

SATURDAY 5th April – State President in, Queen out, by That (& This) Correspondent

SABU had kindly scheduled regional matches for Saturday morning so all visitors were free to lie in and enjoy a morning not sweating behind a rifle. Our management were kind enough to schedule some team chats and ammo pressing among other tasks to ensure our morning was not wasted on oversleeping (this sounds mean, we actually had a significant lie-in until 7.30am). Once bullets were pressed, plans hatched and buses packed a number of the team accompanied Rick Shouler to the range to watch him tie shoot for the Orange Free State match.

Sadly today marked the departure of our Adjutant and most recent Queen, Jumbo. He was flying home to attend a 'business engagement' in Monte Carlo for lunch, which we were all sure would be all work and no play... Jumbo had been a legendary Adjutant, always able to facilitate the team's needs and occasionally to be found lubricating the wheels of team bonding.

Rick's tie shoot was a tie to remember for a number of reasons. He first handicapped himself by leaving his shooting jacket in the hotel and not having time to have it brought over, despite the delayed start of his shoot. Fortunately a jovial Irish busmate of his was able to lend him a Truttman jacket of similar(ish) proportions so Rick was able to get down with his (in the absence of Jumbo) sole opponent, Willem du Plooy. Contrary to Bisley form, the tie consisted of one sighter and three shots to count, which one would have thought would take little time to be done with and surely would require more rounds to finish. Rick, in his inimitable style, turned around to his watching teammates (having fired no shots despite his partner having finished) and said "Errr, guys, can I try a different jacket?" Given that Willem had already dropped three points and finished, Rick was encouraged to just get on with it and stop faffing. He fired 5 V 4 to win the tie, no doubt to Willem's displeasure at having been beaten by such a disorganised muppet!

At lunch, Rick's jacket arrived and the whole team (with the exception of Martin sadly) prepared for the State President's Final. Matt Ensor was very pleased to be shooting and was also happy to have been squadded on P1 (far left of the targets and right by the flag line). He suspected this might have been something to do with his having been last into the cut at 245.20.

When shooting got underway the wind was certainly stronger than had been seen all week and also new to the week's shooting was a dust storm coming in from the northwest. General Mac delayed the preparation time while shooters covered up their rifles and soon enough we all dusted down and got ready. Rain promptly broke out in some force but the shooters pushed on (especially the Brits, who were familiar with a good drenching and expected their wet weather drills to help them). Once the firers had found their bearings from their sighters and were one or two shots in, the General piped up over the tannoy and halted shooting because of the danger of potential lightning. We all fell back to the shelter of our vehicles and caught up on

the many excitements that had occurred already in the few shots that had been fired.

Matt Ensor and George, upon seeing the dust storm come in, had retired to the vehicles before the break of rain and spent the rest of the afternoon sipping wine. Matt was especially pleased with his total final score of 141 points ex 300. Eventually, once it was decided that the range was safe enough to shoot on (though we were still in danger of a good soaking) we were invited to return to the point. The shoot continued (after a non-convertible sighter) to lighter winds but still with variation enough to provoke some wide inners from some competitors.

This Correspondent's partners in the final at 800m had withdrawn – one before the start and the other when his eagle eye misted up after one sighter, leaving him to string shoot. This is normally advantageous in such tricky conditions but not when it means that you get through more of the shoot than everyone else before a halt is called, dropping more points than everyone else during the nasty patch, and then find that the match is restarted in the dry and in calmer wind!

Nigel, shooting at 800m, had an upset just as the weather broke as his rear iris leaves broke, giving him a rather odd rear ring picture featuring a spike pushing into the black of the target. This was all OK for him (being used to the odd blade sights of military weapons) until his extractor broke too. He fortunately had a headless 9-inch nail in his bag so (much to the confusion of his partners) he dropped it down the barrel to bump out his case every shot. Despite this he still finished with a good 73.

The fun and games continued at 900m when the firers got down again in their soggy kit to find the flags blowing more strongly now and also blowing clouds over to give varying light. Our vice-captain was under pressure to capitalise on his clean 800m shoot, as were Patel and Ball to put in a good show to secure the South African TR championships.

Meanwhile, This Correspondent managed the unusual achievement of firing his first sighter at 900m, then raising his foresight 5 minutes before firing the second, and converting them both after skilfully skimming the first off the dirt and into the V-bull! His partners had kindly informed him of his mantlet-skimming antics, without which he might have had V0 sighters rather than V5.

The wind picked up strongly as more rain came in, seeing a swift rise from 5 to 11 and then 13 minutes of right wind. Needless to say that, given the range flags (which were not close to being square, which should give some idea of how strong the wind was) show little change in winds above 10 minutes, the only clue that could be used to ascertain that the pick-up was closer to 6 minutes than 3 was the huge number of left handed outers and magpies across the range (and, for This Correspondent who managed to stay in inner and bull at 900m after such a weak 800m, it also presented frustration as so many of the others' outers that just hit the paper were marked as outers – the markers hadn't had much practice with very wide shots all week!).

As firers dragged their now wind-dried equipment from the point, there were not many scores above the 70-72 range and plenty below. Parag Patel had finished six off overall to win the South African TR Championship with Nigel four points behind in second but, to the pleasure of the GB team, David Dyson won the State President's Final, dropping only 2 points (one of only two such scores). The pleasure was short-lived as, when the team chaired him from the range it transpired that he did not, as he claimed, weigh 13.5 stone. The team were more than up to the challenge though, and indeed popped Georgie Ogden, of the U19s and a fellow Yorkshire shot, onto his lap for part of the ride.

Most people moved from the range into the bar for celebratory, or consolatory, beers and waited for the beginning of the prize giving. Here Parag told us how he had been at a loss for words when Bernard De Beer approached him immediately after his 900m shoot and informed him that a girl he knows would 'like his barrel...'. Clearly the fluting has significant appeal. The team were quick to stock up on the beers that they had largely been missing over the previous week, to the extent that they ought to last through the prize giving (a long lasting event in the best of years) and soon we were applauding the winners in the main mess hall.

Highlights of the prize giving included Nigel, in true sailor fashion, taking a few drinks with him when invited to take a seat up front with the rest of the South African TR Championship's top 10 finishers. This 'death row' of prize giving attendees were not forgotten by the team though, with Toby quick to nip off to the bar to bring back, and very conspicuously distribute among all the winners, a good supply of beers.

There were a number of anomalies amongst the winners called out. When announcing the top U25s in the Grand Agg, That Correspondent was surprised to hear that he had been beaten by Chris Watson (now 29). Although Jumbo had been listed all week as an Under 19, it was Ed Compton who won a prize in that category, nearly a decade too late. Topping this all was David (having been awarded his trinket for the State President's Final) being announced as the winner of the veterans class as well. BY 'ECK!

Our top placings in the Grand had been:

1st Parag Patel

2nd Nigel Ball

9th Adam McCullough

10th Jane Messer

Fellow Brit David Calvert was 6th.

The proudest moment of the prize giving, though, was when the team went up to collect its medals for the Protea Match, the one thing we had come for.

The team followed prize giving with a quick turn-around at the guest house before heading for a celebratory team dinner back at the Beef Baron, where a nearby

table contained Bernard de Beer and his Gauteng North team. Lots of toasts flowed back and forth; and later we were joined by some younger British shots and their chaperones. This Correspondent surprised himself by coping very comfortably with the 1kg steak challenge (having failed in 1999 by dint of having eaten the chips too early), and then following it with a belated starter. Those who complete a 1kg steak at the Beef Baron get it free and are immortalised with a plaque on the wall or ceiling, so now both Matts (along with a few others from our shores) will forever be able to find their names there when they return.

Aptly the evening finished at the Sportsman's Bar. Whether those who were back at the guest house were all behaving we do not know, but the large contingent of Brits at the bar were good ambassadors for their country while they celebrated. One, on asking one of the massive guys in striped shirts what their significance was, learned that they were the Cheetahs rugby team who had beaten the Queensland Reds that day. His surprise came, though, after he had been asked in return what all these Brits were doing in Bloemfontein and, upon replying, was told "Ja, you're really good aren't you; I hear you've been breaking lots of records." Sure, this was a rugby player who used to shoot air rifle at Gray College, but it was ample demonstration that shooting gets much more and better press in the Free State than it does back home!

All that remained after that was to surface the next day, pack, eat a bit more, and then (for most) wait until Monday to go home. We'll leave the detail on that and reflect instead that this had been a shortish, intense and very successful tour. Thank you to all those who made it so.