a rifle that's lacks nothing. Apart from its price, that is!

"Must be one of the best-value hunting rifles money can buy"

Tim Finley has fun with a budget-priced but beautifully bonded single-stroke pneumatic pistol, one of Dr.Beeman's best

I can't deny I've a bit of a pistol passion and like to indulge my craving on a regular basis – which is why this month's fix is a real fizzer. Dr Robert Beeman, a well-known name to all true real airgun nuts, has been the man behind many airgun developments and this is one of them. In fact SMK, the importer for Beeman products in the UK, has been bringing in the Beeman 2004E air pistol for sometime now – though I first saw one being used in our region's winter league. Actually, I thought it was a HW40 until I saw Beeman engraved on the side and from that moment on I watched fascinated as the guy shooting was knocking down more than his fair share of targets.

Beeman Badge

I promised myself a test as soon as a gap in the schedule arrived and here it is. As I mentioned, the 2004E has similarities with the HW40, since Dr.Beeman has worked with Weihrauch to produce many air rifles and pistols, selling them in the USA under their own brand name. Hence, the Beeman P3 is essentially a HW40 made in Germany for export to America under the Beeman badge.

The Beeman 2004E is different. It is made in China to the same spec as its European and US cousins – but considerably cheaper than either of them. Only, I must stress, cheaper. Beeman do not and have never made cheapo airguns; the 2004E is not a dodgy copy, it's simply a more affordable version of the P3/HW40.

The 2004E pistol is a single-stroke over-lever pneumatic pistol in .177 calibre with open sights incorporating an adjustable rear notch sight. Constructed from tough space-age moulded polymers, with metal rigid inserts for added strength, the 2004E is well built and sturdy.

Charge of Air

To cock the pistol, the dummy hammer at the rear of the action is first pulled back with the thumb, which allows the top section of the action to be pulled up and open to a full 160° swing. As you do this, the metal cylinder which is revealed can be heard sucking in its charge of air.

A pellet can then be loaded directly into the breech end of the barrel, also exposed by the opened action-frame and held within it. Loading may seem a bit fiddly at first but with practice the action becomes easy.

The air you heard being sucked in by the cylinder now has to be compressed, by closing the action/lever and locking it down into its starting position.

One brilliant feature of the 2004E is the automatic safety catch, on the left hand side of the action, just above the trigger. This

THE 2004E IS A SINGLE-STROKE OVER-LEVER PNEUMATIC .177 PISTOL CONSTRUCTED FROM TOUGH SPACE-AGE MOULDED POLYMERS

is set on cocking and the silver sliding catch has to be pushed forward by the right thumb to reveal a red dot before the pistol can be fired. It can also be reset at any time. I tested pistol with the 8gr round-head SMK pellets supplied and, over the chronograph, the pistol gave very consistent readings at 392 to 396fps – which equate to 2.73 to 2.78ft.lb – and which is just right for FT pistol shooting.

Once the chrono had been checked it was up to the 6-yard range in my loft. Here, I got to know the Beeman a bit better and appreciated that the grip is outstandingly comfortable for both right and left handed shooters.

Passed rather well

The sight picture is 190mm (7.5in) long and having positioned the adjustable rear sight, I zeroed the gun at 6 yards and set about the accuracy testing – which it passed rather well! Well enough, that is, to print regular 5-shot groups in the 11 to 10mm centre-to-centre mark, using SMK's own brand of pellets, which at £2.99

for 500 are undeniably cheap but certainly provide cheerful results. The pistol is totally recoilless and even the three neat forward-facing slots of the muzzle brake seem to enhance the fact. And the trigger also enhances this accuracy. Billed in the blurb as a 2-stage trigger, in reality it's a single stage with a spring-loaded pseudo first stage, but whatever the reality of the action, it is very light and even with only a very little creep on the second stage which assists its predictability. I found it a joy to use.

Unfairly Picky

By the way, just to show I'm not being unfairly picky here, *real* 2-stage triggers move the sears on the first stage. Even the latest Walther FT rifle has a pseudo 2-stage trigger, so it's a deception that's practiced at every level!

Next, I took the pistol to the my outdoor range, set a test zero card at 10 yards, and those same SMK roundheads easily shot sub-1in (25mm) groups, which again was not what I was expecting with such a basic sort of pellet. Just to prove the point, I had to try more 'up-market' slugs and I won't deny the results were better, but the SMK's are fine for plinking and, essentially, so is the 2004E, so why ask for more?

Another feature of the gun is a 120mm (4.7in) 11mm wide scope rail, designed to accommodate any of the widening range of pistol-based scopes,

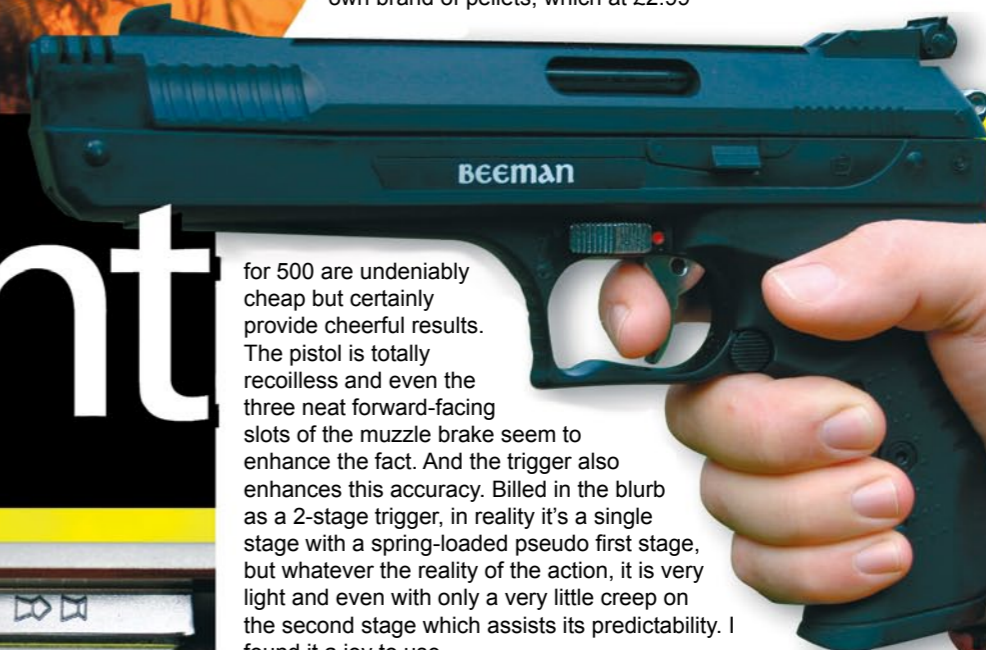
red-dot and hologram sights. I chose a red-dot sight, but found it a little tricky at first to close the top lever with the sight in place at the rear of the rail, for fear of pushing down too hard on the top of the sight and damaging it. Only a brief bit of thought was needed for me to manage nicely, after I moved the sight well forward on the scope rail, which meant I could push down on the rear open sight assembly – which is spring-loaded and designed to absorb the pressure – to close the action.

Fears Unfounded

Despite this, I must confess, I was still wary of pushing down strongly on the rear adjustable notch sight, when using the pistol just with the open sights, but the zero didn't change, so my fears were unfounded. Group sizes at 10 yards, by the way, came down significantly when the red-dot sight was in place – but that's just what you'd expect to happen.

At this price, the Beeman 2004E is hard to beat. And with no CO2 bulbs to keep buying, it's cheap to run, too. Not just as an introduction to pistol shooting, but for even more serious stuff, it's a clear winner.

Beeman with delight



BEEMAN 2004E PISTOL AND ACCESSORIES
Many thanks to John Nash and Sarah of SMK

Specification

Manufacturer:	Beeman
Distributor:	SMK
Model:	2004E/P17
Type:	Single-stroke pneumatic pistol
Calibre:	.177
Action:	Over-lever
Sights:	Post-Notch, adjustable (with dovetail optical sight-ramp)
Trigger:	2-stage
Safety:	Automatic
Overall length:	235mm (9.25in)
Barrel length:	172mm (6.75in)
Weight:	0.82kg (1.8lb)
RR Price:	£69.95



CHAMPION'S CHOICE

A replica of the World Champ's gun gets Charlie McFee dreaming

When you're five times world pistol shooting champion, I guess you can expect to have a replica of your winning gun made by somebody, and Frenchman, Eric Grauffel, is just such a man. He's won the IPSC practical pistol championships over and over and was approached by Cybergun, a French company, who asked if they could make a faithful copy of his pistol, and he agreed. He saw the chance to make an exact replica that would allow him to practise away from the fullbore ranges at home or in areas that weren't suitable for bullet firing guns. In fact, the replica is so exact that parts like the grips can be swapped from the real gun straight on. The weight and balance are spot-on, allowing him to practise things like his draw, which professionals

repeat hundreds of times a week. This is good news for us because we can try what Eric designed, on our own ranges. The base gun is the Tanfoglio semi-automatic which Eric shoots in .38 Super, but we get .177 steel BBs. If fact we get 20 BBs per magazine. The mag's are almost all metal apart from the plastic feed lips, and their weight ensures that they fall free from the well as soon as you press the extended mag release button, making for fast and certain mag changes. The mag release isn't the only extended control. The ambidextrous safety and slide release have had the same treatment, all of which aid control at speed.

The gun really looks the part and every upgrade and modification that you'd expect a true speed pistol to have is included. What's really unusual about this pistol is that the grip panels are made from metal, rather than wood or some kind of synthetic material. I was curious about this and looking at photos of his raceguns I think I might have the answer. It appears that he

SPECS

Manufacturer: Cybergun
Distributor: SMK
Web: www.sportsmk.co.uk
Model: Tanfoglio Gold Custom
Type: CO2
Action: Blow-back semi-automatic
Calibre: .177 steel BB
Capacity: 20
Weight: 2.96 lbs (1.34kg)
Length: 10" (25.5cm)

Cost £129.95

fills the dip in the metal grip with a material that can be shaped to fit his hands, offering a truly custom shape. I've even seen some pictures that show he's added grip tape to the panels. However, for the rest of us I think they just look cool but there would be nothing stopping you from copying Eric.

The front and back of the frame are neatly chequered making a positive hold guaranteed, even with sweaty hands. Where the



web of your thumb contacts the frame the shape has been carefully designed to offer no sharp edges and to guide your hand into the same place every time. The



Above: The back strap has sharp chequering for sure grip

Top left: The cocking extension makes racking the slide possible even with the scope mount in place

Top right: Every control has been enlarged for positive action at speed

Inset: The metal magazine holds both the CO2 and BBs

extending piece is called a beaver-tail and as befits a race gun, this one is very long, again guiding your hand during a fast draw. Eric uses an unusual hold in that he uses the index finger of his weak hand wrapped around the front of the trigger guard, and for this reason it's made with a square profile. It's a style that has mixed popularity with various groups of pistol shooters but is seldom seen among the top level IPAS/IPSC competitors.

The action is semi-automatic, and



is propelled by standard 12-gram CO2 capsules. I, like Eric, prefer semi-autos because they allow the trigger travel to be short and light, again important at speed. This makes a huge difference compared to the more common double-action type that does two jobs. Firstly, they cock the hammer and secondly drop it to fire the gun. This makes them long and heavy whereas the trigger on a semi-auto only needs drop the hammer so can be lighter and more refined.

This pistol is dripping with goodies such as the barrel compensator that has eight gas ports, adding realism to the looks and keeping the balance just like the real thing. The Tanfoglio slide is unusual in that its rails run inside the frame as opposed to the conventional outside location. This makes it more difficult to grip than the more common type. This is made more difficult still by the scope mount that covers much of the slide, so Tanfoglio added a cocking extension that's easily gripped, thus

eliminating the problem completely. It's details like these that show this is proper race gun not a lookalike. Another important feature is the flared mag well. This is a wide chute that acts like a funnel, guiding the tapered top of the magazine easily into the frame even when you're changing mags flat out. The flared section also gives a nice supported feeling to your hands in the standard competition hold.

Enough about how clever it is, how does it shoot? Well, the trigger is great, with the caveat that you must remember to release it far enough to engage the sear again. The blow-back action gives a good, solid kick but is easy enough to keep the dot on target between shots and with a fresh capsule offers a nice snappy feeling. This softens as the pressure falls, but that's true of all gas-powered guns. The chronograph showed that the steel BBs were leaving the muzzle at over 300fps which is impressive, especially for a blow-back action. Accuracy was again impressive, being as good as some of the top 6mm pistols I've been shooting recently and more than good enough for plinking.

I like this pistol a lot; it's great fun to shoot and it hit plinking targets as fast as I could pull the trigger. Beyond that, tough, it's lovely to have a replica of the champion's gun that's correct in almost every detail. The handling and balance are excellent and the heavy, all-metal build gives the feeling that it will last and last. Perhaps we can all dream of being as good as Eric one day, and this is the ideal training tool to get us there. ■

"This is good news for us, because we can try what Eric designed on our own ranges"

FIRST GUN



**WE TEST
HARDWARE
FOR YOUNGER
AIRGUNNERS**

THE CO₂ SMK QB78 DELUXE

A much improved version of the XS78CO2 model, you'd be hard pressed to tell that the new SMK QB78 Deluxe is made in China if it wasn't imprinted onto the side of the rifle's action!

Fully deserving of its 'Deluxe' name tag, this latest CO₂-powered offering from Sportsmarketing has a much-improved and better-finished stock, complete with a soft-rubber recoil pad, a 'golden' trigger blade and bolt, fibre-optic sights, a superior exterior and a slicker internal action – yet it still gives you change from £130!

It's also lightweight, compact and beautifully balanced, making it ideal for a teenage young gun – although this mid-power sporter boasts a specification that makes it the sort of rifle you'll never grow out of... nor want to!

Let's see why Sportsmarketing are so convinced their new golden gun is going to appeal to both lads... and their Dads!

TEST REPORT BY THE CO₂ SMK QB78 DELUXE

**MYLES
HENRY**



The fibre-optic
rearsight is
(finger!)
adjustable.



Above: Cocking the golden bolt.
Right: The golden trigger blade.
Note the 'F' and 'S' safety
markings on the guard.

Below: The manual safety lever
(on the other side of the guard),
shown here in the 'on' position.



QB78 DL - FACTS

Importer: Sportsmarketing ☎ 01206 795333.
Action: Single-shot, twin CO₂ capsule.
Calibre: .22 only (5.5 mm.).
Cocking: Bolt-action.
O/A Length: 1,010 mm. (40 ins.).
Barrel Length: 530 mm. (20.75 ins.).
Weight: 2.6 kg. (5.75 lbs.).
Stock: Beech sporter.
Trigger: Single-stage, three-way adjustable with brass blade.
Safety: Manual, lever type.
Length of Pull: 362 mm. (14.25 ins.).
Sights: Fibre-optic opens, fully-adjustable.
Power: 8.4 ft. lbs. (11.4 J) (quoted);
10.2 ft. lbs. (13.8 J) (tested).
Price: £129.95.

MYLES' SCORE
PARENTS' SCORE

I often hear grown-ups saying that things from China aren't very well made, but nearly all my best possessions – my computer gaming consoles, MP3 player and mobile phone – are made there... and you don't hear me complaining!

And if this QB78 Deluxe is anything to go by, I'd say the Chinese are every bit as good as making airguns as they are at electronic gadgets.

To me, the QB78 Deluxe doesn't look like a 'first gun'. In fact, with a lovely, slim stock, gold-coloured bolt and trigger and no plastic bits to be seen anywhere, I think it looks far too good to be a first-time airgun.

Because it runs off CO₂ capsules, a pair of which go into a tube under the barrel, the whole rifle looks much slimmer and less 'bulky' than most of the airguns my mates use.

To be honest, I didn't know much about CO₂-powered guns, but they're actually far less complicated than spring-powered models and they have the added advantage that they fire without any kick in your shoulder. This makes them a lot easier to hit the target with.

You have to use two CO₂ capsules, which you must insert into the tube back-to-back, so that the neck-ends get pierced when you tighten up the end cap. This doesn't need much effort, though you might need an adult to help you unscrew the cap and release any pressurised gas at the end

of the shooting session.

Like the Norica Titan I recently tested, the QB78's open sights have fibre-optic inserts in them, making it a lot easier to line up the front sight in the back sight's notch. You simply get the glowing red dot in between the two green ones – easy!

The back sight can be adjusted for up/down and left/right movement. Because there are no thumbwheels, you'll need a coin – but I found that by pressing down with your thumb, the slotted screws turned easily enough. Just as well, I'm the sort of teenager who can't keep money in my pocket for long!

Even with the maximum adjustment, I

found that my shots struck high under 15 metres – but because of the QB's recoilless action, it was no problem to place targets further away and I could easily spin tin cans at 25 metres.

I found this rifle to be pretty effortless to shoot. The only energy you need is to push the bolt forward to load a pellet; there's no barrel or underlever to cock, or pump-up handle.

It's also very easy to take aim with, because it weighs just 2.5 kilos – so I was able to shoot quite well when standing. That said, my steadiest position was when lying on the ground – or resting my forearm on a solid object, something you can't do very well with a recoiling airgun.

One thing I disliked about this rifle is that it had a long reach to the trigger – though I'll grow into it soon.

Another gripe was that my step-Dad was just as happy shooting it – so whenever we went shooting, I spent a lot of my shooting time watching him with it! ☘

Below: The QB78 is powered by two, 12-gramme CO₂ capsules which you insert back to back (left and middle) before piercing with the screw-on cap (right).



SMK expands its BB pistol range



→ Swiss Arms P1911.

→ Blackwater BW1911.

In the last few months Sportsmarketing (SMK) has increased its 4.5mm BB CO₂ air pistol offerings. Here are just a few tasters of what you can expect...

All of the latest 4.5mm BB air pistols available from SMK use the standard 12g CO₂ bulb, housed in each pistol's grip. The Witness 1911 plastic, P84 and GSR are non-blowback CO₂ pistols. In other words, the top section of the action doesn't move back as the gun is fired. The new Blackwater 1911 R2 and Swiss Arms P1911, however, are recoil blowback pistols.

Choosing a system

There are two shooting systems available. The 'standard' spin-up involves the BB passing through a tube that features a dimple at the top. The dimple imparts backspin to the BB, allowing it to travel further, but the downside is that this can often be at a slight angle, sending the BB off to the left or right. The BAXS system features an additional point of contact

with the BB, with effectively two dimples, one at 10 o'clock and one at 2 o'clock within the firing mechanism, which leads to greater accuracy. You might be thinking that it looks like the Tanfoglio Witness 1911 has the same features as the rest, but this is actually a high-impact polymer replica of the full-metal version. The ambidextrous chequered grip is superbly contoured for comfort and also features the

spin-up shooting system. For its size you're looking at the same as the full-metal version – with a total length of 23 centimetres and a weight of approximately 650g. Even though it's lighter, you still get the punch, with a velocity of approximately 361fps and a power range of 65 metres, as the power is two joules. With these statistics it proves to be ideal for plinking fun and, as you have a 20-shot magazine,

this ensures that the fun keeps on coming. With an RRP of £59.95, SMK says that this is unbelievable value for money.

Looking good

Meanwhile, the Swiss Arms P84 bears a striking resemblance to a Beretta M84, and there's nothing at all wrong with that. Due to the increasing demand for the M84, Swiss Arms has taken charge of the manufacture of the P84 and it has proved to be very popular. This compact, nimble pistol is something else. Feeling hefty for its small size of a total length of 17.5 centimetres, this full-metal model weighs in at 778g, with a velocity of around 380fps and a power range of 80 metres, as the power is 1.1 joules. The P84 is a superior plinking pistol at a low price of £79.95. The grip has been described

as awesome, the shot count unbelievable, and other features include the spin-up shooting system and removable magazine. The Sig Sauer GSR pistol has the BAXS system and is the heavyweight of this range, weighing in at 1,093g, with a total length of 18.6 centimetres, a velocity of around 390fps and a power range of 73 metres, as the power is 1.1 joules. This semi-auto version features a tactical rail and a speed loader, too. One of the major attractions has to be the fast-fire semi-auto feature, making the SIG Sauer GSR a solid little contender. It's neat, compact, well presented and unashamedly fun!

Latest launches

The next two pistols are the newest yet – the Blackwater BW1911 R2 and the Swiss Arms P1911. The BW1911 R2 is semi-auto, full metal, has strong recoil and the spin-up shooting system. It weighs in at 930g, with a total length of 22 centimetres, a velocity of approximately 312fps, a power range of 60 metres and still has the power of two joules. The unalterable laser marking makes this stand out from the crowd and it also features a rail frame for tactical options. With an RRP of £129.95, this is great value for money.

The Swiss Arms P1911 also bears a striking resemblance to a Tanfoglio Witness 1911. Due to the increasing demand, the only difference is the brand name. This pistol still features the semi-auto, is full metal, has the spin-up shooting system, weighs in at 898g, has a total length of 22 centimetres, with a velocity of 320fps, a power range of 64 metres and also sports the power of roughly two joules. With an RRP of £119.95, this is said to be the great value that shooters have been waiting for. **T.G.**



→ Sig Sauer GSR.

→ Swiss Arms P84.

→ Tanfoglio Witness 1911.

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Sportsmarketing (SMK) have a burgeoning catalogue of goodies for us airgun shooters, and that includes some evergreen favourites which are as popular as ever. Here are a few we have been testing;

SMK Spinners

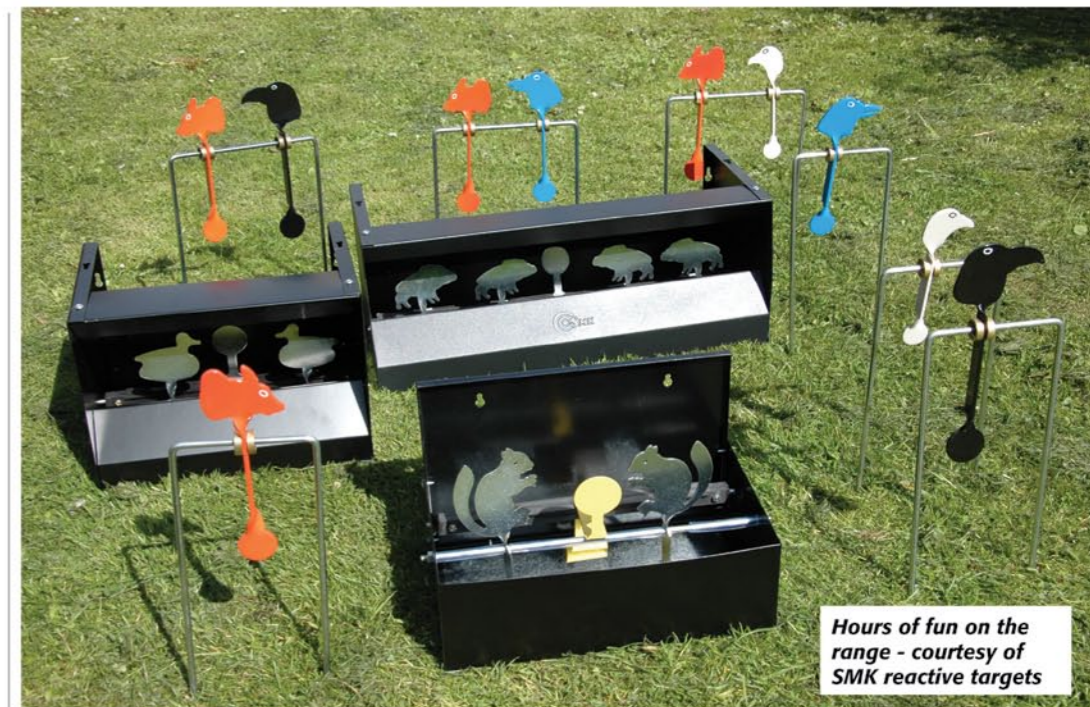
Whether sitting on the practise range at a Field Target event or just plinking at home in the garden, the good old 'Spinner' takes some beating, for the 'simple fun' factor alone.

The spinners marketed by SMK come in two main varieties: single or double; and all feature an animal's head at the top, with a disc at the bottom. The Single Spinners are available with either a magpie, rat or crow shape at the top, and a one inch disc for more precise aiming below. The obvious simplicity of the design is part of the attraction, and with a direct hit sending the target furiously spinning on its axis, these targets can be good to practise on, as well as great fun.

Double Spinners just mean double the fun, and a combination of animal shapes keeps things interesting. These larger versions also featured two different lower target sizes, with a 1 inch and 1.5 inch disc to sight on (rat/magpie, magpie/pigeon), although the crow and rat came fitted with one inch discs. All these spinners are of solid steel construction, and simply push into the ground via their twin spiked supports.

SMK Magnetic Knockdown Boxes

Another classic airgun target has to be the magnetic pop-up target box, and the largest model from SMK (known rather confusingly as the 'Knockdown Target') measures a full 19x8x9 inches. The main box is constructed of heavy gauge steel, and is designed in such a way as to catch the



Hours of fun on the range - courtesy of SMK reactive targets

Plinking good fun... ...and a practical aid to accuracy too - Mark Camoccio tests some SMK reactive targets



A selection of SMK single or double spinners, the choice is yours



The 'Knockdown Target' is the largest SMK magnetic box design

spent lead shot via the angled panels. The principle is again nice and simple, with four animal shapes to shoot at, along with a central 1.5 inch diameter disc. Once the outer animal targets are hit, they are held flat by strong magnets. Hit the central disc, and the magnets are forced backwards, releasing all the targets to be shot at all over again.

Two smaller target box designs are also available, featuring either two outer duck shapes or squirrels. Again a central disc resets the lot, but in these smaller boxes, the disc is around 1.5 inches for the ducks and slightly larger for the squirrels.

These targets can add safety to any range set up, and with all the boxes being freestanding or wall mountable, their design is nothing if not versatile. Ultra appealing to juniors, but great fun for shooters of all ages, it's not hard to see why the magnetic design has proved so enduring over the years. **GM**

PRICES

- SMK Single Spinners (magpie, pigeon, rat or crow) RRP £5.99 each
- SMK Double Spinners (crow & rat, rat & magpie, magpie & pigeon) RRP £8.99 each
- SMK Knockdown Target RRP £29.95
- SMK Squirrel or Duck Knockdown RRP £22.95

For more information, contact Sportsmarketing (SMK) on Tel. 01206 795333, visit the website at www.sportsmk.co.uk or check out your local dealer.

What if it were possible to physically switch barrels in a moment, and thus change calibre? Well now it is, and this new Beeman Dual Calibre package is an intriguing product, which has been particularly well thought out.

New concept?

Memories come flooding back with this model, as the idea of switching barrels to change calibre is hardly new.

Indeed, just before I embarked upon a lifetime of airgun sport, I remember my good old uncle John, in the mid '70's, showing me his Webley Hawk; a break barrel model, offering much the same package as my test model here. Also, customising companies such as Airmasters dabbled with the multiple barrel idea in the '80's, with their Chameleon models, based on the legendary HW77 action, while Venom Arms brought out their break-barrel 'Snipe' with a choice of three barrels, so there's no doubting the appeal of the whole idea.

Well Presented

This new Beeman is an exciting project though, as it offers dual calibre performance at a highly affordable price. A conventional spring piston action is supplied, along with two interchangeable barrels; one in .22 and the other in the smaller .177 calibre, making the Beeman Dual Calibre RS3 fairly unique in today's market place. A Beeman 3-9x32 scope is also included, along with mounts. It comes extremely well presented too, in a dedicated, compact carry case.

Assembly is beautifully simple, and about as streamlined as it could be. Just select the barrel calibre of your choice; slacken off the large grub screw on the underside of the breech block; gently push home the barrel into the receiving hole in the breech block, taking care to line up the arrow on the side, and finally nip up the grub screw. Job done. Because of the obvious indent where the grub screw locates, any minor misplacing of the barrel soon self corrects, as the grub screw pulls itself into its correct location. In practise, I found the crispness of engineering, and sheer simplicity of the design, meant the whole process worked a treat.

Overall finish to the woodwork is very good, with evenly applied varnish enhancing the natural grain of the beech timber used. As for the metalwork, the occasional machining mark does show under the traditional chemical blueing, yet the overall impression is still one of a solid, slick product, finished to a fairly high standard.

Scope included

The Beeman branded 3-9x32 scope and mounts, all come, as previously stated, as part of the package. Mounting is made all the more easy as an arrestor block is set onto the receiver, which is another nice touch, eliminating any chance of creep. For the record, this scope is fitted with a conventional 30/30 style reticle (equidistant fine centre lines, and four thick outer posts), variable magnification from 3-9x and a comprehensively marked front parallax ring.

Reassuringly crisp target turrets complete the spec and on test the adjustments were spot-on.

Characteristics

In use, an automatic safety catch comes into play, which means the small tab just in front of the trigger, needs to be nudged forwards before each shot can be taken. Note though that de-cocking the action is possible here.

Cocking the action of this Beeman requires an all in one approach, with the point at which the trigger sear/piston engages, coming earlier in the arc than expected. A fairly short stroke is probably responsible, yet with both barrels being a full 18 inches in length, and both sporting a smart ported end piece, leverage is of course enhanced.

The firing cycle itself is a pleasant experience, with a snappy action, devoid of spring resonance, and only a slight amount of creep in the trigger. A broad trigger blade helps enormously by spreading the load more evenly across the finger, and the overall release pressure is wholly acceptable.

Take your pick!

With the .177 calibre barrel firmly fixed in place, RWS Superfield pellets were tried first, which at 8.44 grains, follow an extremely similar pattern to the all conquering JSB design. These proved pleasingly accurate over 30yds, with clusters forming just a shade over half inch. Whilst energy levels were a little low at around 8.5ft/lbs, a switch to Webley Harrier pellets instantly added over a ft/lb, so experimentation, with various pellet brands is obviously vital here.

I have to admit to a fascination with this rifle and the general concept, and to say that I was eager to switch barrels and gauge the outcome is a serious understatement. I felt like Christmas had come early! Having zeroed with the .177, for the record, the groups moved around 4.5 inches to the right, once the larger calibre was installed. Air Arms Diabolo Field (JSB) printed groups of around 3/4 inch, which again is highly acceptable for a rifle of this type. Energy as expected with the heavier calibre, rose significantly (.22 being generally more efficient than .177), with the Air Arms recording 10.1ft/lbs. For the record, SMK's own Spitfire pellet brand posted similar groupings, and achieved around 10.4ft/lbs.

As usual with airguns some variation is to be expected from one example to the next, and with pellet/barrel compatibility, not to mention variation in the barrels themselves, expect some other examples to be a little more powerful. The muzzle energy will also rise naturally with use as the rifle's components 'run-in'.

Success

In this Beeman Dual Calibre RS3, Sportsmarketing (SMK) now have an intriguing product in their extensive line-up. Close range vermin control is of course on the cards, but for the enthusiast who just wants versatility along with hours of absorbing experimentation, all at a highly affordable price, owning this fairly unique rifle makes a lot of sense; the .22's heavy hitting shock effect or the .177's flatter trajectory - now you decide!



Cocking effort is fairly manageable with either calibre barrel



A large grub screw locks the barrel in place - just remove it to change calibres



Have case, will travel - this neat package sees all the constituent parts held securely

One rifle two calibres

Mark Camoccio gets double the use out of the Beeman Sportsman RS3 Dual Calibre



The Beeman Sportsman RS3 Dual Calibre is a solid performer

CALIBRE COMPARISON RESULTS

Barrels on test:	.22 Calibre	.177 Calibre
Pellets: (10 shot string)	AA Diabolo Field	RWS Superfield
Average velocity	532fps	672fps
Average spread	8fps	16fps
Average energy	10.1ft/lbs	8.4ft/lbs
Pellets: (10 shot string)	SMK Spitfire	Webley Harrier
Average velocity	583fps	676fps
Average spread	13fps	15fps
Average energy	10.4ft/lbs	9.6ft/lbs

SPORTSMAN RS3 DUAL CALIBRE

Manufacturer:	Beeman
Type:	Break-barrel/spring-piston
Calibre:	.177 and .22 with interchangeable barrels
Weight:	8.6lbs including scope
Overall Length:	47inches
Barrel Length:	18inches
Stock:	Beech sporter
Trigger:	Two-stage adjustable
RRP:	£299.95
Contact:	Sportsmarketing Tel 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk

Power-packed!

Mark Camoccio gets to grips with the brand new SMK XS26 Air Pistol

The SMK XS26 offers a high power pistol in a break-barrel format

As one of the largest suppliers of airguns to the UK market, Sportsmarketing certainly appear to have most bases covered. So when they launch a brand new product, it's often to fill a perceived gap in the market.

With a UK legal power limit set to a maximum of 6ft/lbs, air pistols are only ever going to be relatively low powered affairs. Yet consider that they are also invariably close range tools, normally associated with informal target practise, and the power issue suddenly becomes somewhat secondary. Dare I say it, we're talking about unashamed fun shooting, where a modicum of accuracy trumps kinetic output every time.

Sometimes though, some extra oomph does come in handy – especially when using reactive targets. What we have here is the all new SMK XS26 model, and it's a spring powered pistol, designed to pack a punch.

Sleek

It cuts a distinctive profile too, since the bulk of the surface area



The barrel sleeve is a push fit



This shows the adjustable rear sight with green fibre optics



Nicely contoured grips give a good hold



A chunky blade aids trigger control

is non-metallic material. Firstly, the fore stock and pistol grip are all one moulding, formed from high impact polymer, which also neatly wraps around the end of the cylinder. The steel barrel tube is also set into a polymer shroud and breech block, and whilst this may sound a bit cheap, in practise, the mouldings are precise enough to impart a quality feel to the pistol overall. Those grips are of course fully ambidextrous, and with some clever styling, the matching thumb and finger grooves, coupled with the main finger contours, results in an extremely comfortable and supportive grip.

Let's face it, with little change from £100, the XS26 is significantly more expensive than other basic spring powered pistols in the SMK line-up. Consider the features on offer here though, and it does begin to stack up nicely.

Sights

The XS26 comes with a neat 3inch strip of dovetails, so fitting a pistol scope, red dot or other sighting device, is firmly on the cards. Of course,

with an extremely impressive set of fibre optic open sights fitted as standard, it would be foolish to look elsewhere before exploring their uses.

These fibre optics offer a particularly good sight picture, with an attractive front orange element sitting within the two green dots at the rear. The rear sight is fully adjustable incidentally, although the fact that windage gets a finger adjustment wheel, and the elevation requires a small screwdriver, is ever so slightly irritating. Both or neither makes sense in my book, but hey - a mere nit-pick. Once the sights are set. I found they worked a treat out to about 20yds, further than this and my eyesight begins to be challenged!

Trigger

Triggers on this sort of gun can so often be the downfall, and spoil an otherwise good product, yet in the case of the XS26, I'm pleased to report that the unit is highly usable and more than acceptable. A chunky, wide, moulded trigger blade certainly helps to spread the load, and whilst the non adjustable pull has significant creep, careful technique can improve performance. I found it possible to slowly pull through the creep, and have the trigger waiting on the edge of the sear, with only minimal pressure left, before final release. The triggers action is best described as pseudo 2-stage (where the first stage doesn't actually alter sear engagement).

The manual safety catch features a rectangular push through button tab that passes right through each side of the pistol body indicating live or safe, and can be easily toggled on or off when required. Personally, I reckon it's a lot safer to ignore any safety catch, and leave the pistol unloaded until just before you make the shot, end of!

Leverage & Power

As a break open design, having a stubby barrel just 6.5 inches in length would ordinarily create problems, where a lack of

leverage is concerned. With this in mind, SMK supply a barrel shroud extension tube, which is simply a push fit onto the muzzle. In practise, this total simplicity of design can't fail to impress, and with precise locating grooves incorporated, it just puts a smile on the face.

Basically, I found it impossible to cock this pistol without the shroud, but once in place, leverage is transformed. The relatively easy cocking stroke should be within the capabilities of all but a few junior shots, and with a smooth determined stroke adopted, the task as usual, is made much easier.

The manufacturers make much about the power capabilities of this gun, with a full 6ft/lbs listed on the spec sheet. For the record, my tests revealed energy levels a bit down on their figures, with a variety of pellets. Yet with power in the region of 4.6ft/lbs achieved, and the fact that this style of gun is liable to run itself in, the manufacturers can still boast one of the highest energy outputs for a spring powered pistol. A pleasant firing cycle, with little spring resonance, was an added bonus too, and groups of around 3/4inch at 10yds, using SMK's curious black domed pellets supplied, certainly impressed. I managed 2inch clusters at 20yds for the record, again with the fibre optics, and fitting a scope will of course tighten those groups further.

Good All Rounder

In conclusion, I thoroughly enjoyed my time with this pistol. What we have here in effect, is a latter day version of the BSA Scorpion, albeit slightly less beefy, and somewhat less of a handful! Tipping the scales at a super manageable 2.2lbs, means this highly appealing pistol is unlikely to overly tire on an extended session. So whether despatching quarry at very close range, or just informal target shooting, the XS26 represents a sound choice.

Compact, relatively powerful and versatile sums it up nicely. **GM**



The pistol at the end of its cocking arc



The barrel sleeve makes cocking easy



Note the orange fibre optic element to the fore-sight



The XS26 pistol with over barrel shroud removed

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Model:	SMK XS26	
Type:	Spring powered break-barrel	
Calibre:	.22 only	
Weight:	2.2lbs	
Overall Length:	18 inches with shroud in place	
Barrel Length:	6.5inches actual (10.5 with shroud)	
Stock:	High impact polymer	
Trigger:	2-stage, non adjustable	
Chrono tests:	Over a 10 shot string using SMK Black Domes / JSB's	
Average velocity	365fps	350fps
Average spread	19fps	5fps
Energy on test:	4.6ft/lbs	4.4ft/lbs
RRP:	£ 99.95 approx.	
Contact:	Sportsmarketing (SMK) Tel. 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk	

Wide hide & PEGLESS

Clearing out his old fishing equipment, **Pete Meek** stumbles upon a great idea to make a cheap, but effective, hunting hide



Name:
Peter Meek

Profession:
Pest
Controller

Rifle:
SMK XS20
.22

This Mission:
Concealment

Being born and raised in the country, I've grown up with a love of all things outdoors. Airgunning is, obviously, one of my passions – but like many other shooters, I'm also rather a keen fisherman, although I rarely get much 'bank time' these days. Now, before you say I'm writing in the wrong magazine, let me explain...

Recently, while I was tidying up the mountain of carp and catfishing gear I've amassed over the years, I had one of those 'eureka!' moments. I came up with the idea that some of the fishing equipment could be deployed in my other favourite sport – and improve my shooting enjoyment to boot.

The equipment that got me thinking was my 60-inch, oval fishing broly that the good lady bought me a couple of years ago, but which I've not really used. At five feet, it's a whopper – but the thing about this bit of kit is that it does away with the usual centre pole. This means you get acres of room underneath it for a bed chair when you're on an overnight fishing session.

Well, I wasn't thinking of any overnight shooting sessions – after dark action with the rifle is best reserved for lamping on the move – but the cover afforded by the umbrella could be utilised in another way... as a hide!

You put it up just like an everyday umbrella, locking it open with the supplied centre boss. That done, you then attach two, height-adjustable poles to anchor the broly in place and once held down,

you're ready to 'move in'. But my idea was to add some camo netting... and make it the king of all hides.

I took it to the local shoot for my first field trial and decided that to make it even better, I needed to dress it up with a bit of natural, nearby vegetation. The broly takes only seconds to put up, so even spending a few minutes blending everything in isn't exactly a chore – and you can see from the photos that the result is pretty impressive.

Being wind- and waterproof, it makes for a much better hide than the 'natural construction' type when the conditions are inclement – and it's roomy enough for two, if you want to hunt with a mate to relieve the boredom; hide-hunting can, sometimes, be a very slow business in which you could do with a bit of company.

Even if you prefer to shoot on your own, there's plenty of stowage room for your kit. It's ideal for me because I like to stretch out, with the rifle on a bipod, safe in the

Left: The finished product, with some local flora to help it blend in further

Above: Some camo netting over the top of the umbrella makes it a true hide

Top right: Pete has found his portable hide has increased his bags considerably

Right: It's perfect for prone shooting off a bi-pod because there's so much room to stow kit



knowledge that I'm all hidden from view in my sniper's nest...

Okay, at £100 – without the netting – my broly conversion has ended up being a quite pricey hide. But it wasn't bought as a hide – and I can still take it fishing! The fact is, though, you don't need an expensive one; a run-of-the-mill 45- to 50-inch broly will do the same job – and you can pick them up for around a tenner. Try looking on the internet, as there are loads of discount fishing tackle sites – and then check eBay for the netting if you're on a budget. I got some ex-MOD net for less than a tenner – although the proper shooting stuff that your local gun shop sells isn't all that expensive.

Whichever net you use, it still makes the concept an inexpensive way to make a really neat hide for airgun hunting – plus one that'll take you less than 10 minutes to set up anywhere you want!



This DB5 from SMK proved to be accurate at a great price

You don't need to spend a fortune...

Mark Camoccio gets a first look at the new SMK DB5 custom under-lever rifle

Timber, finish and detail

There's no doubting the appeal of the new woodwork, and first impressions of the DB5 are very favourable. That rich walnut lacquer contrasts well with the chequered panels, and while the laser patterns are extremely shallow, they do add detail to an otherwise conservative design. Few guns of any note come in cheaper than this rifle, so it's fair to say that the few minor dents and imperfections on the stock can be overlooked. These rifles are intended as starter models at the end of the day, and manufacturing down to a price has to be accepted. The cheek piece is defined for the right handed shooter, yet given the subtle definition, it may as well be considered as an ambidextrous design.

What stands out for me though, with this rifle, is the action. The finish and precision of the engineering is a huge improvement over earlier similar models that I have seen. Add to that the attention to detail, and the DB5 begins to impress.

Fibre optic open sights come as standard, and the rear-sight is fully adjustable via thumb wheels, for both windage and elevation.

Range report

Cocking the DB5 is easily done by first unclipping the lever. Two points of note here; yes the sprung retaining clip is crude, but the inclusion of a rubber handle on the cocking lever is a really nice touch.

Pulling the lever all the way down until the trigger engages, requires only modest effort too, and is another impressive plus point. Cocking the action also slides the breech cover back exposing the conical breech; a pellet can now be pushed home

directly into the barrel. Another two points of note here. Firstly, chambering a pellet can be a fiddly business, given that the lip of the breech is set back a little, and the chamber itself is fairly narrow. So while this is a good starter rifle, I would say they aren't exactly user friendly for the youngest beginners.

The second point concerns safety, and applies to any under-lever rifle. Whilst the DB5 comes fitted with what's termed an anti-bear trap device (a built-in mechanism designed to prevent the sliding cylinder from moving forward whilst loading), 'best practise' dictates that the under-lever should always be gripped firmly, whilst fingers enter the loading bay – this applies to any under-lever rifle, no matter what mechanical safety measures are built in.

Trigger wise, a pseudo two stage affair is fitted, but the test model's factory setting wasn't bad at all. Once the first stage had been taken up, the second stage released after no great effort, and with minimal creep. My only criticism concerns the blade itself, which is too narrow and, I would have thought a little too far forward for many shooters. I have big hands, yet I was at full stretch. A flatter, more set back design would be a big improvement. That said, consider the asking price, and this trigger still outperforms many competitors.

Firing the DB5 reveals a quick snap of an action. A little noisy maybe, but strangely, not from spring resonance. As for the internal trickery, well don't get too excited. There's still recoil, but it's perfectly acceptable for a rifle of this type, and more civilized than a few supposedly superior rifles I could mention.

SMK reckon on these guns producing around the 10ft/lbs mark, once run in, and my tests certainly bore out that claim. SMK's own Black Dome pellets supplied with the rifle, produced around 8.8ft/lbs, whilst RWS Superdomes came in right on the button at 9.9ft/lbs.



Shallow chequering sets off the woodwork



Fibre optic open sights are becoming increasingly popular



The trigger isn't the DB5's strongest point, but it works OK



A little crude, but the under-lever clip works well



With the breech open a pellet can be loaded directly into the bore

When you consider that the weakest point of any break-barrel design is the break barrel design itself... so it should come as no surprise just how popular the under-lever concept has become.

Break-barrels rely on the barrel being hinged at the breech, and doubling up as the cocking lever, to compress the mainspring. Wear at the breech over years of use, can occasionally result in an

inconsistent barrel lock-up, with small amounts of shift in the point of impact, the result. Of course where the very best quality examples are concerned, this is rarely an issue. Yet the theory holds true.

Under-lever rifles in contrast, offer the shooter a rigid fixed barrel arrangement, with a separate lever held beneath, which is used to cock the action. On paper at least, fixed barrel accuracy should outshine the break-barrel, so it's little wonder that manufacturers

bring out their own takes on this highly popular theme.

Value for money

Sportsmarketing (SMK) have become one of the largest suppliers of airguns to the market place, and on test here is their brand new SMK DB5 model. In keeping with the majority of their products, the emphasis is on value for money, and at £99.95, it certainly looks a bargain.

Largely based on the no-frills under-lever DB4 model, the new rifle sports an attractive

European hardwood stock (apparently Italian crafted) and a more stylish, sleeker finish.

Technical improvements are included inside the DB5 too, with the air transfer arrangement featuring a cone-shaped breech which dovetails into a conically shaped cylinder-end, complete with a conical seal. Apparently this design allows for a shorter transfer port, which improves air flow - with the manufacturers claiming 'more power for less recoil' as a result. More on this in a while.



The new woodwork sports an attractive finish



The DB5 utilizes the under-lever design and cocked easily



► Accuracy wise, over 30yds, the SMK pellets produced average 1.25inch groups, but since they were tight in the barrel, I reckoned it was only fair to look elsewhere. An excellent sample of Superdomes

seemed like an ideal choice, and sure enough those clusters shrank to half an inch at the same range. Excellent results from any springer, let alone one at this price.

Bargain Hunter

In short, the DB5 really impressed. Quality control can often let this grade of rifle down, so I would advise you to try before you buy if at all possible. Yes it's made down to a price, but the relative quality of the tested action and subsequent accuracy on offer, gives this rifle the accolade of the best Chinese made rifle I have shot to date. A sign of things to come?

Who knows. Once things for sure, at £99.95, if my test model was anything to go by, the DB5 is a genuine bargain. **GM**

The new SMK DB5 underlever rifle - a real bargain

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Model:	DB5
Manufacturer:	China
UK Importer:	Sportsmarketing
Type:	Spring powered Under-lever
Calibre:	.177 on test/.22 available
Weight:	6.75lbs
Overall Length:	40.5inches
Barrel Length:	17.5inches
Stock:	European hardwood
Trigger:	Single stage
Safety:	Auto anti-beartrap system
Velocity:	Over a 10 shot string using; SMK Black Domes RWS Superdome's
Average velocity:	692fps 726fps
Spread:	15fps 7fps
Energy:	8.8ft/lbs 9.9 ft/lbs
RRP:	£99.95 approx
Contact:	Sportsmarketing (SMK) Tel. 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk



Note the fibre optic element inside the hood

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The Swiss Arms P1911 also bears a striking resemblance to a Tanfoglio Witness 1911. Due to the increasing demand, the only difference is the brand name. This pistol still features the semi-auto, is full metal, has the spin-up shooting system, weighs in at 898g, has a total length of 22 centimetres, with a velocity of 320fps, a power range of 64 metres and also sports the power of roughly two joules.

The BW1911 R2 is semi-auto, full metal, has strong recoil and the spin-up shooting system. It weighs in at 930g, with a total length of 22 centimetres, a velocity of approximately 312fps, a power range of 60 metres and still has the power of two joules. The unalterable laser marking makes this stand out from the crowd and it also features a rail frame for tactical options.



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