

Ryan Breeding: Big Bores Done Right

BY CRAIG BODDINGTON



Nobody ever said a .505 Gibbs is easy to shoot, but accuracy with Norma factory loads was superb.

This summer I got an email from Nampa, Idaho gunmaker Ryan Breeding. It seems he was going to be passing through the Central Coast on a short summer vacation with his family. Would it be possible for him to stop by and show me a couple of rifles? I'd heard the name, but wasn't familiar with his work.

The date was just before I departed to Africa for a couple of months, so entertaining perfect strangers was pretty far down on my list of things to do. But of course it would be fine. I figured I'd see some nice rifles, but, honestly, I didn't expect to be so thoroughly impressed.

Once we got to visiting, I felt as though I'd been living in a cave. Ryan Breeding has been building custom bolt-action rifles for a long time. In 1989 Jack Lott (of .458 Lott fame) wrote about a Ryan Breeding .505 in *Guns & Ammo*.

I, of all people, should have remembered that. He also has a long association with Gil Van Horn, a big bore pioneer who was a favorite custom gunmaker to both Bob Petersen and Tom Siatos.

Like his friend and mentor Gil Van Horn, Ryan Breeding specializes in large caliber rifles based on magnum Mauser actions. In fact, he calls his family-owned shop Ryan Breeding Big Bores (www.rbbigbores.com). That doesn't mean he is incapable of build-

ing rifles to standard calibers. He sent me some pictures of a gorgeous .270 Winchester built on a Mauser action, and even Jack O'Connor would have approved. But his company name does state both a specialty and a preference.

The two rifles we shot on my range were a .416 Rigby and a .505 Gibbs. "We" is an ambitious term; I shot the .416, but on the eve of a long trip I wasn't about to shoot a right-handed .505. So Ryan shot that one, proving not only accuracy and function, but also the fact that he can handle the big rifles he builds. Accuracy, by the way, was excellent but, moreover, operation was incredibly smooth.

The very term "big bore" is of course subjective. We could argue that a .416 Rigby is, as John Taylor called it, a "large medium," with the true big bores starting at .45 caliber. A .505 Gibbs is without question in the upper stratosphere in power. Breeding is a fan of the .458 Lott, but he has also built quite a few rifles in both .505 Gibbs and .500 Jeffery, but that isn't where his big bores stop. He has built rifles for Gil Van Horn's wildcat .585 Van Horn, and he gave me samples of two new wildcats, Gil Van Horn's ultimate big bores. The .620 and .700 Van Horn Express, are monstrous rebated rim cartridges that Ryan Breeding will house in at least one bolt-action rifle apiece. (Nope, no way I'll shoot either one.)



An amazing detail on Ryan Breeding's rifles is the parts are made in scale with the rifle's caliber. Left, .416 Rigby; right, .505 Gibbs: The .505 has, naturally, a bigger barrel, so it also has a bigger sight, in identical scale to the .416's sight.

Behemoth big bores like that are interesting projects, but Ryan's real focus lies in building big bore hunting rifles that are both beautiful and practical. As one might expect of full-up custom rifles, the samples he showed me had gorgeous wood, but were selected with plenty of strength in the pistol grip area, and properly reinforced to handle the recoil. Metalwork was just plain awesome. But with true custom rifles the devil is in the details, and the closer I looked the better the work became.

The front sight is a handcrafted work of art, with a flip-up hood that, no kidding, cannot be lost. What a concept! The trap pistol grip contains a fitted metal capsule (no rattling, no need for wrapping in an oil-soaked rag.) containing a spare foresight and an Allen wrench for changing it out. The follower is machined specifically for the cartridge that rifle will be chambered for. No wonder the feeding is so smooth.

By preference he uses double square-bridge Mauser actions, with detachable scope bases machined into the bridges. To truly appreciate a Ryan Breeding rifle, you really need to start at the recoil pad and work your way slowly all the way to the muzzle, taking note of every feature as you go.

As I said, I was extremely short on time and didn't expect to be as impressed as I was. But I did this, and then I started at the muzzle and worked my way back again. These are true custom rifles, butt to muzzle, not just parts that are assembled in an attractive fashion.

Once you've done that inspection, if you aren't impressed then there isn't


continued on page 90

much I can say. But then you need to do something else, and you can do this at his convention display or at his shop. Take two Ryan Breeding rifles of disparate caliber – such as the .416 Rigby and .505 Gibbs that we took to the range. Lay them side by side. This, perhaps, offered one of the greatest demonstrations of gunmaking art that I have ever seen. The parts of each rifle were in perfect scale for the respective caliber. The island rear sight on the .416 looked exactly like the island rear sight on the .505 – except both were in identical scale to their barrels. So the .505's rear sight was, well, bigger than the .416's rear sight.

Scaling the parts to the rifle – which can only be done by incredibly painstaking handwork – means that a big gun like the .505 is perfectly in scale. It doesn't look large and clunky, nor does it handle large and clunky, and in fact you have to heft it before you realize that it really is a large and heavy (never clunky) rifle.

One of the hallmarks of an "RB Big Bore" is a full five-shot capacity, not just on a .416, but on a .505 – and even on his .585 Van Horn. This can only be done with a "drop belly" magazine, of course, but it isn't exaggerated as we often see. The contour is smooth and elegant, again maintaining the entire rifle in attractive scale.

When Ryan finishes the .620 and .700 Van Horn Express rifles, I'm sure they will be equally deceptive. But if I were in the market for a big-bore bolt action of this quality, I think I'd stick with something more portable and shootable, with that range of practicality probably starting with the .416 and ending with the .505. I doubt that Ryan would disagree.

As I said, I was really impressed. I'll be honest. I'm not in the market for one of Ryan Breeding's rifles. They're way above my pay grade, and even if I could afford one, well, in my crazy business I don't get to use my own rifles often enough to justify a custom rifle of that magnitude. But it's reassuring to see that there are guys out there like Ryan Breeding who are truly doing it right, no matter how much work is required. It's equally reassuring to know there are hunters, shooters, and collectors who appreciate such quality, are willing to pay for it, and willing to wait for one-of-a-kind rifles like these to be delivered. 



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